

Academics' experiences of diversity and gender equality in their own research groups

Postdoctoral researcher, Inkeri Tanhua

Hanken School of Economics, funded by the Finnish Work Environment Fund

Introduction

- Finnish universities have been working to promote diversity and gender equality for several decades, and there is also a legal obligation to do so
- Still, challenges remain
- One indicator of these challenges is the low proportion of women professors and of professors who have moved to Finland from elsewhere, especially compared with doctoral researchers

Introduction

- RQ: How do teaching and research staff experience that diversity and gender equality are realised in their own research group?
- Based on the online questionnaire on equality and diversity, which was sent to all universities and universities of applied sciences in Finland
- A total of 2,675 responses (including 438 research group leaders); 2,599 written answers to open-ended questions on equality and diversity
- The study will contribute to the literature on gender equality and diversity practices by focusing on academics' experiences of their own research groups

Literature on equality, diversity and inclusion

- Although academics' experiences of diversity and gender equality have been studied extensively internationally, relatively little attention has been paid to team activities from this perspective
- Many researchers (Ahmed, 2012; Bhopal and Myers, 2025; Husu, 2021; Pereira, 2017) have called for more research on the implementation of equality in everyday practices
- Forms of hidden discrimination, and the accumulation of small “non-happenings,” i.e., small incidents that could lead to career advancement, but do not take place (Husu, 2001, 2021)

Literature

- Rather than steadily advancing, diversity and gender equality work has recently faced a backlash both in Finland and internationally
- Among other things, the anti-gender movement, "anti-wokeism," nationalism, and movements opposing gender and sexual diversity have gained support from powerful and organized actors (Butler, 2024; Kuhar et al., 2017; Ng et al., 2025; Paternotte and Verloo, 2021)

Context and methodology

- Finnish higher education institutions include 14 universities and 24 universities of applied sciences (UAS)
- Research teams are important sites of research in all Finnish higher education institutions, but their role differs greatly between institutions and disciplines
- Based on our survey, in universities, 81 % of respondents, and in UASs, 59% of respondents, whose work involves research activities, are part of a research group
- Thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Xu and Zammit, 2020)

Possible themes/topics to focus on

- Research group hierarchies are organised along the lines of gender and ethnicity, intersectionally, although this is often informal and hidden (remarks, non-happenings, sometimes “feedback” or harassment)
- Many respondents discuss the relationship of meritocracy and diversity and equality. Some perceive meritocracy as the most important; some find both meaningful but in some ways contradictory
- Resistance towards DEI: what arguments are used, can I identify typical backlash discourses or is this about something else?
- Both women and men voice resisting comments, but in this survey, research groups led by women were more balanced or women-dominated, also in natural sciences and technology

Conclusion / questions

- Do some of the topics/themes resonate more than others?
- Other ideas, comments, thoughts or questions

Thank you!