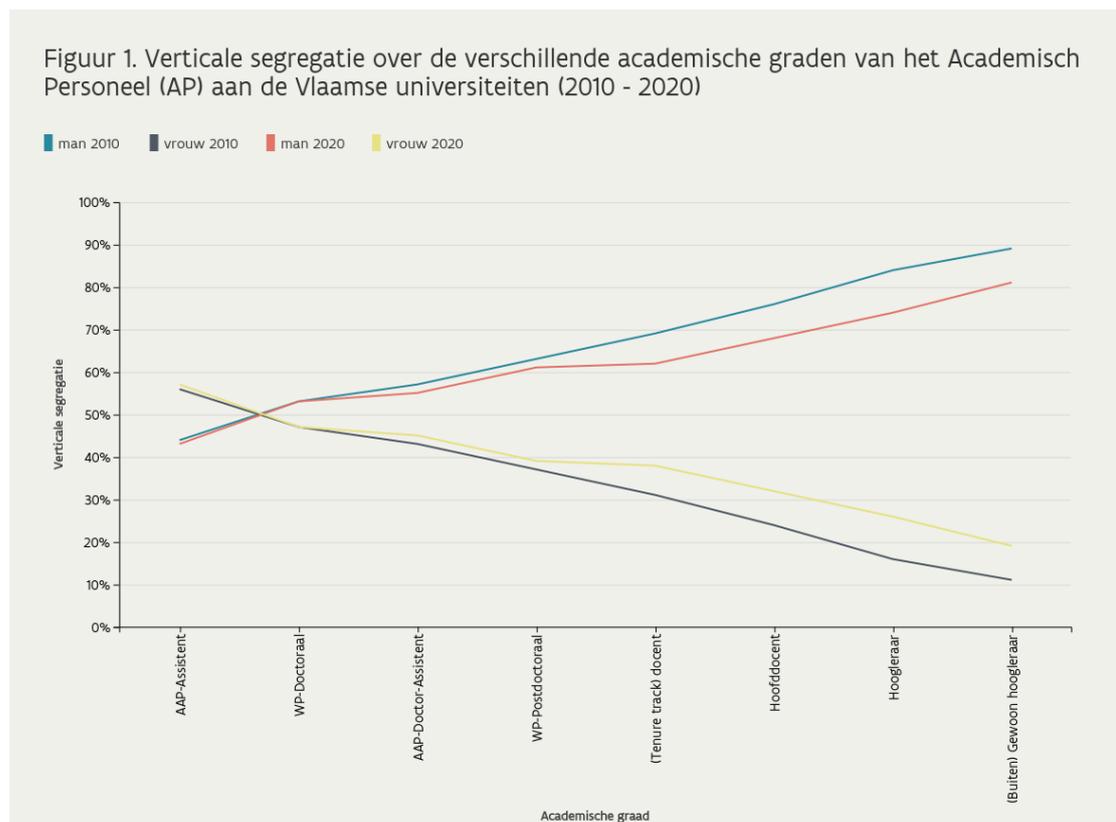


FWO Gender Equality Plan

• BACKGROUND

The Research Foundation – Flanders (FWO) attaches great importance to the creation of equal opportunities for all researchers relying on the FWO for the funding of their research. This is reflected in an equal opportunity policy that covers different areas of interest, including gender equality. Gender equality is a fundamental value that benefits research and development (R&D) by improving its quality and relevance, attracting and retaining more talents and ensuring that everyone can fully realise their potential.

As part of its equal opportunity policy, the FWO thoroughly monitors its funding channels to ensure that possible gender bias or other forms of bias can be rapidly detected. This is the subject of regular reporting, both internal and external, e.g. in the annual report¹ or the Vlaams Indicatorenboek.² Progress has been made toward a more gender balanced composition of the scientific staff (WP) at the Flemish universities. Of the total number of WP, 57% were men and 43% women in 2020, compared to 59% and 41% in 2010 (Fig. 1).³ However, there is still a substantial difference between the share of male and female researchers, in particular from the postdoctoral level onwards.



¹ [FWO Annual Report 2020](#)

² [Vlaams Indicatorenboek 2021, Gender analysis of fellowship and research project applications at the Research Foundation – Flanders \(FWO\) between 2016 and 2020](#)

³ [Vlaams indicatorenboek 2021, Het menselijk potentieel, Werken aan een Vlaamse universiteit](#)

As part of the *Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025*, the European Commission requires that public bodies, higher education establishments and research organisations from EU member states and associated countries that seek to participate in the Horizon Europe framework programme, have a Gender Equality Plan (GEP) in place⁴. A GEP is a policy instrument that may help to clearly formulate gender balance and gender equality objectives on the one hand, and that may serve as a means to make progress towards finally achieving the set objectives by monitoring a number of indicators, on the other hand.

- GENDER EQUALITY PLAN - GENERAL

A GEP is a policy instrument that comprises a set of objectives and actions aimed at promoting gender balance in an organisation through institutional and cultural change. When developing a GEP there are some essential elements - 'building blocks' - which must be included. These building blocks are four mandatory process-related requirements and five recommended content-related thematic areas, which have been defined as follows by the European Commission⁵:

Four process-related requirements

1. **Public document:** the GEP must be a formal document published on the institution's website, signed by the top management and actively communicated within the institution. It should demonstrate a commitment to gender equality, set clear goals and detailed actions and measures to achieve them.
2. **Dedicated resources:** a GEP must have dedicated resources and expertise in gender equality to implement the plan. Organisations should consider what type and volume of resources are required to support an ongoing process of sustainable organisational change.
3. **Data collection and monitoring:** organisations must collect gender disaggregated data on personnel with annual reporting based on indicators. Organisations must consider how they can select the most relevant indicators, how they can collect and analyse the data, including the resources required for this purpose, and must ensure that the data are published and monitored on an annual basis. These data must serve as the basis for the objectives and targets, indicators and evaluation of the GEP.
4. **Training:** the GEP must include awareness-raising and training actions on gender equality. These activities should engage the whole organisation and be an evidence-based, ongoing and long-term process. Activities should cover unconscious gender biases training aimed at staff and decision-makers and can also include communication activities and gender equality training that focuses on specific topics or addresses specific groups.

⁴ Directorate-General for Research and Innovation (European Commission), Horizon Europe, gender equality, doi: [10.2777/97891](https://doi.org/10.2777/97891)

⁵ Directorate-General for Research and Innovation (European Commission), Horizon Europe guidance on gender equality plans, doi: [10.2777/876509](https://doi.org/10.2777/876509)

Five recommended content-related thematic areas

1. **Work-life balance and organisational culture:** GEPs aim to promote gender equality through the sustainable transformation of organisational culture. Organisations should implement necessary policies to ensure an open and inclusive working environment, the visibility of women in the organisation and externally, and that the contribution of women is properly valued. Inclusive work-life balance policies and practices can also be considered in a GEP, including parental leave policies, flexible working time arrangements and support for caring responsibilities.
2. **Gender equality in leadership and decision making:** measures to ensure that women can take on and stay in leadership positions can include providing decision-makers with targeted gender training, adapting processes for selection and appointment of staff on committees, ensuring gender balance through gender quotas, and making committee membership more transparent.
3. **Gender equality in recruitment and career progression:** critically reviewing selection procedures and remedying any biases can ensure that women and men get equal chances to develop and advance their careers. Establishing recruitment codes of conduct, involving gender equality officers in recruitment and promotion committees, proactively identifying women in underrepresented fields and considering organisation-wide workload planning models can be important measures to consider in a GEP.
4. **Integration of the gender dimension into research and teaching content:** the GEP should consider how sex and gender analysis will be included in the research or educational outputs of an organisation. It can set out the organisation's commitment to incorporating sex and gender in its research priorities, the processes for ensuring that the gender dimension is considered in research and teaching, and the support and capacity provided for researchers to develop methodologies that incorporate sex and gender analysis. Research funding and research performing organisations both have a role to play in ensuring this.
5. **Measures against gender-based violence, including sexual harassment:** organisations establishing a GEP should consider taking steps to ensure they have clear institutional policies on sexual harassment and other forms of gender-based violence. Policies should establish and codify the expected behaviour of employees, outline how members of the organisation can report instances of gender-based violence and how any such instances will be investigated and sanctions applied. They should also consider how information and support is provided to victims or witnesses and how the whole organisation can be mobilised to establish a culture of zero tolerance toward sexual harassment and violence.

- THE FWO'S GENDER EQUALITY PLAN: CURRENT STATE OF AFFAIRS, CHALLENGES, AND FUTURE OBJECTIVES.

In what follows we will present the current state of affairs, challenges, and objectives for the future, for each of the process-related requirements and thematic areas.

1.1 Process related requirements

1.1.1 Public document

Current state of affairs

A summary of the equal opportunity policy conducted by the FWO can be found on the FWO website⁶. Specific measures, e.g. raising of the scientific seniority limits in case of pregnancy or maternity leave for fellowship applications, can be found on the web pages of the respective calls and in the regulations (also available on the website). To inform researchers even better, the FWO is currently working on an updated web page that will include all relevant information for funded research and researchers.

Challenges

There is as yet no formal GEP in place at the FWO.

Objectives for the future

The FWO's GEP is formally approved by the Board of Trustees. After approval, the GEP will, from early 2022, be published in Dutch and English on the FWO website. The web page on funded research will explicitly refer to the equal opportunity policy and the GEP. FWO staff will also be informed about the contents of the GEP.

1.1.2 Dedicated resources

Current state of affairs

The policy on Gender and Diversity is followed up by a policy officer. The FWO also has a Trusted Person to whom both FWO staff members (first line) and FWO fellowship holders (second line) can turn to in case of problems. Finally, the FWO provides the necessary financial resources and administrative support to extend an ongoing fellowship by one year for each pregnancy, both for PhD and postdoctoral fellows.

Challenges

There is no full-time Gender and Diversity expert within the FWO. The extension of ongoing fellowships in case of pregnancy requires a substantial financial effort.

Objectives for the future

The FWO provides adequate resources (time, staff, and budget) to consolidate and further develop the Gender and Diversity policy, to continue to maintain the role of Trusted Person and to extend ongoing fellowships in case of pregnancy.

⁶ [FWO equal opportunity policy](#)

1.1.3 Data collection and monitoring

Current state of affairs

The FWO reports both internally and externally on applications, awards and success rates of PhD and postdoctoral fellowships, travel grants and fundamental research projects by gender of the (lead) applicant. In addition to the traditional male (M) and female (F) options, the FWO has included a gender neutral (X) option in line with current societal attitudes towards gender division. For fellowships, there is also limited reporting on the applicant's nationality (Belgian, belonging to the EEA, not belonging to the EEA).

Challenges

For other funding channels the success rates are not always reported by gender of the lead applicant.

Objectives for the future

The current reporting method for PhD and postdoctoral fellowships, travel grants and fundamental research projects will be maintained. Reporting for the other funding channels is based on the above method wherever possible. The FWO is exploring the possibilities of gaining an insight into the ethnicity/nationality of the applicants, within the boundaries of relevant legislation and regulations in the field of privacy, GDPR, etc.

1.1.4 Training

Current state of affairs

An analysis of gender aspects in project and fellowship applications over the period 2016-2020 reveals that the differences in success rates between male and female researchers are rather small.² However, vigilance is still needed. Members of expert panels are made aware of the risks of unconscious biases in the evaluation of project and fellowship applications. The policy officer responsible for the gender and diversity policy participates at regular intervals in workshops, conferences and other training initiatives on gender and diversity to keep abreast of new developments. The other policy officers are regularly briefed on new developments in the area of gender and diversity.

Challenges

Circumstances (regularly new panel members, limited number of contacts, and limited time per contact) complicate the provision of extensive and sustainable training to all panel members and the monitoring of its effects.

Objectives for the future

Together with the Flemish Interuniversity Council (VLIR) and other research funding organisations, the FWO will explore the possibilities of appointing, per panel, a so-called gender vanguard who can raise the awareness of panel members about gender and diversity and point out to them any unconscious bias, including gender bias, during evaluations. The FWO is investigating how this can be done in a sustainable, cost-effective manner.

1.2 Recommended thematic areas

1.2.1 Work-life balance and organisational culture

Current state of affairs

Within its administration, the FWO makes it possible for employees to engage in teleworking for positions which allow it. The working regulations were recently amended and state that staff members are expected to be present on the work floor for at least 50% of working days. The FWO also provides the resources required for this purpose.

For FWO fellowship holders, family-friendly provisions and flexible working conditions should help to better balance gender ratios and stem the outflow of female (postdoctoral) researchers from the academic sector. The FWO provides, among other things, the necessary flexibility for dealing with medical and social needs. For example, all fellowship holders receive a bench fee to pay for the costs of their own research. Where necessary, researchers can use this bench fee to pay for medical support in overcoming physical or functional disabilities. The FWO also makes it possible for both PhD and postdoctoral fellows to move up the seniority limits by one year and to extend an ongoing fellowship by one year, for each pregnancy. Postdoctoral researchers in particular have the opportunity to suspend their fellowship to enable them to take up a remunerated full-time research fellowship or grant at a university, a scientific institute, within a company or organisation.

Every FWO researcher can spend up to 20 percent of their available time on activities other than the actual PhD or postdoctoral research, so long as they contribute to the researcher's development. Examples are activities in the context of the doctoral training, academic education or service provision or an internship at an external organisation.⁷

The FWO sets high requirements for the supervisors of its PhD fellows⁸ or postdoctoral researchers.⁹ These requirements are explicitly described in the profile of the good supervisor and state, among other things, that the supervisor must create and maintain a safe working environment that is indispensable for the proper functioning of the researchers.

The European Charter for Researchers¹⁰ and the Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers were published by the European Commission in 2005.¹¹ Institutions who can demonstrate that their HR policy seeks to conform to the Charter, are awarded the "HR Excellence in Research" logo. As a Member of the European Commission's HR Strategy Group, the FWO has elaborated a strategy to promote research careers in Flanders.¹² On the basis of this strategy, the European Commission awarded the FWO with the "HR excellence in research" label in 2010, thereby recognising the efforts by the FWO to maximise career opportunities for researchers.

Challenges

Due to the SARS-CoV-2/COVID-19 pandemic, teleworking has been the norm since 2020. As a result, the practical implementation of the new guidelines on teleworking within the FWO administration has been delayed.

⁷ [FWO, HR Strategy, Research careers](#)

⁸ [FAQ PhD fellowships, psychosocial well-being](#)

⁹ [FAQ postdoctoral researchers, psychosocial well-being](#)

¹⁰ [European Commission, The European Charter for Researchers](#)

¹¹ [European Commission, The Code of Conduct for Recruitment](#)

¹² [FWO HR Strategy 2019-2023](#)

Objectives for the future

The implementation of the new guidelines on teleworking within the FWO administration in practice. The family-friendly provisions and flexible working conditions for project and fellowship holders are maintained and researchers are informed about them via the website and during info sessions. Possible additional measures in this field are being examined, e.g. with reference to measures implemented by other research funding organisations. The FWO is making the necessary efforts to implement the HR Strategy 2019-2023¹² and to maintain the 'HR excellence in research' label in the future.

1.2.2 Gender balance in leadership and decision making

Current state of affairs

For the composition of its expert panels and board of trustees, the FWO is bound by quotas which stipulate that not more than two-thirds of the panel members shall be of the same gender. In the current board of trustees, five of the twelve members (41.67%) are women. The quota are also reached in the expert panels (see table below).

Expert panel	Period	Gender balance (M-F)
Fundamental research (fellowships and projects)	2016-2020	66.25% - 33.75%
PhD fellowships SB	2016-2020	63.76% - 36.24%
Thematic expert panels SBO	2019-2020*	60.69% - 39.31%
Steering committee SBO-E	2016-2020	60.70% - 39.30%
Steering committee SBO-M	2016-2020	50.00% - 50.00%
Expert panels TBM	2016-2020	54.93% - 45.07%
Odysseus (Type I + II)	Call 2021	52.00% - 48.00%
Excellence of Science (EoS)	Calls 2017 & 2021	64.44% - 35.56%
Research Infrastructure	2016-2020	68.63% - 31.37%

* Introduced in 2019

For the sake of transparency, the names of the members of the expert panels are published on the website with their permission. This enhances also the visibility of experts from under-represented groups. The FWO participates in various initiatives to increase the visibility of researchers from under-represented groups, e.g. AcademiaNet¹³, European Platform of Women Scientists¹⁴ and Expertendatabank.¹⁵

Challenges

At international level, e.g. in the European framework programme, a shift is taking place whereby at least 40% of the persons in leadership and decision-making are of the under-represented gender.

Objectives for the future

The FWO will continue to support initiatives aimed at improving the visibility of researchers from under-represented groups. The FWO strives to include at least 40 percent of the under-represented gender in its expert panels, taking into account the composition by gender of the groups of researchers from which experts can be recruited.

¹³ [AcademiaNet](#)

¹⁴ [European Platform of Women Scientists](#)

¹⁵ [Expertendatabank](#)

1.2.3 Gender equality during recruitment and career development

Current state of affairs

For the selection of PhD fellows and postdoctoral researchers the FWO organises an open competition. The sole selection criterion is the outstanding quality of researcher and research proposal, regardless of scientific discipline, host institution, gender, nationality, ethnicity, or political or religious beliefs. The regulations, application procedure, evaluation criteria and other additional information can be found on the website.¹⁶¹⁷ New calls are announced as widely as possible.

The FWO also conducts a gender neutral policy for its administrative staff by applying a neutral job classification system and detailed job descriptions and profiles based on the provisions of the Flemish government. The FWO has classified the jobs into levels, assigning a salary scale and a functional career to each job. A functional career plans future salary scales based on seniority within a given job. This is done for each job, so that the remuneration for a given job is the same regardless of the gender of the job holder. In addition, the FWO pays attention to a balanced gender distribution within the different job levels (situation over 2021), resulting in a sound gender balance:

Job level	M	F	Total
A: Top management, middle management, policy and advisory functions	18	16	34
B: Operational managers, file managers, specialised operational functions	10	15	25
C: Administrative support functions	5	8	13
D: Support functions	-	2	2
Total	33	41	74

Challenges

Maintaining a proper gender balance within the FWO administration remains an area of attention.

Objectives for the future

Within level A, i.e. top management, middle management, policy officers and advisers, further efforts can be continued to achieve complete gender balance.

¹⁶ [Web page PhD fellowships](#)

¹⁷ [Web page Postdoctoral fellowships](#)

1.2.4 Integration of the gender dimension into research and teaching content

Current state of affairs

Starting from the call for postdoctoral fellowships in 2021, researchers must indicate to what extent gender and sex are relevant for their research proposal and how they intend to deal with this during their research. The FWO does not provide education, hence the integration of the gender dimension into teaching content is not relevant for the FWO.

Challenges

In the short term, the integration of the gender dimension into research must be implemented in the other funding programmes of the FWO. In the longer term, its effects should be monitored.

Objectives for the future

The integration of the gender dimension into research content will be implemented in all relevant funding channels of the FWO.

1.2.5 Measures against gender-based violence, including sexual harassment

Current state of affairs

As an employer, the FWO is bound by the Law of 4 August 1996 on the well-being of employees in the performance of their work, which includes provisions regarding safety at work, protection of the employee's health and psychosocial aspects of the work. The FWO's working regulations stipulate that unacceptable behaviour, including violence, bullying and sexual harassment, will not be tolerated at work. Staff members can raise problems with the Trusted Person within the organisation or the psychosocial external prevention advisor. The FWO has put in place a mediation and complaint procedure and can, where necessary, impose sanctions ranging from a written reprimand to suspension or dismissal for cause. The FWO requires the supervisors of its PhD fellows or postdoctoral researchers to create and maintain a safe environment for the proper functioning of the researchers. Attention to psychosocial well-being is an essential element of such a safe environment. Fellowship holders can raise psychosocial problems with their supervisors. All Flemish host institutions also have a network of ombudsman services and confidential advisers to whom FWO researchers can turn to with psychosocial problems that they cannot discuss with their supervisor. When a PhD fellow or postdoctoral researcher has used all facilities in their own host institution to find a solution to a psychosocial problem, in particular in the event of conflicts between the researcher and the supervisor, the FWO can, as a last resort, attempt to mediate.

Challenges

The possibility of turning to the FWO as a last resort in case of problems is not known by all fellowship holders.

Objectives for the future

The FWO continues to raise awareness about unacceptable behaviour at work. The FWO informs its fellowship holders about the ways in which they can report unwanted conduct within their host institution. In addition, researchers are also made more aware of the possibility of turning to the FWO as a last resort in case of problems.