

Excellence and Gender Equality Policies in Neoliberal Universities

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Abstract: The historical nexus of academia and gender has been characterised by exclusivity. The classical idea of innovative science was shaped by male scientists and reflected their ways of living and was mainly reproduced via gatekeeping and homosocial co-optation processes. Recently, academia has begun a transition towards a new model of academic organisation and governance represented by the vision of the 'neoliberal university'. In this transition the historical nexus between academic 'excellence' and masculine culture is being called into question by new economic mechanisms and instruments of academic governance that are declared to be 'gender neutral' and 'transparent'. In fact, some studies show that management by performance disadvantages female academics by favouring male patronage, but with the instruments of the new governance gender equality can also be introduced as a core principle of excellence criteria, as happened in the case of the German excellence initiative. On the basis of two case studies of German universities, our contribution shows how the nexus between 'excellence' competition and masculine culture is eroding, partly due to new 'quasi'-market mechanisms being combined with gender equality policies. Our findings shed light on new gendered work patterns and inequalities of contemporary academia. Academia is opening up to 'excellent' high-performance women, while other women are still disadvantaged.

Keywords: gender policies, excellence, academia, new public management, neoliberal university

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In recent decades a common feature of higher education policy in European countries is the almost universal aim of creating stronger incentives for 'excellent'¹ academic performance in particular academic centres (Boer et al. 2008). Such 'excellence' is to be attained by either strengthening, or – depending on the country-specific context – introducing, market and competition-based mechanisms of organisation and governance (Slaughter, Leslie 1997; Slaughter, Rhoades 2009). This approach is designed to establish or boost competition between academic institutions and between academics for third-party funding, both in the national and international arena (Riegraf, Weber 2013). It was only with the introduction of neoliberal competition mechanisms that the vaguely defined term 'excellence' rose to prominence in the academic sector (Bröckling 2009). Academic staff and universities, research fields and paths of knowledge are being documented, measured, differentiated, and hierarchised in line with sometimes clearer, sometimes more fluid 'excellence criteria'. Research evaluations become the basis for allocating research funding, reputation, and recognition with the purpose of singling out an academic elite from the mass university education business. Excellence awards are associated with high reputation and recognition, which in turn substantially ease access to powerful positions in national and international academia, as well as to research funding. Once academics and universities have successfully competed against their rivals for an excellence award, they receive better and faster access to additional research funding and institutional support. Robert K. Merton (1973) described this process as the 'Matthew effect' for academia. The fact that distorted perceptions of performance inform this process of differentiation and hierarchisation into 'mediocre' and 'excellent' academics and research institutions was pointed out by the science historian Margaret W. Rossiter (1993), who, drawing on Merton's analysis (1973), referred to it as the 'Matilda effect'.² She thus focused on the systematic devaluation and denial of the contribution made to research by female academics, which happens solely on the basis of their gender (Rossiter 1993; also Husu 2004; Strid, Husu 2013; Brink, Benschop 2012, 2014).

The process whereby the performance of female academics is devalued as described by Rossiter is, however, no longer so unequivocally observable. While the academic system largely excluded women during the centuries of its development (Riegraf et al. 2010; Noble 1992), it is noticeably opening up to them at about the same time as competitive procedures and the focus on 'excellence' are being introduced. In certain

¹ When we talk about 'excellence' as a social construction then we put the term into question marks; when we talk about concrete instruments or criteria that indicate excellence, then they are not put into question marks.

² In an irony of fate, Merton's Matthew effect was first recognised by his wife Harriet Zuckerman in her PhD thesis, but he published it under his name and became famous for it (Merton 1988:607).

transnational European programmes and certain countries, institutional gender equality measures and instruments are now becoming an evaluation criterion for third-party funding applications, and hence a criterion for excellence awards. Similarly, diversity and gender mainstreaming policies are gaining ever increasing recognition in academic organisations, in order to counteract discrimination against female academics and the devaluation of their performance (Aulenbacher et al. 2012, 2015).

Our article traces these developments with regard to Germany and considers them in context. The analysis of how 'excellence' is introduced and defined in the academic system is linked to the question of whether and under what conditions 'excellence' is becoming a new exclusion criterion for female academics. Or is it the other way round? Does the restructuring of the academic system combined with gender equality efforts lead to erosion in the briefly outlined historical nexus between 'excellence' and 'masculinity'? We begin our discussion by examining the concept of excellence more closely and, at the same time, considering whether and how 'excellence' and the criteria formulated within it are connected to gender (Section 2). Second, we analyse the nature of the linkage between academic 'excellence' and gender equality instruments and policies. This is outlined empirically with reference to two case studies based on literature review and qualitative expert interviews with university management and gender equality officers (Section 3). Finally, we provide an assessment of these processes (Section 4).

Excellence, the neoliberal university and gender

Gender and excellence

In recent years the proportion of female academics in the European higher education area has been growing, albeit at a slow rate and unevenly across countries, hierarchical levels, disciplines, and research fields (for an overview, see European Commission 2016; for Germany, GWK 2016). This is occurring at a time when the overall academic landscape is in upheaval as a result of consolidation of the European higher education area and the more zealous introduction of the competitive mechanisms of new public management instruments. 'Excellence' has become the key catchword in this process of change, which initially prompts fears from a gender perspective, because evidence from social constructivist studies shows that a relationship between academic 'excellence' and 'femininity' is not be consistently established (Wetterer 2002). In historical perspective these studies show that there is a connection between the social recognition of a field of work and its gendering: occupations, activities, and positions carried out predominantly by women are located at the lower end of society's scale of values. Accordingly, devaluation of an occupational field or a position – or in academia, of a discipline or field of research – is not uncommonly associated with

feminisation processes. Conversely, masculinisation processes are frequently associated with the social upgrading of an occupation, activity, or position, or, in the academic sector, of a discipline or branch of research. From this perspective the contingent opening of the academic system to female academics is a sign of differentiation and hierarchisation of an academic system organised by research fields and disciplines. Thus, disciplines, research fields and positions to which female academics gain entry become unattractive for their male colleagues, and as increasing numbers of female academics gain access to these areas, they experience devaluation and diminishing social recognition (Aulenbacher, Riegraf 2010, 2012; Weber, Binner, Kubicek 2012; Binner, Kubicek, Weber 2010).

The often stated argument about the homology between the partial opening up and the concurrent devaluation, internal differentiation, and hierarchisation of academic fields (so-called 'feminisation') had some plausibility in the past, but cannot be observed unreservedly nowadays. Increasing numbers of women are higher qualified and receive to some extent higher education levels than men. High-qualified women obtain higher positions in the labour market and in society. Attention to gender equality has increased dramatically in the last decade in European society (Berkovitch, Bradley 1999). Politicians and employers are under pressure to explain persisting gender inequalities, because they becoming less acceptable in society. Thus, gender equality policies and instruments, which can be understood as an expression of a process of societal transformation, are feeding into these processes also in academia (Weber 2017). Further, the number of female scholars and professors is on average still not large, but it has been rising steadily over the last twenty years (European Commission 2016). If gender equality becomes a core principle of the evaluation criteria for determining excellence, then it can be assumed that the status of the interlinkage of 'femininity' and 'excellence', at least in some instances, is rising in society.

Excellence awards in the neoliberal university

What counts as excellent or not excellent in terms of content is normally determined in academia by means of a review procedure that is carried out by academics who are highly regarded, nationally and internationally, by the academic community itself. In this procedure, the results are subjected to an ideal-type, science-immanent assessment to establish whether they can be considered 'innovative' and contribute to advancing knowledge and are thus 'excellent' or of outstanding quality. This understanding of academic practice is based on a meritocratic measurement of performance in which all academics are theoretically treated as equal. However, there are several levels in the review procedure where the evaluation of an academic's performance can become distorted. Distortions in the evaluation process can result on the one hand

from social factors such as self-interest, rivalries, or a sheer lack of understanding, and on the other hand from underlying indicators (such as publication and patent rates) that are supposed to reflect 'excellent' performance but can favour or disadvantage certain subject areas.

A study by Karin Zimmermann (2000) looks at the example of the appointment procedures applied during the reform of East German universities. Zimmermann investigated how these appointment panels negotiated the supposedly objective quality and selection criteria and she showed that the criteria were modified and repeatedly recoded during the negotiation sessions. Zimmermann shows how academic 'excellence' was recognised and acknowledged in a procedure that was riddled with power processes, and she reveals the social practices at play in these procedures as homosocial in structure, with scope for complex enactments of collegiality. Against this backdrop, academic 'excellence' no longer appears as an abstract indicator but something concrete, a socially constructed 'fitting in' that is ascertained argumentatively for the given candidates during the appointment process. The 'fitting in' thus constructed is the foil for the persistence of homosocial-masculine recruitment patterns that are extremely stable, particularly for prestigious academic positions.

In a similar study, Mareike van den Brink and Yvonne Benschop (2012) describe the construction of 'excellence' in appointment procedures in the Netherlands. In interviews with people involved in the appointment procedure, this 'excellence' is described as a 'sheep with five legs'. With this turn of phrase, the respondents are trying to explain that candidates for a professorship must deliver top-notch performance in all formal areas and must also fulfil informal criteria. The number of publications a candidate has is regarded as a formal criterion, with other criteria like teaching given less weight accordingly. In addition, the individual qualifications of both male and female candidates were emphasised. Brink and Benschop come to the following conclusion: 'In this context, gender practices involve the tendency of committee members to attribute likability to men, which grant them excellence points.' (ibid.: 13) Margo Brouns (2000, 2007) also shows in her analyses that gender bias in the review procedure can vary considerably between disciplines, which she attributes to idiosyncratic evaluation standards in each discipline. Other studies suggest that the differences between disciplines arise from the fact that measuring 'excellence' with quantitative indicators is more suited to the natural sciences and engineering disciplines, in which women are underrepresented (Schiebinger 2000; for an overview see Samjeske 2012; Rees 2011).

Thus, neoliberal reform in academia has led to the increasing transformation of the academic community's informal excellence criteria into quantitatively measurable performance criteria for determining excellence. By neoliberal reform we mean

a shift in state practice from more bureaucratic governance towards more business-administrative measures and instruments and more emphasis on markets and competition as a socially accepted distribution process of valuable goods in academia and society. This results in altered societal relations between civil society, the state, academic institutions (universities) and the market, as well as in a new model of academic organisation that is referred to as the 'neoliberal university' (Clark 1998; Binner et al. 2013), and that is displacing the previously dominant model known as the 'Humboldt model'.³ The 'Humboldt model' was characterised by a strong state bureaucratic control and academic self-governance; competition between and within universities was moderated, while external stakeholders (industry, culture, the media, etc.) and managerial governance by heads of faculties and departments and rectors' offices exerted a relatively limited amount of influence (Boer, Enders, Schimank 2008). In the wake of the new model of the neoliberal university, this relationship is being reversed; market principles, managerial governance, and the organisational hierarchy are taking over the decisive role in decision-making processes. Universities embedded in a quasi-market⁴ are required to give themselves a distinctive profile that allows them to compete for financial and staff resources and behave like 'autonomous service companies' (Riegraf et al. 2010; Binner et al. 2013). We argue that in the shift from the Humboldt model to the neoliberal model of science governance, the understanding of 'excellence' is also renegotiated and transformed. It is questionable whether, in the neoliberal model, as excellence criteria become more quantitatively measurable they also become more 'gender-neutral', 'objective' and 'transparent'. This could be a change that puts gender equality, as a quantitatively measurable duty and democratic claim, on the excellence criteria agenda. Or are the gender-differentiated and gender-unequal assessment practices of excellence masked, once again, by the apparently formalised and meritocratic process of measuring excellence?

To pursue these questions and to investigate the new understanding of 'excellence', we will examine the state-organised quasi-competition for excellence, called the Excellence Initiative in Germany, because it is a key instrument in the neoliberal governance of science. While in England this has now become the tried and tested method for the state distribution of financial resources (the Research Assessment

³ Wilhelm von Humboldt was a 19th-century German education reformer with a humanistic agenda. Within the German academic system, the 'Humboldtian ideal' denotes an ideally complementary combination of research and teaching, and allowing researchers to choose what they study independently of state or economic interests.

⁴ With the term 'quasi-market' we seek to differentiate between 'real' economic markets and the politically introduced and supported as well as more 'artificial' markets. They are 'artificial' because economic interests and commercial purposes are politically constructed.

Exercise, conducted since the 1980s, has been known since 2014 as the Research Excellence Framework), the German Excellence Initiative for the allocation of additional financial resources in research represents an innovative governance instrument of science and research policy. The excellence competition in Germany (Münch 2009), like the English one, is rightly criticised for the inequalities between disciplines and the protection of elites in its evaluation practices (Ferlie, Andresani 2009: 189-191; Leathwood 2012). The chances of winning competitive procedures and successfully attracting third-party funding, which count as the key indicators of academic 'excellence' in the evaluations, are not equal among all academic subjects. Applied engineering subjects and those natural sciences that are considered especially innovative, such as bio- and nanotechnology, have considerably more access to third-party funding (Schubert 2009) than, for example, literary or medieval studies. This is not solely due to the subjects' different needs for (financial) resources for research, but also to the value ascribed to them by society. If the amount of third-party funding attracted is used as a scale for academic productivity, social sciences and humanities disciplines have more difficulty meeting the expected standards. Likewise, when disciplines are compared, success in the excellence competition seems to come less easily to humanities and social sciences disciplines. Female academics are predominantly employed in the humanities and social sciences (GWK 2016; European Commission 2016), which tend to be disadvantaged by excellence criteria and which have attracted fewer resources. This could well have the effect of impeding the majority of female academics from building an academically 'excellent' career, whilst the small share of them who work in the natural sciences, engineering, and technology receive especially excellent support.

In the German Excellence Initiative (first cycle 2006/2007; second cycle 2012), jointly carried out by the central government (*Bund*) and regional governments (*Länder*), universities can apply by submitting draft proposals for three programme points, namely Graduate Schools, Clusters of Excellence and Institutional Strategies. Applications have to be accompanied by gender equality strategies, in which the universities describe which strategies and measures they are developing in order to ensure or promote gender equality in their Clusters of Excellence, Graduate Schools, or in the university's development (Institutional Strategy). The inclusion of gender equality policy objectives in the assessment of academic excellence can be attributed to the decades-long struggles of gender equality officers⁵ at universities and to critical

⁵ Since the late 1990s, gender equality officers at universities have been enshrined in the higher education legislation of the German federal states. A gender equality officer is an independent position and serves as the political representative for gender equality issues at a university. Gender equality officers are allocated a budget, which varies from one university to the next, with which they can implement gender equality measures and instruments.

reflection by gender researchers on the 'neoliberal reform' of the academic landscape, as well as to lobbying from both groups in higher education and research policy (Weber 2017).

The purpose of the highly coveted – because it is highly lucrative – Institutional Strategies is to enhance the structural innovation of universities. In this way, the Excellence Initiative allows a kind of differentiation that is innovative for the German academic system in distinguishing between performance designated as 'excellent' and as 'not excellent' in science and research. Also, for the first time, an explicit link has been made between 'excellence' and gender equality (Zippel, Ferree, Zimmermann 2016), the effect of which is to break up the nexus between excellence and masculinity. More specifically, gender equality strategies are supposed to be taken into account in the selection of excellent performance. The Excellence Agreement between central and regional governments stipulates the 'Appropriateness of the measure to foster the equality of men and women in science' (ExV, §3, para.1) – alongside excellence in research and the promotion of early-career academics, strategies for interdisciplinary networking, internationalisation, and cooperation between universities and non-university research institutions.

Around roughly the same time the Excellence Initiative was introduced, gender equality strategies were also required when bidding for additional female professorship posts (the Professorinnenprogramm – Programme for Women Professors 2006) and the research-oriented gender equality standards of the DFG (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft – German Research Foundation). Universities were called upon by the DFG to describe their gender equality strategies and were then evaluated accordingly with reference to predetermined criteria. The DFG made it known that the evaluation of the gender equality strategy would have an influence on the success of applications for third-party funding. The DFG's criteria play a substantial role in the competition between HE institutions for material and symbolic resources because of the high financial and material incentives involved and because of the DFG's reputation in the academic community. The engagement of the DFG boosted the gender equality mainstreaming process during the first cycle of the excellence initiative.

Empirical results: excellence and gender equality policies at a neoliberal university in Germany

We now examine more closely how 'excellence' and 'gender' interconnect and how gender equality policy is negotiated under conditions of competition with reference to two contrasting case studies from our own empirical study. The data were collected in the course of the project: 'Geschlecht und Exzellenz: Eine qualitative Untersuchung universitärer Leitbilder an ausgewählten Universitäten in Nordrhein-

Westfalen' (Gender and excellence: A qualitative study of university models at selected universities in North Rhine Westphalia) in November and December 2011. The project was financed by the Ministry of Innovation, Science and Research of the state of North Rhine-Westphalia. Four universities were selected for in-depth research, according to the criterion of a 'traditional' versus a 'new' university (founded before 1900 and after 1970). The four case study universities reflect different stages in the development of equal opportunities initiatives, gender profiles, histories and priorities given to research, teaching, and commercial activities. The inclusion of new universities reflects the different history of establishment under the agenda of educational expansion and broader access, but also that they have less power and status in higher education. The data consist of document analyses (Wolff 2009) of freely available university documents (university development plans, equality plans, equality strategies, vision statements, etc.) and nine qualitative expert interviews (Meuser, Nagel 2009) with individuals from university management and with gender equality officers. While interviewees from management level of a university (rectors, chancellors, member of executive boards) more or less represented the official 'talk' about the university, and they are the creators and representatives of 'institutional talk' (which does not always means they act that way), the gender equality officers are more independent and thus able to voice alternative opinions and critiques. The aim of the study was not to find out what the representative or 'true' opinion of the university is, but rather to identify how university members share common perceptions of gender equality politics and university governance and how they present their university to the public. What do they emphasise? How do they legitimise aims, measures and governance instruments? The qualitative interviews focus on the development of the vision statement process, the institutional strategies and profile, and positions on academic excellence and gender equality policy. They were conducted against the backdrop of final decisions in the previous application phase of the Excellence Initiative (2012). Data evaluation was carried out using structuring qualitative content analysis (Mayring 2010). Qualitative content analysis involves the methodological controlled analysis of texts within their context of communication, following rules of content analysis and step by step models, without rash quantification. This method makes it possible to structure the expressions of the interviewees according to predetermined concepts. The analysis included the following dimensions: the understanding of academic excellence, gender equality policies, and opinions about the recent restructuring of university governance. From among the universities studied, we identified two contrasting cases with respect to how they link 'excellence' to gender equality issues and adapt to recent reforms in higher education. Below we present the two case studies, identified as 'Historia' and 'Keramika' (both are 'traditional' universities). The first case study

(Historia) concerns a university that has taken a stance ranging from scepticism to opposition towards the current higher education policy changes, and rejects them in the name of 'excellence' in research and teaching. In the second case study (Keramika), the new market and competition-based organisational and governance models have been introduced proactively, likewise in the name of 'excellence' (Weber 2017). Both universities were successful in the first cycle of the German Excellence Initiative and attracted Clusters of Excellence and Graduate Schools funding. Keramika had additional success with its Institutional Strategy including its gender equality strategy. While Historia was consigned to the lower rankings in the research-oriented quality standards of the DFG, Keramika received the best rating in the first evaluation cycle.

The proportion of women in both universities declines progressively up the rungs of the career ladder, which makes them no different from other universities in Germany (GWK 2016). At Historia female students outnumber males, which explains why the 'dropout rate' (Metz-Göckel, Selent, Schürmann 2010) in comparison to the share of female doctoral candidates (40%) is especially high. Barely one-third of postdoctoral candidates are female, and the share of female professors, at eleven per cent, bears no relation to the total number of early-career academics trained. At the engineering and natural sciences-oriented Keramika the share of female students, at approximately one-third, is low compared to the regional and national average. Keramika does, however, manage to carry forward its low proportion of women at student level onto the next rung of the career ladder: the share of female doctoral candidates stands at 30 per cent, which indicates that a sizeable proportion of female students are achieving doctorates; nevertheless, only 20 per cent of successful postdoctoral candidates are women. A further major drop is seen at the professorship level; in 2010 the proportion of female professors stood at only 7 per cent.

Historia case study: 'We don't think Humboldt is dead yet'

The development in the case of Historia, which offers many minor humanities subjects, is characterised by its sceptical to oppositional stance towards the recent organisational and governance instruments and against the implementation of managerial systems because this means a break with the tradition of excellence of this university:

Completely objectionable, this economic view and attempts at governance in universities. (University Chancellor)

The university adheres inwardly and outwardly to academic traditions, which include the detailed regulation of heraldry and seals in university documents and the ritual of ringing in the academic year in formal gowns. In its self-presentation – in brochures, for example – it holds up its 'excellent' tradition and famous, entirely male award-

winners from the university's past as the guarantors of university 'excellence'. Female academics do not feature in this definition of 'excellence' and gender equality measures are seen as conflicting with the university's tradition and its academic meritocracy, which, within the university, is tightly intertwined with masculinity:

Gender equality is an important objective but has nothing to do with performance. Therefore, it has no place in incentive structures. Gender equality can be discussed as a theme, and efforts made to enable or foster it without forcing it into incentive structures. Being a man is not about performance, being a woman is not about performance, and treating both equally is a socio-political, constitutional imperative or desideratum; that's why this shouldn't be anchored in the performance-based award of funding. (University Chancellor)

In the university's self-conception, its professors' power of definition and the adherence to informal appointment rules were the guarantee of excellence in the past and still override all organisational development processes. By guaranteeing its professors considerable autonomy, the university management is convinced that it has attracted and retained 'excellent' scholars for centuries. No doubt is cast on these time-honoured principles and selection mechanisms; in the University Chancellor's words: 'We don't think Humboldt is dead yet.' The position of individual professorships ranked as excellent, in comparison to the less central and less excellently rated professorships, is reflected *inter alia* in their substantially higher material resourcing, reflecting confidence in the university's selection process and, for that reason, in the professor's productivity.

It is feared that political interventions like quota systems or financial incentive structures to achieve gender equality on individual hierarchical levels will interfere with the recruiting system that led to academic excellence in the past. The fear concerns the possible loss of 'excellent' personalities and disruption of informal appointment rules by equality programmes, both of which might threaten excellence:

Top-down doesn't work. Then the really outstanding minds that we have, that's when they walk out. At least, that's our fear. (University Chancellor)

Recruitment practice reflects the adherence to traditional university structures: the practice of informal appointment rules in 'excellent' subjects, maintaining network structures of individual subjects, forming schools under individual professorships, and associated staff recruitment is claimed to guarantee the training of 'excellent' early-career academics and selection of the best. In subjects designated as excellent, the 'appointment ideal ... is that they try to appoint people who are even better than themselves' (University Chancellor), bringing more and more outstanding award-winners to the university. It is asserted as the reason for the scarcity of female professors

that they specialise in subjects perceived as marginal and hence less prestigious, such as gender research. As a consequence, the decrease of female academics after the PhD-level is perceived as due to self-selection.

The university is associated with certain worldviews, certain denominations, which were ever thus, and that is very difficult to change. (Gender Equality Officer)

At this university, adherence to tradition is a means of defence against the changes in academia and against equality measures, at least from those seeking to change internal university structures. Nevertheless, even this university is not untouched by societal processes of change. Unsuccessful appointments, where candidates withdrew because of better offers from other universities, led to the establishment of the university's own Dual Career Service.

We got the message that a Dual Career office is a competitive factor in contending with rivals. (University Chancellor)

The aim of this measure is not to increase the share of female professors but to compete successfully for (male) 'excellent' personalities, who now increasingly have working partners. Taken together with the outlined recruitment practices in subject areas, the exclusion of female academics is being cemented rather than turned around. Orientation to professorial autonomy remains the foremost priority, which certainly may instigate structural changes, but these do not alter classic recruitment practices and internal organisational structures:

Building our own kindergartens was an idea we resisted! We said, that's the state's responsibility, why ever should we feel obliged to take it on, and build and run them ourselves with the little money that we have? But we realised that's no use when the state is cutting back and the profs say to us "if you don't provide that for us then we won't come, we'll go elsewhere". (University Chancellor)

This university excels at attracting third-party funding and is home to a comparatively high proportion of applicants to the DFG, Germany's largest and best-known funder. Criticism for failing to implement the DFG standards is building up pressure for change, but without any notable consequence in relation to equality measures or penetration of the university's *gendered substructure* (Acker 1990:147; 1992, 2012):

Once again we came off relatively badly with our strategy, so that people said we must develop something. The DFG wants to see women included in the groups where possible. We must at least show willingness [...]. All faculties are trying to get female academics, not because they are necessarily convinced that a gender-diverse team or gender-mixed team adds something, but because they know the

DFG wants it; so there are already positive effects in a roundabout way. (Gender Equality Officer)

Meanwhile the university has set up some stand-alone gender equality initiatives, such as earmarked funds for female postdoctoral candidates or an equality controlling system for appointment procedures, but all other levels remain ‘uncontrolled’ and disconnected from other aspects of university development. For instance, a project is planned to present famous ‘excellent’ female academic alumni of the university on its website, but it is run independently of the university’s official online presence and barely touches on its masculine-influenced conception of excellence. The idea of diversity management was welcomed in principle, but again, it is overshadowed by the fear that any further opening might reduce the university’s quality and hence its aspirations to ‘excellence’:

I find diversity a wonderful story, but in a different sense: that more can come out of diversity – whether men, women, old, young, foreigners, nationals – than out of particular cloistered or otherwise ghettoised cliques. Just men, when they get together, are boring, just women, perhaps the same, and then suddenly this other story comes in. That we should now also consider “lower aptitudes”, to put it bluntly [...] and consider them by means of diversity and dropping standards and so on. (Chancellor)

Although the rejection of the neoliberal system and its measures and instruments may, in part, stem from justified criticism of its lack of concern for academic freedom and independence, Historia also appears to use this argument to preserve stability and not have to change. Ultimately, Historia has to recognise that it cannot refuse all innovation and a shift in its idea of excellence, especially the need to introduce some gender equality measures, if it wishes to remain attractive to ‘excellent’ researchers in the international competition process.

Keramika case study: ‘From the “excellence shock” to “gender and diversity”’

If Historia stands for the development of a university that adopts a sceptical or opposing stance towards recent organisational and governance models and this position is connected to scepticism about gender equality and diversity measures, the changes in our second case study are wholeheartedly in line with the economisation of universities. Keramika received the coveted title of university of excellence only on its second attempt to apply for the ‘Excellence Initiative’, after having also made improvements in the criterion of gender equality policy. A university with traditionally strong ‘third-party funding’ it initially entered the competition for the title of excellence

full of confidence. In the first cycle of applications for the Excellence Initiative, Keramika was unable to provide evidence of any coherent gender equality concept. The rejection of its Institutional Strategy had a 'shock' impact on the university's management.

Among other comments, we were advised by the Wissenschaftsrat [German Scientific Council] and the DFG that in the area of gender equality we had a great deal to do. (Head of Gender Equality Unit)

To continue that development, the Rector took a decisive and, in the words of Burton Clark (1998), 'entrepreneurial' step: he called upon internal expertise from a female academic competent in gender research. From this consultation came a comprehensive organisational and staffing development strategy, with the core idea of creating a staff unit tasked with the coordination, strategic development, and evaluation of equality measures. The previous gender equality officer was not to be replaced but the idea was to enhance her work with strategic tasks and evaluation:

The Excellence Initiative gave the gender equality area a further push. This university is very strong on third-party funding, i.e. for many researchers at the university it's a really important aspect to be outstandingly well-placed to attract third-party funding. There was simply an opportunity to attract further funding via the Excellence Initiative, and it was conditional upon better or more effective implementation of equality efforts. (Gender Equality Officer)

The initiatives introduced with the third-party funding acquired in the second cycle of the Excellence Initiative included monitoring gender equality, a Family and Dual Career Service, and additional childcare. The rapid turnaround of a once rather 'gender blind' university management is explained by the university's 'pragmatic' approach:

The rapid successes as a university were achieved through the very pragmatism of the natural sciences and engineering, which say, "OK, where's the problem? Do a strengths-weaknesses-opportunities-threats analysis!" We develop measures; we say, here's the problem, there are the causes, here's a way to address them, and someone says quite pragmatically, "OK then, go ahead". That's an experience I've come to appreciate in the last four years. (Head of Gender Equality Unit)

In its brochure, the university links 'excellence' with a diversity- and gender-oriented staffing policy, which is aimed at increasing the proportion of female professors. The first cracks are appearing in a masculine-connoted understanding of excellence, and are coming to light in the rivalry for 'excellent' female academics in the natural and engineering sciences:

When women are offered appointments elsewhere and we absolutely want to keep them, our Chancellor is working towards being able to make them very, very good offers too. It is just very expensive. He often says that retaining women is sometimes more expensive than retaining a man, and has already cost him a lot of money. (University Executive Team member)

The rapid establishment of the staff unit enabled the flexible allocation of finance within the university. Nevertheless, the actors concerned stated in the interviews that it would take more structural changes to bring about a lasting reconfiguration of the university's gender arrangements. The measures so far have concentrated mainly on supporting (female) early-career academics with continuing education and advanced training, whereas most of the equality measures with structural impacts (incentive programmes, performance agreements, family services, dual career services) mainly target the professorial level, with the objective of recruiting and retaining established female professors for the university. In preparation for the next 'Excellence cycles', special efforts have already been made to recruit established female professors, particularly in engineering and natural sciences. Every university is trying to increase its share of women at the professorial level, and the universities with strong third-party funding records are in a particularly good negotiating position. The 'market value' of female professors in research fields, which traditionally have low numbers of women, is suddenly rising tremendously.

For a wide-ranging transformation process to occur in gender arrangements in the university landscape, the priority must really be to persuade female doctoral and postdoctoral candidates to continue to pursue their academic careers. The individual projects for gender equality in the Clusters of Excellence, Graduate Schools, and special research areas of the Keramika university can only provide *ad hoc* impulses. With a view to opening up the university at all levels in the long term and beyond the Excellence Initiative funding period, efforts are now focused on pooling a major part of the funding already allocated to small projects so as to finance one bigger project on a university-wide level.

In contrast to the comparatively fast development of new organisational structures and the enthusiasm for third-party financed equality projects funded with Excellence Initiative resources, a portion of which must be spent on equality, the expansion of other gender equality measures has been rather slow. For example, the university has extensive experience in monitoring but has not so far adopted any gender equality indicators. At this point, gender equality efforts are obviously running up against their limits.

Outlook: 'excellence' and gender in contemporary academia

The definition of academic 'excellence', which in the wake of the restructuring processes is predominantly associated with high third-party funding ratios, extensive publication outputs in highly ranked journals, seamless career trajectories, or great willingness to relocate, points to a fundamentally different idea than in the past about what distinguishes an 'excellent' academic. Nowadays not only academics but also academic organisations and research fields can obtain the title 'excellent', if they are at the top of the rankings that the university is measured with. They are perceived as innovative and it is anticipated that they will make further important and outstanding contributions to science. In former days the understanding of 'excellence' was tightly connected to a certain ideal of scientists (dedicated only to science without any duties outside academia, like care responsibilities), which strongly reflected the life arrangements of men and the ideal of masculinity.

Through the neoliberal change the masculine culture in academia is being questioned and some of deeply embedded dimensions of academic culture are breaking up. But the direction in which it is moving is not yet clear: On the one hand, attributes typically associated with masculinity, like competition, are being strengthened, but on the other hand new democratic values of transparency and equality are becoming part of the criteria of excellence. That new values and themes enter academia does not automatically go hand in hand with more gender equality and by no means more equity for all female and male scientists. How the relationship between gender and 'excellence' is perceived and renegotiated in this process, and what impact this has for gender equality, depends on how tightly reputable excellence programmes are politically interwoven with gender equality instruments and it depends also and increasingly on the given organisational level and on the concrete power constellations '*in situ*', as our empirical findings demonstrate. What is key is how strong the political requirements for equality in the excellence programmes are and which equality measures are developed. And also on how, by whom, and to what ends the political requirements are perceived, interpreted, and implemented in higher education organisations and which elements within the organisational structure and culture prove to be receptive.

To answer our research question as to whether and under what conditions 'excellence' is becoming a new exclusion criterion for female academics, in our sample we found two totally distinct ways in which universities adapt to the restructuring of academic governance and stronger support for gender equality with different outcomes. In the case of Historia, 'excellence' is primarily understood as fostering and promoting individuals as 'excellent' figures in line with traditional recruitment practices, along with consortia or research groups awarded 'excellence' titles. Consequently, the androcentric practices of the selection process tend to remain in effect. The gender

equality measures introduced are still more or less aligned with this understanding of excellence and do not become more progressive unless and until they receive signals from (male excellent) scientists and funding bodies that they must either change or risk falling behind in the competition.

In contrast, the case of Keramika demonstrates that if gender equality requirements are associated with excellence efforts within the organisation, career opportunities for female academics can substantially improve in a competitive environment, and gender equality measures and instruments become important factors of university development. In that case, the result is not a global improvement in equality in academia, but localised, exclusive improvement on one side of the equation in tandem with persistent tendencies towards inequality on the other (such as precarious career trajectories, for example). It depends then how well these universities do in acquiring excellent third-party funding and how offensively they link this success with gender equality policies.

It is also clear, however, that the comprehensive gendering of the academic system on various levels most certainly cannot be undone solely via programmes and measures that only benefit individual, highly reputed female academics within the system, while gendered substructures remain unaffected (Acker 1990; 1992). If the core or the gender substructure is not affected, then only those female academics whose performance is compatible with the required excellence criteria gain more opportunities to university careers. The opportunities for the substantially larger proportion of junior female academics to entry prestigious positions are worsening. So far the question remains unanswered as to whether these incentives will lead in the long run to more open structures and an improvement in the situation of female early-career academics below the professorial level, since advancing the careers of more female academics is an important premise for the long-term transformation of the gendered organisation of the university towards greater gender justice. As is well known, it is precisely the phase between a doctorate and a professorship in which most female academics leave the academic system.

This scepticism is applicable both to the scale of the measures and their durability, for it remains to be seen whether equality will be retained as a competitive factor in the rivalry for excellence awards, in the forthcoming fourth cycle for example, where it then features as a routinely embedded excellence strategy. In the event that financial incentives and political signals in the direction of greater gender equality are dropped while competition increases, it is reasonable to doubt whether lasting reinterpretations and orientations will be established. Whilst the excellence competitions retain the link with gender equality objectives, having a certain proportion of female professors is crystallising as a generally binding parameter. This certainly provides incentives to compete for the (as yet) few established female academics who have experienced

lengthy socialisation in the scientific community, particularly in the fields in which female academics have hitherto been underrepresented.

Recognition and reputation criteria have hitherto been considered central factors in the failure of female academics and gender equality efforts within the academic system. Accordingly, female academics are perceived as a reputational risk for academic institutions (on this, cf. Aulenbacher, Riegraf 2010). These constellations seem to be shifting in a few areas. Gender equality issues are certainly being integrated at influential points in the current process: in the awarding of third-party funding, in the evaluation of research, in the promotion of early-career academics, in teaching and continuing education, and in standards for administration and for knowledge transfer. Consequently, gender equality deficits may attain the status of a shortcoming to be addressed in academic institutions (cf. on this Riegraf 2017; Riegraf, Weber 2013; Weber 2017).

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