

Academic standards and gender equality*

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Abstract

This paper provides an analysis of gender equality at the Faculty of Arts of the University of Ljubljana and examines the main results in the broader context of quality in higher education. The Faculty of Arts participated in a project that aimed to develop a gender equality plan for the institution. Data from different aspects of institutional life were collected and analysed to gain a better insight into institutional equality and its relationship with the existing notion of quality in academia, especially through academic career advancement. The study reveals that more women than men tend to remain at the same academic rank for an extended period, particularly at the assistant professor level, and that they meet more objective and subjective obstacles on their academic path. Although there is an increasing awareness of academic policies and practices that foster equality in higher education, there is still a prevalent and strong perception that equality measures compromise academic standards.

Keywords: academic standards; career progression; gender equality

Resum. *Estàndards acadèmics i igualtat de gènere*

Aquest article ofereix una anàlisi de la igualtat de gènere a la Facultat d'Arts de la Universitat de Ljubljana i n'examina els principals resultats en el context més ampli de la qualitat de l'educació superior. La Facultat d'Arts va participar en un projecte que pretenia desenvolupar un pla d'igualtat de gènere per a la institució. Es van recollir i analitzar dades de diferents aspectes de la vida institucional per obtenir una millor visió de la igualtat institucional i la seva relació amb la noció de qualitat existent a l'àmbit acadèmic, especialment a través de l'evolució de la carrera acadèmica. L'estudi revela que més dones

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que homes tendeixen a romandre en el mateix rang acadèmic durant un període prolongat, especialment en el nivell de professora ajudant, i que les dones troben més obstacles objectius i subjectius en la seva trajectòria acadèmica. Tot i que hi ha una consciència creixent de les polítiques i pràctiques acadèmiques que fomenten la igualtat en l'educació superior, encara hi ha una percepció forta i prevalent que les mesures d'igualtat comprometen els estàndards acadèmics.

Paraules clau: estàndards acadèmics; evolució professional; igualtat de gènere

Resumen. *Estándares académicos e igualdad de género*

Este artículo proporciona un análisis de la igualdad de género en la Facultad de Artes de la Universidad de Liubliana y examina los principales resultados en el contexto más amplio de la calidad de la educación superior. La Facultad de Artes participó en un proyecto que tuvo como objetivo desarrollar un plan de igualdad de género para la institución. Se recopilaron y analizaron datos de diferentes aspectos de la vida institucional para obtener una mejor comprensión de la igualdad institucional y su relación con la noción existente de calidad en el mundo académico, especialmente a través del avance de la carrera académica. El estudio revela que más mujeres que hombres tienden a permanecer en el mismo rango académico durante un período prolongado, particularmente en el nivel de profesora ayudante, y que las mujeres encuentran más obstáculos objetivos y subjetivos en su trayectoria académica. Si bien existe una conciencia cada vez mayor sobre las políticas y prácticas académicas que fomentan la igualdad en la educación superior, todavía prevalece y es fuerte la percepción de que las medidas de igualdad comprometen los estándares académicos.

Palabras clave: estándares académicos; progresión profesional; igualdad de género

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1. Introduction

Quality in higher education is mainly perceived through merit and standards of success. Academic success in turn is therefore regulated through different quality mechanisms that produce institutional and individual practices, producing academic subjectivities and the rationality of standards in an academic field (Beerkens, 2018). Recruiting the best individuals based on their merits and assuring their progression within the field in terms of maintaining and/or improving their qualifications for the positions they hold in higher education are fundamental for maintaining the quality of academic work and the academic field *per se*. Practices undermining or challenging this rationality are

marginalised, excluded and under-debated (Cote & Furlong, 2016). Nevertheless, widening access to higher education for social groups which previously had limited or even no access to it – the massification of higher education – has revealed complex problematics concerning equity and equality of success and progression within a field (Yudkevich et al., 2015). The notion of education as a great equaliser for those with less favourable socio-economic backgrounds, for racial minorities and for women, has brought about debates on equality and equity versus quality, challenging the conceptualisation of quality, its mechanisms, and standards of success, which explicitly or implicitly contribute to exclusion. One of the main contemporary ideas challenging the notion of existing standards of quality in academia and the perception of merit is gender equality. In recent decades the European Union's policy responses have shown a commitment to strengthening diversity and inclusiveness, with an increasing focus on gender equality as a priority, including institutional practices of gender equality in academia (European Commission, 2020). While there has been an undeniable focus on gender as the dominant discourse regarding equality and equity in higher education in the EU, other intersectional inequalities have also been considered, such as those relating to age, race, and so on. Starting with the concept of gender equality in higher education, this paper presents some of the equality and equity standards and problematics in higher education in Slovenia, which go beyond gender equality and reveal the need to reconsider the mechanisms that frame the access and progression of academic staff. The results of an analysis of factors that support or hinder academic careers at the Faculty of Arts of the University of Ljubljana are presented as a possible contribution to the broader debate on standards and equity in higher education in Slovenia.

2. The Context of the Equity and Equality Debate in Education

After the Second World War equality discourses defined education as a human right for every individual, regardless of social background, race, gender and other characteristics (UNESCO, 2018). Educational institutions were also seen as one of the main mechanisms of national security to maintain peace, social justice and economic prosperity. Increasing numbers of students were thus enrolled in secondary education and universities, with such institutions facing challenges in supporting existing practices. Gaining access to a social field which was previously strongly marked by principles of exclusion revealed a twofold problematic. Access was not enough to ensure the success of most of the expanded population of students, and this was related to the reproductive structures and practices of the educational institutions themselves, which excluded many of the newcomers – not on account of their status, but on account of their abilities and merits (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Kos, 2023).

Le Feuvre et al. (2019) argue that women's progressive access to the upper reaches of the socio-professional hierarchy usually coincides with major demographic, organisational or socioeconomic transformations at the national and/

or occupational levels, which is also applicable to the academic profession. Structural changes in higher education and research institutions are running in parallel with shifts in the gender composition of academic staff, producing challenges to the “old” rationality of academic professional ethos (European Commission, 2021). Changes to academic working environments have been demographic, organisational and ideological in nature. From a demographic point of view, academic employment has expanded significantly over the past 50 years. This growth has affected all levels of the academic occupational hierarchy but has often been more spectacular at the junior levels (PhD candidates and postdoctoral researchers) than among tenured professors, leading to a widening of the base of the occupational pyramid (Le Feuvre et al., 2019). Shifts in the organisation and management of higher education have been increasingly influenced by the instrumental rationality of New Public Management, a concept and practice that was introduced at the end of the 20th century, as part of the move towards deregulation in the field of education (Broucker & De Wit, 2015). Academic institutions were still part of the public sector, but were pushed to change their management techniques to be more in line with the principles of competition, transparency, cost-cutting and the maximisation of profit, all with the aim of achieving returns on investment, which has not only a managerial but also an ideological dimension. This has produced various challenges in terms of greater competitiveness among academic staff, which has proved to be challenging or even contrary, in some cases, to the principles of equity and equality (Ylijoki, 2013).

For the purposes of this paper, we will briefly draw on the notions of symbolic violence and the logic of the education field, which can help us understand the dynamics of the reproduction of existing inequalities in academia, with an emphasis on gender.

Burawoy, referencing Bourdieu, defines symbolic violence as a “form of domination that works through concealing itself from its agents, or, in Bourdieusian language, a form of domination that works through misrecognition” (Burawoy, 2019, p. 2.); and “a game that seduces participants into spontaneous consent while concealing the social relations that are the conditions of its existence” (p. 3). In the education field this implies that individuals from less favourable social groups may be given access to education, but since they do not possess the appropriate cultural capital they fail to flourish in this context. In parallel, the related social structures, seen as a game, conceal the rules of the game, the underlining practices that secure participation/exclusion while simultaneously obscuring the conditions and consequences of their reproduction. Individuals are therefore invited to participate, accepting the rules and conditions as a set of givens, while not recognising or challenging those rules in terms of justice and fairness. In addition to social background, Bourdieu also showed how masculine domination affects educational structures and practices and follows the same logic of the inclusion/exclusion of men and women in education that manifest, for example, in different trajectories at all educational levels (Bourdieu, 2010).

The academic field, as Bourdieu has shown in *Homoacademicus* (1988), has its own social structures, a set of dominant practices, and by entering a position in higher education a person also enters a game of academic success and of positioning within a social world, defined by several expected properties (Bourdieu, 1988, p. xii-xiii). This social world is maintained and reproduced through a set of classifications and classificatory judgements that produce hierarchies, but also involve agents in struggles for these classifications – in the scope of what these agents, depending on their positions within a specific field, can recognise as an object of possible power struggles, where success is bound to their position in the same field.

Bourdieu's understanding of a field entails agency. While striving towards reproduction of the existing order, agents are constantly (re)evaluating conditions in their quest for individual advancement, through exploitation of the existing rules. This means that rules and classifications change, but at the same time tend to stay the same.

Selection criteria, in our case standards of progression for women, that appear “self-evident” and already legitimised are often accepted because most people do not recognise the underlying structures and power relations that produce values such as merit and equality of opportunity. However, some groups understand these and use their abilities to negotiate the rules (Bourdieu, 1988).

In the context of the academic field, what constitutes merit and the maintaining of standards in academic progression criteria is always arbitrary. This means that dominant groups construct and maintain standards, thereby guaranteeing the reproduction of the “world as we know it” and a notion of success that fits the accepted image. In the past decade, academic standards have been analysed and criticised not only through gender equality but in light of intersectional approaches, highlighting competing inequalities deriving from race, gender, ethnicity, age and so on (Bhopal & Henderson, 2019).

3. Equality, Equity and Policy Agenda

Amidst the pressures exerted by technological developments, global mobility and environmental crises all impacting the ways in which we live and work, inequality thus remains a complex subject and at the core of educational debates (UNESCO, 2021). These pressing issues are related to the challenges of existing neoliberal rationality in education, which, as different authors warn, have been the dominant regulative idea for the last four decades. Cote & Furlong (2016), for example, argue that since the 1980s the economic ideology of neoliberalism has, in the educational sphere, focused on the instrumental aspects of higher education. Internally, higher education is composed of various status hierarchies and numerous conflicts, and competition can be observed among those involved in these hierarchical relations, using quality (among other things) as a positioning device, in terms of rankings, research productivity and other measurable outputs. In parallel, different market strat-

egies are applied to make these institutions more accessible and enable the success of students (Alvesson, 2022). These strategies are often implemented under the “misused” notion of democracy, equal opportunity and individual rights. Cote & Furlong (2016) warn of the risk of institutions using the principles of democracy that can then diminish their capacities to uphold standards and therefore reduce their instrumental utility (p. 2-5).

While gender equality as a policy issue in higher education and society has a long and complex genealogy, we have seen an increasing number of related policy responses, beginning with the Treaty of Rome (1957) and continuing to the present, within the EU and at various levels. Starting with the EU’s Paris Declaration (2015), member states began promoting citizenship and the common values of freedom, tolerance and non-discrimination through education. In the context of EU policies, the issue of social inclusion gained importance, and in 2017 the European Commission took up the topic in its renewed agenda for higher education, while at the same time it became part of the policies to strengthen the social dimension of European integration through the reinforcement of the European Social Pillar. On the research side the focus has been on gender equality, as this has been one of the priority topics within the framework of the European Research Area (ERA) (European Commission, 2015).

Actions to find new ways to enable gender equality in higher education, developing both institutional strategies and the implementation of gender equality practices, have been put in motion by different reports, such as *She Figures* publication (European Commission, 2021) and the European Commission’s Structural Change in Research Institutions report (2012), as well as gender equality being presented as a priority in the ERA progress report (European Commission, 2014), and with financial incentives from the European Commission, mainly through H2020 (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2016).

Despite such consistent action, various research studies and reports recognise that while a gender balance in doctoral graduates has nearly been reached, gender inequalities persist in Europe’s research and innovation (R&I) systems in terms of women’s participation and progression in scientific careers.

The under-representation of women researchers and professors in different career stages is increased through the phenomena of the “leaky pipeline” and “glass ceiling”. The leaky pipeline refers to the fact that an increase in the proportion of women among graduates (or at a higher stage in the career ladder) does not automatically lead to an increase in the proportion of women among researchers, and especially not in the proportion of women among Grade A academic staff (i.e. the highest position at which research is conducted). The glass ceiling effect, on the other hand, is the result of the structural barriers, discriminatory practices and gender biases that impede women’s access to top decision-making and managerial positions (Dubois-Shaik & Fusulier, 2015).

An additional factor partly contributing to the slower career progression of women compared to men is gender differences in access to research funding.

Differences in funding success rates for men and women in R&I could thus lead to a vicious cycle, whereby lower funding could lead to fewer patents or publications, which could then lead to less competitive funding applications (Dubois-Shaik & Fusulier, 2015).

The struggle for equality, equity and standards is complex and therefore not without risks. The gender equality problematic shows the need for a more productive relationship between equity and standards. In the wider European political agenda, as well as in the context of national priorities, gender equality has been embedded in both the policies and practices of the University of Ljubljana (University of Ljubljana, 2020). Nevertheless, some of the more in-depth data on the problematics of gender equality have not been systematically gathered or monitored, nor used to improve equality policies and practices. The Faculty of Arts, the largest of the member faculties of the University of Ljubljana, joined an international consortium of institutions in the H2020 project – GEARING-roles – with the main aim of carrying out its Institutional Gender Equality Plan (GEP). As part of the related activities, the Faculty of Arts, as well as other institutions implementing GEPs, had to gather data to help to take evidence-based decisions in relation to GEP-priority areas and actions. As part of research performed at the institutional level, one of the areas of interest was the trajectories of academic careers and the progression of different groups (by gender and age) regarding academic titles and positions. This research was performed in close collaboration between the project team and the Institutional Commission for Quality Assurance, which also took the responsibility to regularly collect, analyse and publish this data as part of an institutional quality report. Institutional data were gathered and analysed, and based on this analysis an in-depth questionnaire was prepared with the aim of understanding institutional dynamics and better inform decision-making processes at the University of Ljubljana's Faculty of Arts.

The following research topics were analysed:

- Gender differences concerning objective and subjective factors of promotion;
- Contextual factors concerning promotion related to various objective (work, position, requirements of promotion) and subjective (personal priorities and objectives, parenting, health issues, care for family members, etc.) factors.

4. Research design and methodology

A quantitative survey research design was used for the study. An online questionnaire was implemented and sent to all (N = 339) pedagogic and research staff at the institution. The sample consisted of n = 149 respondents and covered 44% of the base population (N = 399), indicating good representativeness. The sample population includes 40 men, 108 women and one nonbinary

person. The average age of the respondents was 46.6 years. According to the structure of academic titles (Table 1), most of the respondents were assistant professors (45.5%), followed by the group of associate professors (23.4%) and full professors (19.3%), and the smallest group consisted of assistants (12.4%).

Table 1. The structure of academic titles

	n	% (n = 145*)
Assistant	18	12.4
Assistant professor	65	45.5
Associate professor	34	23.4
Full professor	28	19.3

*Four individuals did not give any information about their title.

Source: Own elaboration.

There are two main academic fields regarding promotion at the University of Ljubljana's Faculty of Arts, humanities and social sciences. Of the respondents, 39 were from social sciences and 110 from humanities.

The data were collected in November 2021. Respondents received an email and a link to an anonymous questionnaire, which they completed and submitted online. The questionnaire was designed for the purpose of this study and contained 13 single- and multiple-response questions about respondents' career paths (promotion) and perceived obstacles in their careers. Content validity was tested by rational analysis to ensure that the items in the questionnaire were representative of the theoretical constructs that they were designed to measure.

Data were analysed with the SPSS 25 software package and presented in frequency tables. The χ^2 -test was used to test the hypothesised relationships between the categorical variables.

5. Results

The first objective of the study was to find out whether gender plays a role in promotion at the Faculty of Arts of the University of Ljubljana, since the majority of the teaching and research staff are female. Teaching and research staff can be appointed to the same academic rank an unlimited number of times, and the standards for reappointment are lower than those for promotion. The data in Table 2 show that there are differences between men and women in the number of reappointments to the same rank (the full professors did not answer the question about the number of reappointments, as their position does not require reappointment).

Table 2. Gender according to number of reappointments to a current rank

			Once	Twice	Three or more times	Total
Gender	female	f	38	29	17	84
		f%	45.2	34.5	20.2	100.0
	male	f	15	14	3	32
		f%	46.9	43.8	9.4	100.0
Total		f	53	43	20	116
		f%	45.7	37.1	17.2	100.0

Source: Own elaboration.

$$\chi^2 = 2.132 \text{ (df = 2; p = .344)}$$

Although the result of the χ^2 -test shows no statistically significant differences ($p = .344$), there is a gap between men and women in the number of consecutive appointments, as more women than men remain at the same rank/title. One fifth of the women had been reappointed more than two times, while this applied to only one tenth of the male respondents. There are also differences within titles/ranks. More women than men had been reappointed to the rank of assistant professor, while the opposite was true for the rank of associate professor. Our research shows that the reappointments to the assistant professor rank are connected with women's personal priorities and/or cultural expectations regarding childcare.

When asked about their intention to be promoted or reappointed after the expiry of their current title, there were no differences between men and women, but the data show that the majority of academic staff (61.4%) will remain at the same rank (Table 3).

Table 3. Current opportunities/plans for promotion according to gender

			Reappointment	Promotion	Total
Gender	female	f	51	32	83
		f%	61.4	38.6	100.0
	male	f	19	12	31
		f%	61.3	38.7	100.0
Total		f	70	44	114
		f%	61.4	38.6	100.0

Source: Own elaboration.

To gain more knowledge on this issue, the survey also inquired into the contextual causes for reappointments on two complementary levels: first in relation to the existing appointment/promotion criteria at the University of

Ljubljana's Faculty of Arts (Table 4); and second in relation to broader contextual factors (Table 5).

Table 4. Factors relating to the existing criteria according to gender*

Reasons for reappointment		Gender		Total
		female	male	
Internationally recognised publications	f	20	9	29
	f%	26.0	33.3	27.9
Nationally recognised publications in the Slovene language	f	3	2	5
	f%	3.9	7.4	4.8
Research and pedagogical activity at a foreign university	f	22	6	28
	f%	28.6	22.2	26.9
Project leadership	f	33	9	42
	f%	42.9	33.3	40.4
Mentorship of PhD students	f	29	6	35
	f%	37.7	22.2	33.7
Other	f	15	4	19
	f%	19.5	14.8	18.3
Total	f	77	27	104

Percentages and totals are based on the number of respondents.

* Only data for male and female respondents are shown (the one non-binary respondent is excluded from the data presentation because their current rank is full professor, and their position does not require reappointment).

Source: Own elaboration.

Additional analyses showed differences between the social sciences and humanities. International publications are a bigger problem in the social sciences (50%) than the humanities. Activity at a foreign institution (three months research or teaching) is problematic for one third (34.6%) of the researchers in the social sciences. Leading at least one international or national research project is more problematic for researchers in the humanities (41%), but also difficult for those in the social sciences (36%). Mentorship of at least one PhD student is an equal problem (32%) in both fields. In contrast, publishing in a nationally recognised publication in the Slovene language is not problematic for the respondents. The data show no major differences between men and women except in terms of project leadership, where 40-45% of women report this as problematic.

Table 5. Contextual factors according to gender*

Reasons for reappointment		Gender		Total
		female	male	
Parenting	f	28	7	35
	f%	35.9	25.9	33.3
Caring for others	f	6	0	6
	f%	7.7	0.0	7.7
Health issues	f	7	0	7
	f%	9.0	0.0	6.7
Too much pedagogical work	f	39	11	50
	f%	50.0	40.7	47.6
Too much research work	f	14	3	17
	f%	17.9	11.1	16.2
Leadership engagements	f	9	4	13
	f%	11.5	14.8	12.4
Too much engagement in working bodies (e.g. commissions and councils)	f	16	10	26
	f%	20.5	37.0	24.8
I am in no hurry to be promoted	f	16	8	24
	f%	20.5	29.6	22.9
I do not agree with the existing criteria	f	11	4	15
	f%	14.1	14.8	14.3
Other	f	29	11	40
	f%	37.2	40.7	38.1
Total	f	78	27	105

Percentages and totals are based on the number of respondents.

Source: Own elaboration.

Slightly more women (almost 36%) than men (almost 26%) report parenting as a factor in promotion, as well as the workload regarding pedagogical activities (women 50%; men 40.7%). More men, on the other hand, report engagement in different working bodies as a factor, and appear to be slightly less concerned with the importance of promotion than women.

6. Discussion

Academic success based on merit rather than on characteristics such as wealth, family connections, class privilege, popularity, social position or political power is necessary for ensuring equality, but is not without problems. Meritocracy in educational institutions has always been a controversial issue for

many reasons. Problems regarding selecting “the best” individuals for positions, together with increased competition between universities due to globalisation as well as greater public accountability, compels constant reviews in various areas, including relating to the assessment and recruitment of university staff. This creates a strong link between individual academic positions and the overall competitiveness, efficiency, resources and reputation-generating productivity and “speed” of educational institutions. Externally imposed temporal regimes on individuals, institutions and national higher education systems create pressures on them in terms of specific output measures (Ylijoki, 2013).

Ylijoki (2013) raises several issues concerning academic values and shows that these are in part more related to age than gender. First, she questions the status of teaching as a component of academic work and the value of the research-teaching nexus. This means that if we wish to take gender equality seriously, we must, in addition to the policy approaches required by gender mainstreaming, also acknowledge the challenge it presents to traditional academic ideals, such as a commitment to academic work within a specific field, along with traditional practices that are dominated by male culture in the field (Bourdieu, 1988). A clear picture of this dominance can be seen in the strong male networks in educational institutions, as well as their common social and academic capital, which can have a significant impact on the entire process of academic vertical mobility.

The results of our study show that more women than men stay at the same rank/title for longer. Moreover, women tend to stay longer at the rank of assistant professor, as the cultural expectation is that women will take more time off work to care for their young children than men do early in their careers.

Common challenges were found in the study regarding institutional values and the understanding of academic success being mainly based on research achievements, which can be the prime criterion of academic advancement at some institutions, as well as the requirement for maintenance of the research-teaching nexus, publications in international and national environments, demonstrable teaching skills, successful research funding applications, research collaborations, small-scale research management, and so on. Institutions seek visible, if not measurable, indicators of continuing excellence in their permanent academic workforce as part of their desire for quality and accountability (Vidovich, 2009). While systematic, external evaluations based on transparent procedures, rules and criteria have undoubtedly contributed to women having more chance of being judged by their achievements, the introduction of some of the criteria as well as of “objective” or “clock-based” timeframes into performance evaluations, has also been shown to be problematic, Ylijoki (2013) warns.

In Slovenia, the reform of higher education in the 1990s was dominated by a strong inclination towards a more meritocratic approach. In the case of the University of Ljubljana, the University Appointment Committee has considerable discretionary power at the end of the promotion process. The

problem that can arise here is that older male professors at the higher ranks are over-represented on this committee, and this might have an impact on their decisions. In 2017-18, for example, only 25% of the committee members were women, while in 2022-23 this number had only risen to 26.3% (Antić Gaber, 2018).

In parallel, the quality discourse and evaluative academic culture gained importance with the rise of political rationality and new public management. This in turn contributed to the development of criteria for measuring research productivity, which have since become even more strictly defined and quantifiable with the use of bibliometric indicators (Antić Gaber, 2018). In addition to criteria which prioritise research and publication in international journals, the criteria for appointment also contain a teaching mobility element, as well as project leadership and mentoring of a PhD student. While at first glance these seem non-problematic and transparent, ensuring equal treatment and high-quality academic positions, they also raise several issues concerning equity and equality – namely in relation to gender and age. As the results of our study show, project leadership was the most difficult promotion criterion to fulfil, followed by PhD mentorship and international publication activity. In addition, long-term teaching and/or research activity abroad is another criterion that represents one of the greatest obstacles to academic career progression, and this issue is more severe for women than for men. Academic mobility requires relatively long stays in foreign academic institutions. While there are some financial incentives available to enable this, these are usually insufficient, and individuals are often left to their own devices when organising long-term mobility. Moreover, individuals also face difficulties with regard to their regular work (teaching) responsibilities while abroad, as there are rarely possibilities for a substitute to be arranged. Another problem is the demand for a continuous, three-month stay, without the possibility of combining mobility with work and life at home. Candidates are thus usually faced with having to leave their families behind for an extended period of time, and this is especially problematic for those with young children, or with partners or other family members in need of care, in a culture where such work is predominantly expected from women – those who are younger to deal with childcare, and those who are older to look after elderly or sick partners or parents. While the criteria related to project leadership have been seen as problematic, such discussions generally focus on issues such as access to funding (national or international) and differences among different disciplines, rather than issues relating to gender. The mentoring of doctoral students is another issue over which candidates have little control, and something that varies across disciplines, faculties and study programmes.

7. Conclusion

Research on gender equality in academia has only attracted significant interest in the last couple of decades, but the work done to date has revealed some of the pressing issues concerning the policies and practices of quality assurance and assessment, both internationally and, more importantly, embedded in national academic cultures. The need to discuss and reevaluate existing criteria has also become more acute on account of gender equality policy and practice. However, the Bordieuan notion of the logic of the field and symbolic violence can help us to understand why, despite mounting evidence to the contrary, some of the standards and “traditional” pathways for achieving them are still fiercely defended and reproduced, by men and women alike.

While there are not many who argue against the principle of gender equality as an ideal, the question of how to apply it to policy and practice is far more complex. International and national incentives have increased the number of studies on this issue – and thus the related data – and offer more objective insights into the current situation, which remains both under-explored and under-debated in terms of reconsidering the notion of quality and academic standards. The research findings presented in this paper are thus a small contribution to this growing body of literature, offering a pathway in the search for a new vision of academic standards, suggesting the need to reconsider the mechanisms that frame the access and progression of academic staff, specifically those which are problematic based on the evidence of this study, and pointing to a certain incompatibility between equality and existing academic standards.

The limitations of the survey stem from the fact that a survey on promotion, barriers and reasons for non-advancement was carried out at the Faculty of Arts in Ljubljana for the first time as part of this study, and the results offer only a basic insight into the current state of the issue in this area. In order to monitor trends in gender equality, it will be necessary to develop a more comprehensive instrument and methodology that will allow for ongoing evaluations.

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