



Female Empowerment in Science and Technology Academia

EXPERT REPORT:

ER-FESTA-2015

**Working with Gender and Excellence in the Local
Context
Experiences from Bulgaria, Germany and
Sweden**

**Minna Salminen-Karlsson, Nina Almgren, Uppsala University,
Georgi Apostolov, South-West University,
Eva Lübke, Manuela Aye, Andrea Wolfram, RWTH Aachen University**



FESTA is an EU-Framework 7 funded project under: SiS.2011.2.1.1-1 Implementing structural change in research organisations/universities. Grant Agreement Number 287526. FESTA Co-ordinator is Dr Minna Salminen-Karlsson, Uppsala University.

EXPERT REPORT: FESTA-2015: WORKING WITH GENDER AND EXCELLENCE IN THE LOCAL CONTEXT. EXPERIENCES FROM BULGARIA, GERMANY AND SWEDEN

Deliverable Title: Task 5.2. Final report

Reviewers

Pat O'Connor, Clare O'Hagan, University of Limerick

Gülsün Sağlamer, Mine G. Tan, Hülya Çağlayan, Istanbul Technical University

Gabriele Griffin, Scientific Advisory Group

Eileen Trauth, Scientific Advisory Group

Publication Date: PUBLICATION DATE

External Document

ABSTRACT

This report deals with the work on the concept of research excellence in relation to gender equality at South-West University, Bulgaria, RWTH Aachen University in Germany and Uppsala University, Sweden. The report summarizes the local FESTA experiences of conducting workshops to sensitize researchers on the gender aspects of the concept of excellence and other the work at the institutions, related to managing the downsides of the excellence quest. The main finding is that the national/institutional context is crucial for this kind of task. The report ends with two sets of advice for working with the downsides of the concept of excellence, at institutional and departmental levels.

FESTA partners:

University of Uppsala, (Coordinator) Sweden

Southwest University, Neofit Rilski, Bulgaria

University of Southern Denmark

RWTH Aachen, Germany

University of Limerick, Ireland

Fondazione Bruno Kessler, Italy

Istanbul Technical University, Turkey

Published FESTA documents

All public FESTA deliverables are available from the FESTA Web Portal at the following URL:

<http://www.festa-europa.eu/>

ISBN: 978-87-93152-08-3

Table of contents

1. Summary.....	1
2. Introduction.....	1
2.1 Outline of the report.....	4
3. South-West University Neofit Rilski.....	5
3.1 Summary of the interview results.....	5
3.1.1 Excellence and Gender as topics of concerns.....	5
3.1.2 Conclusions from the initial survey.....	5
3.2 Description of the workshops.....	7
3.2.1 Goals and format of the workshops.....	7
3.2.2 Implementation of the workshops.....	7
3.2.3 Impressions and results.....	8
3.3 Local work on gender and excellence.....	9
3.3.1 Evaluation survey as a consciousness-raising method.....	10
3.3.2 Successful women and their personal qualities.....	10
3.3.3 Women in academia and evaluation of the scientific output.....	11
3.3.4 Institutional support for the female researchers.....	12
3.3.5 Impact of the project on perceptions and attitudes.....	13
3.3.6 Women and work-life balance.....	14
3.4 Evaluation of the excellence task.....	15
4. RWTH Aachen University.....	16
4.1 Summary of the interview results.....	16
4.1.1 Organizational Excellence and Gender Equality.....	16
4.1.2 Individual Excellence.....	16
4.1.3 Framework Conditions: Working Time, Age and Mobility.....	17
4.1.4 Academic tasks.....	17
4.1.5 Supervision and establishing networks.....	18
4.1.6 Conclusion: Central issues on the working environment.....	18
4.2 Description of the workshops.....	18
4.2.1 Description of the original approach.....	18
4.2.2 Description of the adapted approach.....	20
4.3 Local work on gender and excellence.....	21

4.4 Evaluation of the excellence task.....	23
5. Uppsala University	25
5.1 Summary of the interview results.....	25
5.2 Description of the workshops.....	26
5.2.1 Description of the original approach	26
5.2.2 Description of the adapted approach	27
5.3 Local work on gender and excellence.....	29
5.3.1 Excellence and work environment in general.....	29
5.3.2 Research areas becoming marginalized.....	29
5.3.3 Life outside research.....	30
5.3.4 Research and teaching.....	30
5.3.5 Mobility.....	31
5.3.6 Possibilities and restrictions at departmental level	31
5.4 Evaluation of the excellence task	32
5.4.1 What was good in our approach.....	33
5.4.2 How the excellence task could have been done better	33
6. Final comments and lessons learnt.....	35
6.1 Evaluation of our efforts and achievements.....	37
6.2 Lessons learnt	39
6.2.1 Lessons from SWU.....	39
6.2.2 Lessons from RWTH and UU	40
7. Appendix.....	43
7.1 SWU questions for the evaluation survey.....	43
7.2 RWTH questions for the workshop.....	43
7.3 RWTH questions for the evaluation survey	44
7.4 UU questions for the workshops	44

1. Summary

This report deals with the work on research excellence in relation to gender equality at South-West University in Blagoevgrad, Bulgaria, at RWTH Aachen University in Germany and Uppsala University in Uppsala, Sweden. The aim of the task was to first map the present ideas among researchers about research excellence and the influence of present excellence ideology and funding practices on their daily environments, and then through workshops discuss the results and possible problem areas, to prepare for ameliorating actions. The report summarizes the results of the mapping, our experiences of conducting the workshops, the work that is presently going on at our institutions, related to managing the downsides of the excellence quest, as well as the lessons we learnt along the way.

Our main finding is that the national/institutional context is crucial for this kind of task and that there is probably no method that fits all. The situation in Bulgaria is vastly different from that of Western Europe (Germany and Sweden), and more favourable to using excellence as leverage for introducing ideas of gender equality:

- At South-West University the combination of the two new concepts, excellence and gender, raised new insights and changed attitudes.
- At RWTH Aachen University, where excellence is viewed as a positive concept, there was practically no interest in discussing the gender and excellence relation among the academic staff.
- At Uppsala University, where the academics generally were critical to the concept, the task contributed to ongoing work for improving working environments and gender equality, and gave an impetus to new actions.

Thus, the report describes three very different experiences, placing them in their local context. It ends with two sets of advice for working with gender and excellence at an institutional or departmental level.

2. Introduction

This report deals with the discussions on excellence and gender that have been undertaken at three FESTA universities, RWTH in Aachen, Germany, South-West University in Blagoevgrad, Bulgaria, and Uppsala University, Uppsala, Sweden. The discussions were based on the results of interviewing researchers at different stages of their careers at these three institutions. The researchers were asked about their experiences of and opinions about the increasingly important concept of excellence among researchers and research funders. The results of these interviews are reported in the FESTA report 5.2.; "Excellence and Gender in the Working Environment".

Our working definition of excellence, both when designing the interviews and when arranging the workshops, has followed Addis & Pagnini¹ with three aspects of scientific excellence: 1) producing groundbreaking scientific knowledge 2) making that knowledge known by cited publications and proving its value by getting external funds 3) getting it acknowledged by peers through various means (awards, honours etc.). We see excellence not as an unambiguous characteristic that can be objectively measured and assessed, but as something that is created in the processes of assessment, by peers and by funders. The origin of the excellence task was also based on a critical stance towards the concept, as something that is used by policy-makers to control research.

The rationale for the FESTA action directed towards gender and excellence in the daily work environment was based in previous research indicating that extreme competition and concentration of research funds on some groups and individuals is detrimental to women's career possibilities in the academy – but also to other people who might have brilliant ideas, but who do not agree with chilly research environments, with working around the clock, or with engaging in extensive networking to secure their reputation and their research funds. While previous research on the issue has concentrated on the evaluation processes where excellence has been the evaluation parameter, the aim of the FESTA action was to map the situation on the local level in daily work environments, to see whether and how the quest for excellence influences not only the excellent researchers, but the overall attitudes to research, collaboration, competition and life outside work. The general approach of FESTA, to improve gender equality among researchers at the early stages of their careers, was the rationale also for the task on excellence. However, while we are well aware that stereotypes, biases and even misogyny create hostile environments for women in a number of academic settings, the excellence task became concentrated on issues that refer to the structural aspects of the working environment and less on the working atmosphere.

The results of the interviews were to be used to raise awareness of the effects on work environment, including gender equality. The original plan mentions hidden criteria that supposedly disadvantage women: the aim was to reveal their existence in the organizational context and, when they are not in accordance with general values among the researchers, to make them less valued. Obviously, this plan built on a number of assumptions: that there are hidden criteria and that they disadvantage women, that they are not in accordance with many researchers' values and that their importance can be downgraded. While the first two are supported by research, the last two were assumptions that we found were not supported to the full.

Thus, before the mapping we assumed that the detrimental effects of the excellence quest on gender equality were to a high extent in people's minds, and that if they would change their perceptions of excellence, it would be easier also for women to be regarded as excellent and to strive for recognition both in local and larger contexts. We wrote about hidden criteria of excellence and we thought of individual practices such as working around the clock (disadvantaging women who often have more caring duties), working to gain visibility for oneself and one's collaborators (advantaging men who have access to male networks), or not contributing to the local research context but concentrating solely on one's publication list. We were also interested in more subtle aspects and unconscious ideas of gender and excellence, connected to gendered stereotypes and revealed, for

¹ Addis, Elisabetta & Pagnini, Constanza (2010) Topic report: Gender and Scientific Excellence. *Meta-analysis of gender and science research*. FP7 project, RTD-PP-L4-2007-1.

example, by always referring to excellent researchers as male or by always assuming that women prioritize family.

Our interviews about the concept of excellence in the local context of three different national settings, Germany, Bulgaria and Sweden, confirmed that practices on the local level disadvantage women. The way gender and excellence was discussed in the different national contexts varied. Practically none of the interviewees expressed any doubts about women's competence as researchers, but at SWU gender blindness was revealed in the faith in equal opportunities already being there, at RWTH women were seen as restricted by family issues rather than other problems in the organization and at UU many interviewees, both women and men, saw several obstacles, both in private life and in the organization as the cause for women losing in the excellence race – at the same time as several others said that they could not understand why that happens. The differences in the responses can to a large degree be attributed to the attitudes and degree of gender awareness in the society as a whole. Bulgaria in general has not questioned the societal gender relations to any large degree, while gender equality issues have been worked on in Sweden for four decades and often surface in Swedish politics, media and private discussions. Germany is somewhere in between, with ongoing discussions since many years but with fewer effects compared to Sweden. The interviews confirmed that the important problems affecting even young researchers while they are building their careers lie as much on organizational, national or international as on local and individual levels.

On basis of the interviews we planned workshops where these aspects of excellence, in particular in regard to gender would be discussed. We had a number of commonalities, which we could take up in the discussions. One was the definition of an excellent researcher by the researchers themselves as passionate about research, conscientious, creative, visionary, persevering, independent, hardworking, good leader, publishing in high-ranking journals, being visible and benefiting their research area with something new and durable. The fact that these excellent researchers were often referred to as male could be one point of entry in discussing excellence and gender equality. Another commonality was the importance given to excellent senior researchers, as teachers, role models and mentors, and for keeping up a high scientific level in the research environment. The fact that these senior researchers often are men could also be another entry point in our further discussions on excellence and women's careers.

When it came to directly talking about gender and excellence the responses in the interviews varied. Excellence in Bulgaria was stated to be gender neutral, even if the interviewees, when talking about excellent researchers almost consistently referred to men. In Germany the answers of men and women differed when it came to describing effects of excellence competition for gender, even if both women and men to a large extent accepted the around the clock work norm. In Sweden, women but also many men talked about difficulties for women in the academic sphere, and there were also men who said that they had dropped out from the excellence race. However, both in Germany and in Sweden there were male interviewees who stated that men were discriminated in the current funding policies and the pursuit of promoting women by research funders and state and organizational authorities. Confronting this kind of opinions would pose a particular challenge in our workshops.

Thus, our mapping of the local contexts added further problematization to the effects of excellence on the daily work environment and on gender equality. On the positive side, we realized that there would be even more issues to discuss with the researchers in the local contexts. On the negative side, the discussions might be diverted to issues that were not so easily handled on a local level. However, we looked forward to discussing the descriptions of the problems on the local level with those researchers, who were affected by them in their daily lives, and to collaborate in finding solutions that could be applied by them and the local leadership to ameliorate negative effects for both women and men.

2.1 Outline of the report

After this introduction we present the work done in each of our institutional contexts. We start by highlighting the main results from the local mapping, which were the contextual basis for our discussions. We describe the workshops we conducted and our failures to conduct others that were planned, and the responses of individual researchers and the organizations to our findings, efforts and aims, with an ambition to evaluate the impact of the work that was carried out. Because our work took different forms in the different organizational contexts, these sections are not directly comparable, but, rather, give an idea of the diversity of the European research scene also when it comes to working with such a generally used concept as excellence in academic organizations.

Finally, we summarize our findings, make comparisons and finish with a summary of what we learnt from conducting the task. We think that it could be of use to our future colleagues who might want to work with the gendered problems amplified by the excellence concept in the everyday work environment of researchers.

3. South-West University Neofit Rilski

3.1 Summary of the interview results

Bulgaria is a country in transition which has been experiencing radical changes for the last 25 years with controversial effects on all domains of society. They have had a strong impact on higher education and science where old norms and perceptions have coexisted with new viewpoints and attitudes, thus creating a unique academic environment. Specific “national” interpretation of some terms is only one expression of that phenomenon. For example, “competition” and “mobility” have very specific meanings within higher education and research institutions in the country because of the permanent contracts of all academic staff. At the same time, there is an “international” understanding of what qualities constitute “excellence” in science. Among the most cited ones during our initial survey (held more than a year ago), were: “international visibility”, “publications in highly ranked journals”, “patents”, “participation in international research projects”, “key speeches at international conferences”, “membership in editorial boards of scientific journals”; etc. For most of our respondents the “international” dimension turned to be the most important feature of the research excellence concept.

3.1.1 Excellence and Gender as topics of concerns

The concept of “excellence”, its concrete dimensions and various implications have been part of many debates on political and operational levels. Striving for higher achievements causes considerable tension for all researchers in their daily work environment at the university. Everyone could have her/his own interpretation of what research excellence is but when it comes to career advancement s/he should respect and follow the officially settled criteria, rules and procedures. For that reason, many of our respondents preferred to talk about “success” but not “excellence”. “Success”, in their view is attaining a higher academic position or a senior university post.

Gender has never been part of any national or institutional discourse regarding higher education or research and there are not any gender specific regulations existing in the academic regulations and practices nor structures or activities. Academic work as well as research excellence is considered gender neutral by all respondents who have participated in our survey. Many of them were quite excited for having had the opportunity to discuss gender within the context of academia. Despite all this, gendered perceptions and stereotypes were more or less recognizable in the different manner they responded to the questions, the language they used, the illustrative examples they chose, the content of their answers.

3.1.2 Conclusions from the initial survey

Some major conclusions and implications from the initial survey with regard to research excellence and gender were:

First, the talks about research excellence at the university resembled the current national discussions (either informal or initiated by the government) on the shift of the national system for promotion of the academic staff and the accompanying changes in the research evaluation criteria and procedures.

Thus, they suffered from most of the deficiencies and contradictions of the transition process not only in academia but of the society as a whole. Therefore, the excellence discourse, alike many other dialogues running at the country, was still quite abstract. It was quite obvious in the chosen phraseology and the kind of (rather general) thinking about research excellence related to gender issues, which was often much more rhetoric than substantial reasoning of the interviewees' own views and attitudes.

Second, gender equality was not an issue which attracted the interest of either male and female interviewees and it had existed neither in university regulations, nor in academic debates. It was said to be irrelevant to research excellence, scientific achievements, and scholars' work. Gender differences were regarded as natural and inevitable. So, if there had been problematic relationships between a man and a woman they were regarded as a result of the inherent values, ingrained attitudes and individual upbringing of the persons concerned. In fact, there was an impression that male and female scientists had always been treated equally and their research output had been evaluated according to common gender neutral criteria. In this respect, no one of the respondents reported being familiar with cases of discrimination because of either sex.

Third, despite this "natural agreement", the gender inequality dimension existed at subconscious level and was present, although implicitly, in the interviews. It was in the different ways of responding to questions, dissimilar choices of words and examples, divergent emotions or reservation while talking about gender aspects, etc. Proofs could be easily found in the content of the answers (in personal stories, concrete illustrations, selected role models, private arguments, etc.). Statistics about male-female proportions, prepared prior to the interviews, demonstrated explicitly this particular implication. Furthermore, having known most of the interviewed individuals for years, their characters, behaviour, performance, etc., the local team discovered that some answers did not correspond completely to certain persons (who they know quite well), and that most probably their "dishonest" responses had been unintentional.

Fourth, quite surprisingly all respondents opposed (in one or another way) the idea of a gender training for academic staff with regard to evaluation of research output. Some of them were not able to see any sense or use of such kind of training while others (including women) strongly disagreed because it might disadvantage men. All responses and reactions testified to lack of any gender discourse or deeper understanding of the complexity of the gender aspect. The Bulgarian language itself makes no difference between "sex" and "gender" with only one existing word denoting both meanings, but still implying much more biological than social differences. The use of the transliterated term "gender" is not so widespread even in academia (especially in the STEM fields), and its proper meaning is not entirely absorbed yet.

Fifth, feelings of inequity in the present situation were voiced by a few female respondents although still in a quite unassertive way. Some answers implied the sense that "some things are not fair enough" and that these disadvantage women in their research career advancement. Therefore, certain awareness of gender inequalities and their consequences existed but still at a rudimentary level.

The South-West University is among the typical higher education institutions in the country and thus mirrors the national status quo as well as the current developments in academia. Therefore, our findings could be more or less representative for the Bulgarian academic community.

3.2 Description of the workshops

3.2.1 Goals and format of the workshops

Following our findings during the mapping stage we decided to organize a number of workshops with various academic staff members from the Faculty of Natural Sciences and Mathematics and the Technical College. Some of our major goals were: to provide feedback about our survey; to present findings in a comparative perspective which could be of interest to the participants; to initiate discussion on topics and issues regarding the gender distribution within the departments and gendered perceptions of excellence; to encourage participants to reflect on different interpretations of the excellence criteria and discuss concrete cases from their practice; to question the implicit functions of the gendered perceptions of excellence and their potential for marginalizing different researchers; to raise awareness about gendered aspects of career advancement. People were invited and supplied with information well before the meetings via e-mail, phone or in person by members of our local team. The invitations contained general information about FESTA. The methods we employed were a brief presentation of findings in a comparative perspective; moderated discussion; distribution of handouts and other printed materials (e.g. translated quotations from partner countries; statistical information; project brochure; etc.).

The moderators of the workshops were three female members of our local team. The workshop scenario followed generally this model: very brief presentation of the countries and institutions involved in the “Excellence and gender in the work environment” and “Perceptions of excellence in hiring processes” tasks; general information about the appointment and promotion procedures, as well as about related issues in the partner institutions (career paths, temporary and permanent work contracts, key decision making bodies and procedures, etc.); differences and similarities between partner institutions and the South-West University regarding criteria and procedures, as well as on interpretation of some “popular” terms like “research excellence”, “research output”, “impact factor and impact rank”; etc.

3.2.2 Implementation of the workshops

We managed to hold two such meetings with a total number of 12 participants (10 females and 2 males), most of whom had taken part in our survey about perceptions of excellence. The small number of participants was due to the impossibility to find a suitable time for a common meeting (i.e. the members of the different departments were involved in various activities at different times and places, so some of those who wished to participate in the workshops were not able to come but provided their contact addresses for further communication).

Further, we decided to hold joint meetings with the “Improving meeting culture” task and benefit from a broader thematic perspective. The major goals of these meetings were to disseminate results from the surveys conducted under another FESTA task regarding perceptions of the present meeting culture at the university on departmental, faculty and institutional levels; to initiate discussion about how the meeting skills and competences of heads, persons chairing meetings as well as participants themselves affect the quality of decisions taken, especially those referring to research and scientific

excellence appraisal (e.g. Selection and Promotion Commission; juries; etc.); to raise the question of whether gender plays a role and/or has any implications in discussions and resolutions at meetings; etc.

The moderators of the workshops were three female members of our local team. Following the presentation, the participants were asked to comment on some of the most curious findings of the recent e-survey on “meeting culture” at the university and share their experience as members of various councils, committees, juries, etc. In order to provoke discussion some starting questions were posed: are the participants generally satisfied with this way of decision-making; do they feel that it ensures fairness and objectivity; who has the strongest influence during the meetings; do participants feel that their voices are being heard and taken into account during the discussions and in the final resolutions; are the decisions really taken as a consequence of an appropriate discussion or are they usually “pre-cooked” prior to the meetings; have the participants perceived any cases/phenomena related to gender; whether and how all these affect the appraisal and acknowledgement of research excellence in its various forms; what could be done in order to improve the meeting culture; etc.

We managed to conduct two such meetings with a total number of 23 participants (13 females and 10 males) from different STEM departments, many of which had also been interviewed in our first survey. The meetings were held at the seminar room of the Laboratory for Higher Education Didactics, Psychology and Management and organized jointly with the newly established Gender Studies Center.

3.2.3 Impressions and results

The overall impressions from all the seminars were very positive. The atmosphere at the meetings was friendly, enjoyable, sympathetic and encouraging. The participants enjoyed the information they had received during the presentations and were very active in the follow-up discussions. They asked lots of questions in order to clarify certain points and get further details about our findings. It turned out that many of them were familiar with various aspects of the project, probably as a result of previous activities of the local FESTA team-meetings related to other work packages, distribution of information, talks with interviewed colleagues, etc. Most of the participants seemed to greatly approve the work done under FESTA, saying that many of the findings, when compared to other partners’ countries “opened-up their minds and broadened their mental horizons”. The attitude towards the three moderators was very warm and respectful which was making them more and more self-confident during the later workshops. The interest towards gender in academia as related to excellence appraisal was high. It is noteworthy that the only female head of a department (8 in total in STEM) was very strongly involved and she asserted that she had created a very friendly culture towards gender equality in her department and will continue maintaining the same managerial approach.

During the workshops some negative impressions emerged, as well. Even though most of the participants seemed to be satisfied with the work done within FESTA, some of them maintained gender biased opinions and attitudes. There appeared some cases of resistance in forms of disinterest or disengagement (e.g. silent or passive participation) towards gender equality issues or disagreement that gender should be addressed in hiring and promotion criteria and procedures as

well as in evaluating researchers' performance. Some of the male participants strongly defended the perception that research work and research achievements are "gender neutral". A very low level of gender sensitivity was also quite evident – participants often tended to get away from discussing gender aspects of scientific work, evaluation of research output and career advancement and focused on other academic issues.

The "comparative approach" turned to be very effective in promoting gender equality as a new topic in the academic life of the university. Most of the participants required to be kept informed about the FESTA project. Some of them expressed enthusiasm to be involved in project activities. Suggestions were made for initiating discussions at higher university levels with the intention of making changes in the university selection and promotion criteria and procedures. Most of the participants agreed that the present evaluation criteria do not reflect the real perceptions of what the majority of senior academic staff regards as excellence, hence they should be reconsidered. They were said to serve the university's hiring and promotion plans rather than objectively assess the scientific achievements of the applicants. In addition, the level of subjectivity in interpreting the criteria is quite high in some cases, so corrective measures should be imposed. As a consequence the team leader met the vice-rector for research and presented the suggested ideas in order to ask for his support. Regular meetings with the FESTA leader/team were agreed as well as elaboration of written proposal for gender initiatives, supported by project findings and examples from partner institutions.

3.3 Local work on gender and excellence

As a follow-up the participants negotiated with the FESTA team further workshops to be organized not ad hoc but on regular basis during the summer term to address other issues, which have significant impact on academic excellence acknowledgement and career development as well as implications of gender in striving for academic success. Two such workshops were held in April, one in May and one more was scheduled for the beginning of June. Those who took part were not only from the STEM fields, but also from the humanities and social sciences since they had been announced to the whole academic community. The number of the participants varied between 10 and 15. New findings were presented (again in comparative perspective) and a range of topics were discussed: academic career paths and obstacles, PhD supervision, challenges for women researchers, successful role models, etc.

Elections for different managerial positions (rector, deans, heads etc.) of the university are now considered as good opportunities to ask the campaigning candidates to include gender equality measures in their strategic plans. In this regard FESTA has already gained certain success. The Technical College has been recently transformed into a Technical Faculty and elections for all the leading posts were held incidentally. As a result, a woman was appointed as a dean and two female members of the FESTA team were elected as her deputies. All the three women subsequently were again elected as heads of the departments constituting the faculty. Thus, all managerial positions in the new faculty have been occupied by women.

3.3.1 Evaluation survey as a consciousness-raising method

We followed the original plan to carry out an evaluation survey after the workshops in order to find out whether there had been a change in the department culture and practices and if it had been positive. For this purpose we designed a list of nine questions some of which were similar to those in our first survey but formulated differently in order to compare the responses – then and now. Other questions referred to broader gender equality issues and the impact of the project with an aim to establish the extent to which FESTA had succeeded in influencing the perceptions, viewpoints and attitudes of the academic staff under consideration. Twelve persons from the eighteen participants in the previous survey about the perceptions of excellence were selected. Seven of them were women (compared to ten before) – four associate professors, two chief assistant professors-engineers, and a PhD student. Among the men there was a professor and four associate professors. The guiding selection principles were to involve not only those who were more active, responsive and open to discussing gender equality but also researchers with power to influence others due to their positional authority, research achievements or personal characteristics. Therefore, the interviews were considered not only as a means to explore changes in academic perceptions but also as an important vehicle to convey important messages, raise further awareness towards equality and challenge existing gender biases.

The chosen researchers were contacted directly (via phone, e-mail or in person) by FESTA team members, and no one refused to participate. On the contrary, they all responded willingly and were very flexible in scheduling the interviews.

3.3.2 Successful women and their personal qualities

At the beginning we asked our respondents to comment on the recent idea of the Prime Minister that the next President of Bulgaria would eventually be a woman. The idea had been discussed extensively and quite emotionally across the country at the time of the survey and we decided to benefit from this advantageous occasion and engage our colleagues in the debate. Additionally, by doing so we intended to establish informal and enjoyable atmosphere for a creative discussion, in which gender equality issues emerge spontaneously and positive attitudes could easily be constructed.

The question provoked immediate excitement. A male researcher exclaimed: “This is a very sexist idea! The next President should be a person having superior qualities regardless of gender...”. Several other interviewees (men as well as women) shared similar opinions and stressed on the same key concept “person with superior qualities” while arguing that there were women in the country having such qualities. Nevertheless, all of them were positive to the idea of a “woman president”, found it “natural and indisputable” (male), “very good” (two females), “an appraisal of women’s merits and eventual contribution to management at the highest level” (female), etc. A couple of researchers (male and two females) pointed out Germany, Lithuania and Brazil as good examples.

The second question was about the linkage between “personal qualities” and “successful women”. It turned that this question logically revolved and expanded further the already started discussion. We asked the participants to suggest “the kinds of qualities which had helped many Bulgarian women achieve very high positions at national and international levels” and provided them with some eloquent examples. Our implicit intent by asking that was to settle down to some excellent samples,

presented by very successful women who once were, in some or other way, connected with education and science. In our view, it was important that such excellent role models be anchored to a very positive conceptual framework.

All the respondents were very voluble in talking over the specific “qualities” such women possessed. Similarly to the previous interviews, the features mostly repeated were: “extreme responsibility”, “excellent communication and presentation skills”, “high professional expertise”, “personal experience”, “precision in performing duties”, “maintaining balance in communication”, “strong ambition”, “sophisticated organizational skills”, “solid educational background”, “perseverance and industriousness”, “devotion and strength”, etc. According to a female researcher the “Bulgarian society is sufficiently ‘emancipated’ which guarantees equal opportunities for women”. Nevertheless, some of the qualities were explicitly attributed to male behavior. While commenting on the Minister for regional development and construction, a female researcher characterized her as a “masculine girl”, adding: “this is how I feel her”. Some critical opinions were also aired (by male and female respondents) that success is not possible without political support and that most of these women succeeded because of their good political ties and their membership in powerful political parties. A senior female academic added that for many of them the success was at the expense of personal sacrifices – “a half of them are either divorced or single”.

3.3.3 Women in academia and evaluation of the scientific output

The next question was designed to get the conversation down to the academic ground. We asked whether it was possible for women scientists to attain similar big success in the fields of STEM and in what way. This was very similar to a query posed in our previous survey. Most of the respondents provided again lengthy answers, and like before they all agreed that it was possible although very difficult. But now the difference was that their thoughts and arguments were much more exhaustive, deeper and conscious in speculating on the nature of these difficulties. A newly appointed female associate professor revealed that she had started thinking and becoming aware of the fact that gender inequality had existed in various forms but it had been somehow taken for granted. She added she had never realized that there were so many women at the lower levels and so few at the top. “Lack of time” due to child care and household duties was again the most cited factor and perceived as a critical “obstacle”. Two other female associate professors expressed their dissatisfaction that “women should be three times better than men in order to be seen” and “a woman should invest much more efforts in order to succeed”, while a still gender-blind male researcher firmly asserted: “I can’t see the difference between a man and a woman. ... I don’t see any difference”.

A positive impact of the project was identified in the utterance of a male researcher who said that recently he had voted for a woman in a competition for the vice-presidency of a computer society: “One of the candidates was a woman and I supported her with pleasure, because I had learned what she was dealing with and what she had achieved...”. He also said that he had done so, not because of gender but just for: “she had the highest score among all candidates, good family...” It was obvious that he had put a lot of attention and probably devoted extra time to learn more about that female candidate since he provided lots of details in his comment.

Introducing quotas for men and women (a practice which used to be well-established during the communist past) was perceived as groundless. It is subjective since someone (person or body) decides on particular quotas.

In the next question we again (like in our previous survey) asked if our respondents had perceived any “hidden or unwritten” criteria, applied consciously or unconsciously, in evaluating research achievements and related to gender. The purpose of this approach (to ask the same question) was to test the dynamics of the changes in opinions.

None of the interviewees reported about a case of a conscious mistreatment on gender basis, but the common agreement that unconscious biases exist was amazing. Four of the interviewees (two males and two females) assumed that certain “disregard” (three of them used the same word) towards women had ever existed. Another female researcher also confirmed that she herself had had such a feeling even though she stressed she could not prove it. A few more discussed the “unconscious” nature of such phenomena (using the very same term) and also asserted their existence albeit with different reasoning. What we found as very positive was that the comments about the “unconscious” ill-attitudes with regard to women were much more sensitive and substantial than those from the previous interviews.

3.3.4 Institutional support for the female researchers

With our fifth question we wished to turn into a more practical direction - we asked the respondents to comment on what the university should do in order to support and facilitate women in their aspirations for higher scientific and career achievements. The aim of such a question was, from one side, to engage them in a process of generating ideas and benefit from participants’ creativity, and from the other, to secure their support later on when proposing measures to the university executive boards. All the comments and suggestions referred only to material circumstances and means, probably as a consequence of the shared notion about the “gender neutral” nature of the scientific work.

The most critical deficiency, mentioned in most of the responses, was “lack of time”. There was a common agreement that it has usually a disastrous effect on female researchers’ output because of their child care, family and household duties, which most men feel detached from. Thus, mainly mothers with small children were being mentioned in the long explanatory comments. A number of general ideas were suggested to overcome this burden: to reduce the teaching and/or administrative workload of mothers with small children or to secure flexible working hours; to arrange longer periods for the PhD students with children for elaborating their theses; to provide them with extra days off or some kind of child care services while they stay at the university (there was a suggestion that a kindergarten would be settled somewhere at the university premises); to supply women with more funds for their research projects; to reserve quotas for women in project teams; etc. Regarding promotion and the evaluation criteria it was stressed again by a couple of male respondents that they should be “gender neutral” and equally applicable to all regardless of their sex.

3.3.5 Impact of the project on perceptions and attitudes

By the following three questions we urged the interviewees to reflect on the impact of our project on themselves and eventually their colleagues as well as to suggest alternative approaches and initiatives aiming at better outcomes with regard to introducing gender equality as a point of concern at different levels at the university. The purpose of asking essentially the same question but from two opposite perspectives (“Has your opinion changed since the first interview?” and “How has our project influenced upon your opinion?”) was to establish the nature and depth of the changes in their perceptions and how conscious our respondents were about them.

Initially, nine out of twelve participants told that their opinions about the place and role of women striving for excellence, and the gender equality had not changed. In different ways and by different wordings they recorded that: “My perception is that, particularly at our university, men and women have equal positions in the academic community, and there is no discrimination on the grounds of sex – at least evident, so I don’t think my opinion has changed” (female); “My estimation about the role of the women has always been high” (female); “My opinion has not changed – the role and place of women should be equal to that of men and I’ve already argued about that. This is how I thought before, and I think the same way now. I have never perceived that women were suppressed, or that they were undeservedly favoured” (male).

The other three comments were positive with only one ostensibly “negative” nuance. A male senior researcher explained with a jokey tone that there had been a “negative” impact because at the new Technical Faculty all managerial positions had been occupied by women [the dean and the two vice-deans act also as heads of the three departments; the two vice-deans are FESTA team members; all these positions had been taken by different kinds of elections]. Still more substantial was the commentary of a female researcher who explained that “there is a certain advancement, a growing awareness about the equal status of women in science” in a sense that their family duties are getting much more acknowledged. Here, it is noteworthy that there are a lot of indications signaling about such process of “growing awareness” – during the interviews the respondents were often using phrases like: “now when you’ve said ... I started realizing that...”; “I was not aware about ...”; “it made me think of ...”; “when discussing with other colleagues we’ve found out there is a problem”.

In elaborating their answers to these key questions, the interviewees mentioned numerous other effects caused by project activities. A confession of a female researcher was very impressive: “It has made me feel confident that it is not only me, who sees these things, and also made me think that something should be done, I mean, I’ve got a kind of a relief that other people think the same way, people like us [academics] but from other countries, which is wonderful...”. Another woman said that “I’ve learned a lot of critical facts from your project which I never knew, and even now, while we’ve been talking...”. A senior (male) professor, whose answer to the first question was that his opinion had never changed”, gave a slightly different comment to the second one in a sense that the project made his opinion somehow more complete. It was strikingly similar to another one (again male), who was initially quite certain that there had not been any change (“No. I remain at the very same opinion”), affirmed later on: “Indeed, I have never thought about these issues. But yet I begin thinking of them”.

A female associate professor made subsequently a remarkable appraisal: “It could be said that this project has changed my mind in a sense that it raised my consciousness about gender issues, I mean,

critical problems are being voiced, surveys are carried out, information is distributed ... even now, during the interview... It's especially influential with all these interviews – our horizons, I mean those who are interviewed, are getting broader. Being twice interviewed, making you getting back and think again about all these things – this somehow influences the attitudes, the perceptions related to the situation of women in academia”.

“Discussions” turned to be of crucial importance for the majority of the respondents. The workshops and meetings provided not only chances to get information, but also opportunities to spell out personal concerns and get the feeling that others share them; to become sensitive towards gender inequality and aware of its hidden forms, existing beneath the widespread notion of the “gender neutral” academic environment; to question conventional gender patterns and argue one’s own viewpoints; to be inspired; etc. All these were expressively summarized by a (male) academic: “Organizing talks about all these issues, posing the question about the role and place of women in academia, governance, etc. is an essential point... Fundamentally, the very core idea of the project to motivate discussions on all these problems, to stimulate debates on positive and negative aspects, I find beneficial. So I think, there is a need for such a project”.

Different kinds of suggestions (mainly from female respondents) for support and initiatives have been made so as to get a stronger and broader impact on gender equality work: to provide mentoring for younger female researchers in order to make them feel more confident and motivated to overcome the hardships; to serve as a role model for young scientists; more talks and events on gender issues to try to negotiate with the university management about better representation of women in university bodies. The men were more or less reserved in proposing anything: “I can do nothing – my resources are too limited”; “at the moment, as an ordinary professor with no managerial power, I could hardly do anything”; “to be honest, I would advise our female colleagues not to try to benefit from being women when striving for career advancement”; “I promise to be more polite with women” etc.

3.3.6 Women and work-life balance

Our last question was almost identical with the one of our previous survey, but with an essential difference. We asked our respondents if it is possible for a woman (“a researcher” in our previous interview) to maintain a balance between her scientific aspirations and family responsibilities. This closing query served several purposes: to check if the male respondents have realized this difference or talk again about the challenges of an abstract “scientist”; to expand the ground of discussion over the boundaries of the “gender neutral” academic environment; to compare past and present responses and examine if the level of gender sensitivity has moved up; to strengthen the relations with the interviewees and imprint positive attitudes towards gender equality work by provoking an informal friendly talk about families, kids and other private issues.

Three out of five male respondents provided either very short (“It’s possible but difficult”) or irrelevant answers (one of them talked about himself, another one offered some abstract wishes). The other two tried to make distinctions between the situation of men and women, admitting ultimately that it is much more difficult for the female researchers.

The women interviewees were much more concrete and most of them provided quite elaborated responses, telling personal stories about how they struggled for keeping some sort of balance between work and family without touching consciously any gender aspect: “I think that, there was a similar question in the previous interview. And I remember, I answered that it’s possible to maintain balance. But almost a year later I find myself unable to keep balance between research and family responsibilities. Somehow, the household duties are continuously growing.” Some respondents reaffirmed how important it was to have the support of their families and especially of their husbands. Most of them were very emotional while talking about their children and how much time they could or could not devote to them, which they stressed as the most painful challenge. It was very impressive to learn about an innocent request of a daughter to her always busy mother: “Would you enroll me in your courses so that I could talk to you some time?”

3.4 Evaluation of the excellence task

Our approach to conduct a second survey (although slightly different) with the majority of the participants in our first one turned to be an effective and valuable solution. It was used not only as a means to measure the changes in the mindsets of representative academics, but also to verify the extent to which the FESTA project had influenced these changes. More than that, the interviews were used as a powerful tool for disseminating, gaining support and collecting ideas for our future gender work at the university.

We discovered that tying excellence with gender provides a great variety of opportunities to introduce gender equality as an important topic of concern at all university levels. Starting from the position of almost complete “gender blindness” of the most researchers we succeeded in making many of them more gender sensitive. This result establishes a solid ground and favourable perspectives for changing practices and initiating gender equality policies and measures at departmental, faculty and institutional levels.

4. RWTH Aachen University

4.1 Summary of the interview results

4.1.1 Organizational Excellence and Gender Equality

This overview on main issues summarizes the 33 interviews, which were a result of the mapping of the present situation. The concept of excellence, the working culture at the RWTH Aachen University and its self-concept are very much influenced by the Excellence Initiative. This Initiative was launched by the Ministry of Education and Research and the Science Council to foster international top-level research by identifying the leading universities in Germany and making them internationally visible. The RWTH Aachen University is awarded for being one of the top-level universities. This leads to a strong feeling of “personally felt excellence”²: the word “excellence” is omnipresent in the university’s strategies, in the evaluation of teaching, in announcements and finally in the minds of the scientists and everyday conversation. Although there is some criticism – for example in an interview a female professor stated that everything that was very good in the past is called excellent now – the concept of excellence is not questioned.

The Excellence Initiative also raised the question of women’s involvement in Academia. The equal participation of female and male scientists is seen as a basic necessity to ensure an excellent scientific work force. To some extent gender equality was a criterion for the evaluation of the universities who applied at the Excellence Initiative. Structures and gender equality actions that aim at increasing the proportions of women in leading positions were implemented. One example is the staff unit “Integration Team – Human Resources, Gender and Diversity Management” where FESTA is located. It was responsible for developing a gender equality strategy which integrated aspects of organizational and personnel development as well as a working culture that allows work life balance. One of the most successful gender activities was an action against very short-term contracts which has been successfully implemented. Much effort has been and still is put on top-down strategies to increase the number of successful female applicants in appointments to professorships.

4.1.2 Individual Excellence

According to our interviewees, excellent researchers are characterized by high engagement. They are passionate about their work and put all their life into the research. Their appearance and presentation skills are convincing and they are highly acknowledged in the scientific community. Young researchers are often perceived as excellent, when they develop and pursue their own ideas, interpret existing knowledge in new ways and detect interesting research questions. Referring to more experienced scientist, another characteristic of an excellent scientist is the support of their scientific staff in their career. In addition, “excellent” male and female professors should not see competition with their protégés as a disturbing factor when they start being as good as or even better than their supervisors.

Therefore, the working environment and the daily working practices influence the perception of excellence and are a condition of becoming an excellent researcher. However, the influence of the

² Schmidt, Boris (2010): „Sind wir nicht alle ein bisschen exzellent?“ Schmidts kleine Elfenbeinwelt 4/2010, präsentiert von www.academics.de/blog [Are we not all a bit excellent? Schmidts little ivory world] http://www.academics.de/blog/wp-content/uploads/2010/04/Elfenbeinwelt_4_2010.pdf [17.01.2014].

working environment on female and male scientists differs, resulting in particular problems for female scientists.

4.1.3 Framework Conditions: Working Time, Age and Mobility

In the scientific community, high engagement and passion is merely judged by the amount of working time. Mostly, the 24/7-working culture is not questioned. Working part-time – also for a certain time – is something that is not imaginable for most of the interviewees if someone strives for a professorship. The question of gender differences is mainly regarded as a topic of having a family/ children. Doing family care and pursuing a scientific career are regarded as mutually exclusive. Parental leave for more than a year is seen as quite critical. In some research areas the time span without risking disadvantages in one's career is shorter; there, half a year on parental leave is seen as a maximum. At the same time – and consistent with the avoidance of leaves in favor of streamline careers – being younger, but as qualified as competitors, is valued positively in appointment committees. This also results in women being a little bit older than men when being appointed as a professor for the first time.

Mobility is a formal necessity if a female or male scientist wants to become a professor. Researchers who want to get appointed as a professor at the university where they did their PhD, have to spend at least two years at a different site. This is required by the university law. In addition, in most academic fields a stay abroad is quasi obligatory. This is seen as problematic in particular when a researcher has children.

4.1.4 Academic tasks

Although the RWTH was successful in some national competitions with its institutional strategy to foster excellent teaching, teaching has had less relevance in the narrations on excellent scientists. In some cases the young researchers said that there are discussions in their working environment about the distribution of the teaching load, because teaching is seen like something that costs time which is not available for one's own research and progress. At the same time, publications are getting more important, even in academic fields like civil engineering, where they have been less important in the past. This new situation also results in the need of a strategic decision at the beginning of a career: to decide whether a researcher strives for a career in the industry means to concentrate on patents and projects but less on publications, whereas staying in academia means to concentrate on publications in high-ranked journals.

Because of the context of New Public Management and the general importance of third party funds, coordinating the application process for big projects, being successful in applying for funds and grants and managing big projects is much appreciated by researchers at RWTH Aachen University and is valued by decision-makers in the re-distribution of funding. It is seen as one of the important issue in regard to excellence. Although good leadership skills are necessary for these tasks, they are seen as less important for being perceived as an excellent scientist. At the same time, the lack of leadership skills is getting more problematic because the necessity of supporting and advising your staff rose in the recent years. Despite organizational awareness to the topic and trainings on

leadership skills, offering good and supportive working atmosphere is not valued in the redistribution of funds within the faculty.

Being successful in applying for (big) grants is rewarded with getting more money, which is redistributed by the faculty or committees. Some interviewees point out that success in acquiring funds is not only based on excellent applications. For example, the decision of the funders can be influenced by the acknowledgement of the applying researchers in their scientific community. It is harder for marginalized research fields to get funding. This leads to some criticism on this indicator of excellence but not to a general questioning.

4.1.5 Supervision and establishing networks

Supervision, career advice and support by their supervisors are judged as very important for young researchers who want to become excellent scientists. The very basis for PhD supervision is being recruited as a PhD student. The fit of a (young) researcher to an existing team with a specific working culture is seen as essential by some interviewees who do not recognize that this can have excluding mechanisms as well. Being introduced to scientific networks is very important if a young researcher wants to be visible as an excellent researcher. The supervisors generally support young researchers already at an early stage of their career. Usually, those who show a high level of engagement – normally measured in working time – and have some sense of creativity in identifying interesting new research questions are supported in particular.

4.1.6 Conclusion: Central issues on the working environment

The term “excellence” has a strong organizational emphasis due to the Excellence Initiative. Being dedicated to science is regarded as essential for being an excellent researcher. This means that science is an excellent researcher’s life, which is recognized by working time and being mobile. Having other interests or being responsible for family care is seen as a contradiction to being a dedicated scientist. Creativity and identifying central questions in the research area are competences that are regarded as absolute necessities and that cannot be learned. Young researchers who show both the 24/7 working culture and the already mentioned competences are supported in their scientific career. In the context of the Excellence Initiative, managing the application for big funds, being successful in applying and managing big projects and the amount of publications are perceived as central and are acknowledged by the University.

4.2 Description of the workshops

4.2.1 Description of the original approach

We decided to conduct a workshop within a series of lectures which is organized by the staff unit FESTA is located at. The event was planned to take place at one of RWTH’s most elegant function rooms. One reason for the choice of location was the fact that it is easily accessible for users of wheel-chairs or blind people and participants could easily be set into a pleasant atmosphere. Besides, the location is very central and could easily be reached by the participants.

The main topic of the workshop was the working conditions and career enhancement in regard to excellence and equal opportunities. The workshop was designed as a World Café. This means that issues are discussed at different tables with changing participants which leads to an ongoing exchange of ideas between the tables. It was planned that after a general introduction on the topic by a FESTA team member, participants would be given the opportunity to spread into four different groups, located at four tables. Each group would discuss a topic that picked up the results of the mapping of the present situation at RWTH Aachen. The groups would be moderated by two well-known female scientists, a female science manager and a FESTA team member. They were chosen as moderators due to their elaborated contributions in former occasions and their knowledge about the topics they represented.

The use of the World Café as a workshop method seemed practical to cover several subjects at once. The World Café also enables participation, even when working with a bigger group. The time frame we set was three hours, which was seen as realistic to handle each subject profoundly and considering the time burden of the participants. It was announced to take place in the late afternoon, which in our experience facilitates participation.

The first table was set to deal with the theme “science as a way of life”. It was represented by a female professor for statistics and stochastic modelling. The questions circled around the issue that excellent researchers are traditionally said to have no work life balance, but rather consider their work as their life. The second group was set to deal with the topic of “working atmosphere and the culture of presence in science”. A female professor for theory hybrid systems agreed to moderate this group. The participants would have the chance to reflect their own personal perception regarding the working atmosphere. Participants of the third table should discuss about the importance of “mobility in science”, moderated by the female manager of the IDEA league, a network of European technical universities that is currently managed by RWTH Aachen University. Last but not least, the fourth group was set to discuss “Young academics between dependence and personal growth”. Our mediator in mind would have been a local FESTA team member, who was the coordinator of the audit family-oriented university program. Starting from the structural problems of academia with many non-permanent contracts, only few possibilities of doing research independently, and normally becoming a professor very late, the issue was to detect possibilities of support for young researchers nonetheless. The central question was how gender aware promotion can contribute to the decision of female scientists to pursue a career in academia.³

The invitations were sent through various mailing lists to scientific and non-scientific staff as well as students. It was announced on RWTH’s homepage, where only few highlights are presented and which is highly frequented. Additionally, it was advertised on the website where all events are published.

The invitation included detailed information about the general topic, the topic of each discussion group and the moderators. It was explained that the workshop was also part of FESTA and a link to the FESTA website was presented. To facilitate our planning, those interested were asked to register by writing an informal e-mail, which is common in the context of university events.

³ A summary of the detailed questions is presented in the Appendix.

Unfortunately, although big efforts were made, there were only few registrations. The advantages of the World Café turned into a disadvantage, as the discussion groups need several participants to ensure lively discussions. The number of participants was so low that it was not guaranteed to have more than one or two guests at each table. In the end we decided to cancel the event, because changing the workshop method could have irritated the moderators and the registered participants.

4.2.2 Description of the adapted approach

Since inviting to a World Café on university level proved to be an unsuccessful approach, we reflected on how to reach more people. We identified that one core problem was that the World Café had been designed as an extra event. In addition, it was put in the overall context of the whole university. To give it a more concrete context and use existing regular meetings, our adapted approach was to contact faculties with existing gender equality groups and to offer a workshop in one of their meetings. First reactions were highly positive. At one faculty we asked the manager of a research training group who represents the gender equality officer on faculty level. She suggested using the existing network of all research training groups that have extra money for gender equality measures. When talking to the manager of this network, she was very open to it and supported the idea. However, when invitations were sent to a mailing list with about 50 addressees, only two accepted the invitation. One of them was the manager of the research training group we asked first.

At another faculty, again, the reaction was highly positive. There we first asked two professors: the gender equality officer and the head of the gender equality commission. They agreed and we started cooperation with a research assistant who supports the head of the gender equality commission on faculty level and who is very engaged in gender equality work. She invited the gender equality commission members to a meeting, with our workshop as the main topic. Only four replied to this invitation, including rejections. So there would have been only two participants – the head of the gender equality commission and the supporting researcher. As we agreed on that there should be more attendees to a successful workshop we postponed the workshop, hoping that the core problem was the end of the year with lots of things that had to be finished. After several attempts to contact the supporting researcher with mailings and calls that were not answered, we finally got in contact with her again. She promised to schedule another meeting where we could do our workshop. We received an invitation to a workshop which was dated without coordinating with us. Unfortunately, it was impossible for us to attend, so the workshop had to be skipped ultimately.

At the third faculty, the idea of a workshop was supported and we were invited to a meeting of a gender task group. Some days before the meeting we were told to limit ourselves to about 20 minutes and that only one of us could attend. So we had to change the idea of a workshop to delivering a presentation and a discussion for some minutes. The group was very interested and discussed very engaged and longer than it was purposed. Main points were the leadership skills of the professors in the context of New Public Management, the importance of personnel development of the staff and many third party funds projects. Also the amount of short-term contracts was seen as something that opposes excellent scientific work.

After all these attempts the delays were so big that we had no time left. So we had to skip doing any of the workshops. In the chapters 6.1 “Evaluation of our efforts and achievements” and 6.2 “Lessons learnt” you can read about our conclusions of the unsuccessful workshops.

4.3 Local work on gender and excellence

As we failed in conducting the workshops we could not evaluate them or the actions that should have been taken as a result of the workshops. So we wanted to know if existing actions on faculty and university level affects the working environment.

Our evaluation concept was to interview those we cooperated with in doing the workshops and ask them if they see any changes in their faculties and what could support change. We invited three persons to a group evaluation interview. Two women from two faculties attended, who support the university’s gender equality officer. They are officially called “representatives of the gender equality officer”. One of them is a manager of a research training group and the other advises students in their personnel development. A female young researcher who supports the head of a gender equality commission in another faculty had to cancel due to high work load. In addition we spoke with the head of an administrative department and the leader of a staff unit. To sum up, two interviews had been conducted.

When talking with the representatives of the gender equality officers their first reaction was that they do not see any change at all. However, when looking into detail, small changes on individual level became apparent. Questions reflected good practice which can already be found in the faculty, either on organizational or individual level.

Overall the criteria of an excellent researcher are still very persistent. The professors adapt to the criteria and expect that their young scientists stick to the rules of the game. The young scientists more or less accept this. A few professors explicitly define long working hours and the possibility and willingness to short-term travelling as a must for being hired as a PhD student. The university’s initiatives on changing the working culture like telework or the audit as a family-friendly university are not very well known and, as far as the interviewees can judge it, discussions among scientists do not reflect the overall initiatives.

However, when asking further, the interviewed representatives of the gender equality officer both saw small changes. In particular younger generations of professors and scientists are trying to achieve a certain work life balance and are looking for new ways to pursue a career. Some young professors, who have a new way of organizing work, form something like a small informal network. Corresponding to the importance of the 24/7 working culture, most of the issues that were addressed by the interviewed representatives concerned time-offs. Most interesting, time-off was understood as both: as a period of not working, like parental leave, and/or as a period of concentrating on research only. An example for that would be taking a semester for research alone or writing a PhD thesis at home without any other obligations in regard to academic tasks. In common understanding, time-offs are a time without doing any work. The fact that the term is used for both, working and non-working time, reflects the research culture which defines doing science as something that excellent researchers are really passionate about and do not see as work only but also as leisure time. As the interviewees describe it, these “time-offs” are perceived as a luxury. They

are seen as a period in which the researchers organize their working life independently and can concentrate on their own research. In addition and quite contrary to former interviews, the interviewees think some researchers also regard parental leave without doing any work as a luxury. The interviewees interpret the criticism researchers face, who are doing both sorts of time-offs, as hidden jealousy. This criticism can be seen as criticism of the current criteria which is directed to those colleagues who do not stick to the rules of the game and find other ways of striving for a career. The interviewees see visible acknowledgement of "time-offs" or frankly expressed jealousy as something that fosters discussions on work life balance. Although both time-offs are no solutions to the everyday working practices, their existence and the discussions on them raise attention to the topic of work life balance.

This is quite interesting as one result of the interviews was that parental leave is an obstacle for a researcher's career. Both interviewees accept the norm of short parental leaves. However, the perception of (short) parental leave as a luxury is a somehow new perspective.

One faculty initiated a task group about the career development issues at the advanced stage of senior researchers. This task group plans to do an empirical survey on the needs of senior researchers. The issue of gender will be included in this survey. Although this was not seen in the context of overall gender equality work by the discussant, it picks up the topic of career development in academia which is currently highly discussed in public media and on strategic level at RWTH Aachen University. Here it is also linked to the question of gender equality. It can be seen as a possible way to draw attention to the problematic criteria and to change them.

Both discussants saw spreading information on employees' rights and visible examples of best practice as the best way to encourage male and female scientists to find their own ways in working; which, at the same time, would change the criteria of an excellent researcher. However, the way information can be spread has to be adapted according to the context: A network of female PhD students exists in one faculty section, where they inform themselves about the topic of career and work life balance. Besides this, the information about best practice can be spread quite quickly as the faculty section is quite small and there are many informal networks that share information.

In bigger faculties or faculties with strong separation of scientists, the spreading of informal knowledge is not possible like this. The competitive culture between institutes and professors is regarded as another obstacle as it hinders professors to speak frankly about leadership and a new working culture. Possible change agents could be senior scientists on medium hierarchy level who are acknowledged and have some supervision responsibility. On structural level, regular one-to-one meetings between employees and their supervisors where issues regarding work life balance can be addressed are seen as supportive. Those meetings are not done everywhere. On societal level, general demand for societal norms that reflect gender equality, addresses the need of an overall discussion of the persistent traditional roles. This can give importance to the questioning of current working environment and drive change.

In the interview with the head of an administrative department and the leader of a staff unit, we asked which main processes they identify that possibly can make a change to working environment and the criteria which define an excellent researcher. They saw the recent introduction of teleworking as a process that eases work life balance. The big initiatives like the Standards on Gender Equality in Research of the very important German Research Foundation and the audit as a family-

friendly university were perceived by them as having some influence, in particular for younger professors and researchers.

The head of the department perceives that he or the department has only very little possibilities to influence everyday practices and the criteria on excellence. In his perspective this could only be done with new and younger people who already are more open to the issue, while they do not see that it is possible to change the mindset of professors. In the perspective of the head of the department, a new legislation as well as the declining interest in working in research, raises pressure that can make a change.

At RWTH Aachen University, short-term contracts and the poor possibilities of getting a permanent position without getting a professorship is an issue that is discussed in the context of gender equality as well. Both interviewees discussed the fact that sometimes the financial or legal framework is a problem for possible solutions. More tenure-track-positions which lead to a professorship had been discussed as a possible solution, but this result in new problems as it is a legal demand to at least stay in a different university for two years. Giving more permanent contracts to PostDocs is seen as a problem. It is nearly impossible to dismiss people who have permanent contracts in public services, even if the professor for whom they worked retires or gets appointed somewhere else and the research area does not exist anymore at the university. Despite the somehow problematic framework, the successful actions against very short-term contracts had been actively supported by the head of the department.

4.4 Evaluation of the excellence task

In sum, as no FESTA workshops could be realized, FESTA had no direct impact on changes, but it identified the hot topics that are issues in overall strategies and initiatives at RWTH. It is not taken for granted that these initiatives are known by the researchers. Although they have an influence, it is not easy for researchers or stakeholders to see the small changes happening as a result from the initiatives. This finding and the low interest in the workshops might reflect the feeling that the issue of working environment and excellence is seen as something highly individualized and at the same time highly influenced by general societal change or legal and financial framework, both of which seem to be very difficult to influence.

We tried different concepts for conducting attractive workshops. None of these concepts worked, so there might be a more general problem with the task that had to be done. One reason might be the participative concept. Solutions that are presented like formula are more appreciated by the target group as compared to discussing solutions in order to find their own way to organize work.

Identifying change agents on faculty level and inviting them personally as well as using technical vocabulary like “efficiency increase” in the titles are said to help to address the target group in science and technology academia. However, in big faculties it can be difficult to identify these informal change agents even for members of this faculty.

Change is regarded as something that can be initiated by pioneers that serve as role models. However, the task group, the supporting network for female PhD students and the demand of regular one-to-one meetings are examples of institutions that reflect current debates and initiatives

on gender equality and can support change of the working environment, although not seen as part of the context. Success in publishing and acquiring third party funds is still the priority and the change is accepted if it does not challenge these aims. So it should be possible to change the working environment, although very slowly, and to change some criteria of an excellent researcher as well, but again very slowly.

The main challenge seems to be to show clearly that it is possible to act and to change the working environment and, as a result, change the criteria.

5. Uppsala University

5.1 Summary of the interview results

When we started to discuss with the researchers in the local context, we wanted to draw attention to the concept of excellence and its implications for gender equality in the work environment. The quest for excellence is by its very competitive nature problematic for the working environment and it is not gender-neutral: Assessments of potential (for young researchers) and excellence (for established researchers) have been shown to be biased⁴ and contribute to the concentration of excellence funds among mostly senior men. The main conclusion of the interview results, reported in the FESTA report “Excellence and Gender in the Working Environment”, was that the excellence quest has gendered effects also at the departmental level. The findings of the report were used as a basis for discussion in the departments on how to make the working conditions reasonable for all research staff.

Seven problem areas could be drawn from the results of mapping of the situation at UU in regard to gender and excellence.

First, researchers need to get independent early in their careers to become excellent researchers in the end. I.e. junior researchers need their own funds or research leaders who let them work autonomously. According to research, there are implications of gender bias in the concept of independence: the independence of female researchers is more often questioned and in a way that does not apply to male researchers to the same extent.

Second, the requirement of international mobility for becoming excellent was perceived by the interviewees both as a value and a problem. The question is how to combine transnational academic mobility in the postdoctoral period and the ideal of gender equality, the idea of being able to combine family and a scientific research career. Research shows differences related to, for instance, gender, children and dual-career constellations in the international mobility of young researchers.

Third, a clash of egos at the top of the chain of hierarchy, caused by the competitive atmosphere in funding, can be detrimental to the psychosocial climate of the work environment and hence also harm the efforts to attract and retain young talent. Similarly, the reverse applies, by creating a positive workplace environment and acting as a good role model, excellent researchers can raise the level of research of the environment as a whole and attract young researchers.

Fourth, the concentration of resources on senior male researchers and their groups influences the gender power balance in men’s favor at institutions and departments. One aspect of the informal power of the excellent researchers is the possibility for them to choose their collaborators –

⁴ Sandström, Ulf, Wold, Agnes & Jordansson Birgitta (2010). *Hans Excellens: Om miljardsatsningarna på starka forskningsmiljöer*. Stockholm: Delegationen för jämställdhet i högskolan. [His Excellency. The Billion Crown Investments in Strong Research Environments].

Moss-Racusin, Corinne & Dovidio, John F. & Brescoll, Victoria & Graham, Mark J. & Handelsman, Jo (2012) Science faculty’s subtle gender biases favor male students. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 109 (41) 16474-16479.

sometimes even stretching the formal procedures and to some extent bypassing the ideal of academic meritocracy. Especially for a junior researcher, fitting in and being approved by an excellent senior researcher may be just as important as the academic record. Research on homosociality in the academy has shown that senior men often are more comfortable hanging around with other men than with women on a daily basis.

A fifth issue was the ideal of having a reasonable balance between research and life outside research. Many interviewees believed childcare should be shared equally between parents. Although both mothers and fathers take parental leave, women have been using it most. The responsibility for work-life balance was seen as primarily an individual one. The interviewees also raised the risk to lag behind in the international competition due to Sweden having one of the most generous parental leave regulations worldwide.

Six, many interviewees believed that the concentration of resources marginalizes the researchers who are not working with trendy topics, but are more in the margins of the current mainstream.

Seven, teaching was seen as a merit but also as time consuming and the interviewees told that it is hard to keep publishing frequently if teaching takes too much time. According to some of the interviewees the demands of excellence create two tracks, a “teaching track” and a “research track”, and these tend to be gender coded. Research is male coded and prestigious while teaching is female coded and not as well regarded.

5.2 Description of the workshops

5.2.1 Description of the original approach

We held on to UU’s original goal with the workshops, which was to raise awareness of the effects of excellence on work environment, including gender equality, and to find solutions to mitigate the negative effects on departmental level. We focused on practical, achievable goals in a number of proposed discussion topics related to the empirical findings of our interviews. (In the appendix are examples of questions we discussed in connection with each problem area.) The initial target group was all research staff (including doctoral students) at the departments involved, but as you will see, we somehow narrowed our target group when discussing with the heads of the departments how to initiate discussions. We first wanted to have a three hour workshop to get positive results/impact. This idea, however, was set aside as being unrealistic, considering the busy schedules of the researchers. We also abandoned the idea to engage a competent moderator from the university outside of the FESTA team. As the workshops would be shorter and less comprehensive than originally planned, it was seen as more practical to not only present the main results of the report ourselves, but also to moderate the discussions - sometimes with the help of the chairperson of the meeting concerned. The workshops were intended to end up with concrete recommendations for actions, but this goal was not always achievable within our time constraints. The plan was also to discuss the suggested solutions with decision-makers at departments/units.

We first had open workshops at two departments where interviews had been made. The invitation was sent out by e-mail to all employees of the departments via the head and/or the personnel administrator well in advance of the workshops (also reminders close to the events). The workshop

was presented as a discussion about excellence and research funding. We reminded of the interviews made some time ago about research excellence and how researchers' and funding agencies' perceptions of excellence influence researchers, departments and working conditions. We informed that the interviews were part of the EU project FESTA and that we would present the report based on interviews made in Uppsala, in Germany and in Bulgaria. We also emphasized that FESTA is not a research project, but an implementation project and that the aim of the report is to create discussion on how potentially negative effects caused by the increasing focus on excellent researchers possibly can be ameliorated. We announced that most of the meeting would be devoted to discussing these issues.

At each department only two women came. It was very much in contrast to another meeting at one of these departments, where the head had invited us to meet principal investigators/research leaders during one hour of their ordinary meeting, and where we had a very good discussion. This head of department had indicated that not so many show up at "open" events, but we decided to have an open invitation anyway in order to give those who had been interviewed the opportunity to hear about the results of mapping of the present situation.

5.2.2 Description of the adapted approach

After the experience of non-attendance in open workshops, we eventually adapted the approach to have the discussions on one hand with key persons at the department and on the other hand as part of the department's ordinary activities. We also assumed that many of the problems may be better handled at faculty level, and used any possibilities to present the excellence findings in different faculty arenas.

At one department the results of the excellence report were presented in an open seminar. A doodle with an invitation was sent out to key persons at the department and when the date was set the seminar was openly announced on their web-site. Around ten people – representatives of the gender equity group or with leading positions at the department - participated in the seminar (as well as the working member of the faculty's equal opportunities committee). We got many questions and had a very fruitful discussion, which led to further proposals for action. One idea was to make the promotion of young researchers a core part of the evaluation of excellence of a senior researcher. Another one was to meet the postdoc requirements by broadening the mobility concept. There are more ways of being mobile than to travel a long way.

Parts of the results were also referred to when presenting FESTA's activity on informal decision making and communication processes. These presentations took place in the framework of the ordinary work environment group, steering group and board meetings. We then discussed very briefly what it takes to become an excellent researcher and some members of the group took the opportunity to once again air their distrust of the excellence quest. At this department there is widespread criticism against the excellence initiatives' unilateral focus on a few elite researchers in narrow research areas, which contributes to create poorer working conditions for the rest. There is a common perception that research resources need to be allocated across far more individuals and a broader range of areas. Many of the interviewees favor more investment in individuals rather than in larger research milieus, because they believe individuals must be allowed to choose their own path.

At this department someone suggested developing methods for mapping teaching by gender (also at faculty level), to see if research and teaching are unequally distributed between men and women in terms of number of hours and students, but also in terms of level, content (research field or not), new and old courses and temporal organization during the semesters. The proposal was made in connection with another FESTA task, on gender equality indicators, and it also included finding out if the perception is true that women are often appointed to leadership positions and work in drafting and decision-making bodies related to teaching, while men are appointed to the corresponding research related bodies.

We also had two fairly well attended workshops about excellence at the faculty level. One occasion was part of the faculty's yearly gender equality day, which also included another speaker. It was arranged by the faculty's gender equality committee. Thus, gender aspects were in the forefront. It was targeted to all levels of academic staff and advertised by posters in different buildings and e-mails to selected people by the equality committee. It was good to have two moderators, one man and one woman. The following topics were discussed: co-authorship (clear rules for who should be taken up in the list of authors and in which position), mentoring, changing the funding system, having somebody responsible for research in department boards to safeguard just distribution of different resources, targeting funds to researchers and not consortia, teaching researchers marketing skills. Activities proposed (to solve the identified problems) were rules for co-authorship, safeguards for fair distribution of resources in formal decision making, more trainings in "marketing skills" and mentoring programs for more.

The other occasion was rather an information event on the FESTA project and the action on gender and excellence in the work environment. It was held at the faculty assembly of science and technology and on the agenda was, besides the FESTA project, the priorities and focus areas of the gender equality committee, awarding of the 2013 equal opportunities price of the university, and news from the faculty. An invitation was sent out by e-mail to all employees of the faculty from the section director at the Office for Science and Technology. It was a great advantage that the internal expert of FESTA, a female senior lecturer in information technology was there. Most of the faculty is familiar with her as she has been chairperson of the faculty's gender equality committee. People seemed interested and one of the department heads got the opportunity to talk about the FESTA work at his department. However, we did not get many questions and there were more women than men at the meeting, which is unusual when other themes than gender equality are on the agenda. What we learnt was that we probably should try to make sure that we also appear in situations where other issues than gender equality is on the agenda.

Some of the activities proposed at the meetings, especially using the faculty funding partly in another way - individuals, young researchers, areas that are marginal (maybe between two disciplines), risk projects - made it clear that the identified problems should also be handled at the faculty level. I.e. we should discuss our results and their implications with key persons at the faculty level. We have started such discussions with the faculty equal opportunities committee.

5.3 Local work on gender and excellence

5.3.1 Excellence and work environment in general

According to one of the department heads the excellence discourse is a special case of a more general problem, i.e. temporary contracts and competition in academia, which can have adverse effects if a cooperative climate is not actively created. The rhetoric of excellence and the focus on quantity and production adds to the problem. The department has worked to improve the work environment for many years, with a particular interest in gender equality issues. Thus, working with excellence and gender in the research environment was just another aspect of keeping up and expanding this work.

One interviewee used herself as an example of the importance of the environment for making a career. She works in a flat organization and not the kind of hierarchical organization that the excellence discourse calls for. She was supported financially to be able to keep up the research when doing a lot of teaching and she got help with going to conferences and writing publications. As a junior researcher she was supported and mentored by two male senior researchers and could free up time to write applications. She never had the opportunity to do a postdoc abroad because of family reasons, but has managed to make a career anyway with help from influential people who could provide her with international networks. Her nearest work environment today is characterized by a very generous and collegial culture. For example, when research proposals are written, the position of being a principal investigator can be offered to somebody who is seen to particularly benefit from it. However, the research group also has an impression that this kind of structure is a disadvantage when applying for funds.

Many researchers need tips on how to get ahead in the academic world. It takes a lot of "gut feeling" to be able to navigate in the research landscape. In addition to knowing how to research and write articles, you must be able to think strategically about your career. Some of the measures in the current equal opportunities plan on faculty level are about learning the rules of the game. For example, to implement a mentoring program for the under-represented gender and to create a strategy for increasing the proportion of women applying for external funding by improving the internal processes in the faculty/university (for example processes for funds where the university is required to put forward candidates).

At one of the departments people who are writing their first research applications get coaching. Proposal writing workshops at faculty level are also in place, where junior researchers can learn how to write applications for research funding by discussing with experienced researchers.

5.3.2 Research areas becoming marginalized

At all three departments the interviewees agreed that you should not only adjust to external financiers, but also appreciate the researchers you think stand for excellence. However, the departments varied in regard to how this ideology was realized.

At the first department the problem of certain research areas becoming marginalized has been worked on. Recruitment of excellent researchers in the beginning of their career can take place via funders, sometimes in forms where the host institution has to guarantee co-financing and positions. However, the effect of this co-financing at the department has been that some areas have expanded

considerably. According to the head of the department there is also a gender aspect to this, as the booming areas have been male-dominated. In our evaluation interviews we were informed that now the department board has a more active and independent role in supporting or not supporting the nomination or appointment of certain people on excellence funding. These decisions are prepared in principal investigators' meetings, and are related to the research strategies of the department, where a more balanced support of several areas is envisioned.

According to the interviewees, the department management recently launched a discussion of strategic development of the department. What kind of recruitments do they want to make? How should they allocate resources? How do they look at excellence? The discussion about resource allocation is characterized as open and inclusive and also includes non-decision-makers. The department uses the amount of freedom to act that is available and makes certain that they move forward strategically. Most subjects have fluctuations and that is why the department considers necessary to have a moderating long-term effect so that talented young researchers also get recruited to other fields than the trendy/excellent ones. In this way, the department counteracts research areas getting marginalized.

The basic rule at this department is that faculty funds are distributed equally between individuals, both junior and senior. Thereby all at the department get the same basic support for their research. A council of principal investigators proposes the distribution of faculty funds and the department board decides. This is to counteract the tendency for funds to get concentrated around some individuals and research areas and to support individuals during a period when they have been less successful in receiving external funds.

At another department the department head would not describe certain areas as marginalized. Rather, it is a few areas that are prioritized externally, at the expense of others. The department cannot influence much the earmarked funding for areas considered particularly important at the moment by the Swedish Research Council. However, they have more latitude when it comes to resources going directly to the department's research programs.

5.3.3 Life outside research

The problem of working hours was addressed by department heads of two departments. They both agreed that recovery and a balanced life are essential. Peers' expectations are important. Even if some people choose to work very much, it should be normal to choose to go home at five in the afternoon. One of the heads himself serves as a strong model by keeping to ordinary working hours. The other pointed out that even men suffer from extended hours, for example too many hours spent at work can have a negative impact on family life, and this can also result in blasted careers. At one of these departments the interviewees stressed in particular that the parental policies were in place and that, for example, it was accepted to bring children to work.

5.3.4 Research and teaching

At one of the departments the head and the director of studies have actively worked to change the distribution of teaching. Teaching is equally distributed between programs and people by moving general courses between programs and continually changing the range of courses to match

individuals' interests and expertise and the research in the programs. The goal is to distribute teaching equally between all individuals, which also means equal distribution between women and men. The department is striving for getting more senior professors into teaching, especially at basic level. New employees, even new professors, are clearly informed of what is expected of them in terms of teaching. To make it possible for everyone to teach, much of the teaching is in English, even in courses where the norm otherwise is Swedish. PhD students are introduced into teaching through a mentoring system and their expertise in their own research areas utilized in teaching.

5.3.5 Mobility

One of the departments plans career planning support as a tool to encourage young researchers' independence. International mobility is a competitive advantage and is therefore an issue that has to be solved. Provided that there is gender equality in the family the requirements for mobility should not hit one gender harder than the other. At this department there is also a wider concept of mobility. They think that it is very important to change environments and widen your horizons, but that you can do this by going to another Swedish university as well.

Another department attempts to facilitate as much as possible for the younger researchers who are going out. Instead of having economically disadvantageous postdoc stipends, people can choose to be employed by the university while doing their postdoc abroad. The university takes a certain percentage of all salaries for administrative costs at department, faculty and university level. The department has chosen to have special rules for post doc salaries bringing this percentage at department level to a minimum and, thus, giving more money for the post doc. In order to retain competence, the department also attempts to facilitate their return. Postdocs have contact with their programs during their stay abroad and come back if they fit the profile and program. After the postdoc has come back, s/he usually has one year for continuing to work with her/his research. This can be extended to another year, to make it possible for the individual to reach the stage where s/he can get own funds etc.

5.3.6 Possibilities and restrictions at departmental level

Our best practice examples show that quite a lot can be done on departmental level. Whether the interviewees thought that it was meaningful to work with the excellence concept in relation to work environment on departmental level seemed to depend on their experiences at their own departments.

At one of the departments the strategic discussions related to the excellence report were said to have initiated change, and, thus, the interviewees considered it meaningful to work with excellence also at departmental level. Somebody said that it might be even better on departmental than on faculty level, as the discussion on faculty level may get too diluted, when different departments do not have so much in common.

At another department the interviewees also found it meaningful to discuss excellence in connection with working with gender and work environment at departmental level. They thought that it is possible to influence how they choose to measure excellence at the department and that they do not have to adapt to one template of excellence.

Two of the three departments have particularly benefited from the excellence funding, but have had different ways of dealing with the informal influence this gives to some people and groups. One has opened discussions about research strategies while another has more willingly adapted to the situation and the advantages it brings, to the department as a whole and, admittedly, to a number of people who get extra powerful. In the latter department the downsides of excellence, such as high productivity demands and some areas becoming dominant are acknowledged, but they are seen as being balanced by the opportunities that also are created. At this department the excellence task did not have much impact.

The interviewees at this department, aside from the head, were quite despondent about the possibility of working with the downsides of excellence on departmental or even on faculty level. According to them, work environment issues at a department are not the faculty's concern – if they were, the faculty should take them into account when distributing their research funds. When there is mutual confirmation of excellence between the faculty and the department, it is difficult to deal with the problems on those levels and no incentives for change. According to interviewees at this department the only way to change the situation would be to influence policymakers on a higher level so that excellence funds, for example, would not only be tied to publications, but also to contributing to a good departmental research environment and promoting young researchers.

5.4 Evaluation of the excellence task

Our approach was to ask key people at each department how this action could have been improved, especially considering other practitioners who might want to do something similar to this. We had mini interviews with the heads of department, chairpersons of the gender equality groups and two researchers at each department.⁵ We asked about whether they were aware of what had happened with the excellence task after the interviews, what we could have done to disseminate the results, how we could have worked with the task in a better way and whether they thought that it actually was meaningful to work with the concept of excellence on the local level.

The excellence task appeared to have had quite different impacts in the three departments: In one of them it fueled ongoing discussions of excellence and gave an impetus to practical measures, in another it contributed to the work the department already was doing on work environment and in the third department it seemed to have had no effect at all. Where it had had effects four aspects were taken up in particular: The differential favoring and development possibilities of different research areas, combining teaching and research, life outside research and mobility requirements.

At one department this task has injected ideas into a larger, strategic discussion on the topic. Already when the department head received the excellence report for peer review the department head presented its main conclusions at the meetings with the principal investigators (who have a regular meeting) and the board. When we got the opportunity to present the report at a principal investigators meeting, the department had already initiated strategic discussions on excellence and in addition taken measures to solve two of the problems identified in the report: allocation of

⁵ Eleven mini interviews were conducted, two heads of department, one former head of department, three chairpersons of the gender equality groups, five female senior researchers and one male junior researcher. At one department the head of department is also the chairperson of the gender equality group.

teaching and funds. According to one of the interviewees, our presentation gave new impetus to the discussion among the principal investigators and planted the seeds for more informal discussions.

At this department the living discussion on excellence was expressed in different ways during the mini interviews. For example, when reminded about the identified problem areas the interviewees directly started to reason about possible solutions without asking for any clarifying information. They knew what we were referring to and it was also clear that they were well aware of the measures the department already had taken in some areas.

5.4.1 What was good in our approach

The report was seen as “scientific” at the same time as it was locally anchored.

The heads thought that it was the right way to go to highlight the problems and then hand it over to the department to find solutions. In particular one of the department heads stressed that people from the “outside” cannot do much more than document the local culture, and then leave it to the department to collegially take action. Thus, the FESTA team could not have done much more than they did, except being more active in presenting possible actions that a department could choose to take. At one of the departments the excellence discussions could inspire the actions of the gender equality group in improving the work environment.

Quite a lot can be done on departmental level. However, this is partly going against the grain of funding policies and requires conscious and determined effort.

5.4.2 How the excellence task could have been done better:

- A short summary of the main results, preferably with suggestions for action is crucial.
- Concentrate on Uppsala University, the local institution in the presentations and discussions.
- Having heads of departments as project “owners” on the departmental side is good, but if that does not take you forward look for other collaborators.
- Disseminate at different types of meetings, for example at the faculty, section and department level.
- Target mentorship programs, appointment committees etc.
- Collaborate with gender equality groups.
- Make sure everybody understands that the task is action oriented, from the very beginning (commitment of the department) to the end (discussing actions rather than results of mapping).
- Find the individuals who are receptive and have strategic positions.
- Use social media, debate articles and the variety of communication channels that exist at a university.
- Discuss the problem of working hours also in relation to men: it disadvantages both genders.
- Integrate the ideas into the system, for example by providing information in welcome packages and in the reception of international researchers.
- Also work on higher levels to change the system, faculty and university levels.

- Work on the national level, both in official ways, targeting different bodies, and in unofficial ways targeting people. Work simultaneously on different levels.
- Initiate more studies, in particular quantitative studies. Often numbers talk louder than words.

6. Final comments and lessons learnt

The diversity of the European research scene became obvious in our work on discussing excellence in three European countries. In Sweden and Germany, the combination of excellence related to gender and work environment was not interesting enough to attract researchers to open discussions. In Bulgaria, the concept was new and interesting. It was discussed as such, and the focus on its downsides, which was central in Sweden and Germany, was less prominent. As the concept of excellence is new in Bulgaria, SWU had the advantage of not only discussing the downsides of something that had already been implemented and rooted in the environment, but to discuss all aspects, positive and negative, and even gender aspects, of excellence funding from the start.

In general it can be assumed that those who benefit from the excellence policies are less interested in discussing their downsides. This would explain the disinterest of some of the target groups – RWTH where the excellence initiative is perceived to benefit the institution as a whole and one of the UU departments with good excellence funding. However, this causality does not always exist, as proved by another UU department.

The national differences should never be forgotten. For example, the problem of mobility requirements, which was important in the German context, as spending time at another university is practically a condition that cannot be negotiated if one wants to make a career, was practically non-existent in Bulgaria, where it still is common for academics to stay at one university their whole career. Sweden was somewhere in between, with high demands of mobility, but demands that to some extent could be negotiated.

Another important difference between the three countries was the issue of combining research with other duties. The differences in how this issue was discussed are a good example of how different the three countries are when it comes to the understanding of gender issues in the society and in academia: In Bulgaria, family duties, which had been next to invisible in the academic environment, were discussed in the FESTA workshops. A number of different suggestions came up to make it possible for women to balance family and research – for family duties were still seen as women's concern exclusively. This approach was based on giving women the possibility to fulfill "woman's natural role" in the family, while giving her a possibility to make a research career at the same time. In Germany, where the discussions about family and work in researchers' lives have been going on for some time, the discussions among academics seemed harsher: women were welcome to make careers, but only if they could take on work around the clock. This approach was rather based on requiring women to abandon their "natural" role and become like men. In Sweden, with a strong societal ethos of men and women being equal in sharing family duties and household chores, the discussions in relation to excellent careers concerned the difficulties for both women and men to combine work and family. These discussions were not new, and some actions had already been taken. This approach was based on regarding women and men as similar, with similar difficulties.

The original aim of the task was discussing perceptions and changing mindsets in relation to hidden criteria. It became apparent that some of the criteria are not particularly hidden in Sweden and Germany: Already in our interviews in the mapping phase it became apparent that most researchers were well aware of the different requirements that make up an excellent researcher, in addition to

the quality of research. Also the effects of unconscious stereotypes were touched upon, in particular by female researchers.

After the mapping phase, at RWTH and at UU implementation phase very much dealt with changing practices rather than mindsets. The discussions were about concrete issues which disadvantage women or are detrimental to the work environment, rather than the unconscious stereotypes which also disadvantage women. At SWU the discussions also concerned the practical difficulties of women to do research on the excellence level, but they also touched on stereotypes and perceptions of women's and men's potential as excellent researchers. Because UU and RWTH never tried a workshop that would mainly discuss the gendered unconscious criteria of excellence in the local context, we do not know how that would have been received.

However, considering the target group of our workshops, discussing concrete obstacles was probably a good solution, as the researchers recommended us to even more concentrate on actions rather than discussions. If people do not have a notion that excellence is problematic, they will hardly be attending events which invite to discuss the downsides of excellence, and if they think that excellence is problematic, they would rather discuss solutions than just discuss the problems. This is true in particular because the problems connected to excellence are not new as such. We can also hope that changed practices also change mindsets – these two go hand in hand.

There were differences also between Sweden and Germany as to what issues should be dealt with in the organizational context. While the 24/7 availability was a major issue at RWTH, the concentration of power and the relationships between “excellent” and less excellent researchers was more prominent at UU. The differences between the two universities, but also between national cultures probably play in here: In the more hierarchical German academic scene the power differences traditionally are large and so the excellence quest has not made so much difference. The German academics may, therefore, not be as alert to power issues as researchers in the more egalitarian Swedish academy. In the Swedish academic scene, fitting family and work together has not been such a divisive issue between female and male researchers, as both have valued life outside research. The Swedish researchers seem to keep to this ideology even in the increased demands of production, while those demands hit harder in the German context, if male researchers adapt to the production requirements while female researchers do not have the same possibility to do so.

At UU the difference between funders' concept of excellence and that of the researchers was voiced quite strongly when discussing the effects and actions on the departmental level. What the departments tried to do was to assert their concept of excellence and support those researchers whom they, but maybe not the external funders, considered as doing excellent or potentially excellent research. Departments have limited possibilities for going against the grain, but this kind of initiatives express an ethos and can open important possibilities for single researchers.

In general, the interest of taking action on the work environment problems exacerbated by the quest of excellence was stronger at UU than at RWTH. The evaluation discussions with an administrative department at RWTH made obvious that they had observed the problems with, among other things, work-life balance and non-permanent jobs, and that they were concerned, but took little concrete action. This was different compared to UU, where departmental bodies (department heads, gender equality groups, research leaders) were concerned and took action. Generally, researchers are not very fond of managerialist initiatives to change their work contexts, and thus, if the researchers

themselves, in their collegial bodies, do not have an interest or do not perceive it as possible to discuss work environment issues, also related to excellence, and to take action, change is not likely to happen. This is important to keep in mind for any change agent.

In Bulgaria, the excellence task, as part of the FESTA project, actually seems to have changed people's mindsets – sometimes maybe even in a way that they themselves are not aware of. When presenting an interesting concept, that of excellence, and tying it to the more controversial concept of gender, even gender issues could be discussed. SWU also worked very consciously by not only having the workshops, but also by using the evaluation interview to provide workshop participants one more possibility for reflection. This approach is time-consuming, as interviewing takes time, but may still be recommended at least when it comes to organizational key persons. Because of the high positions of the FESTA team in the organizational hierarchy the task also reached high level institutional policymakers, which is promising when thinking about the future. In the holistic approach where the excellence task was presented in the context of other tasks, it was an important contributor to changing knowledge, attitudes and policies to be more gender equal.

The failing interest in taking part in workshops on excellence and work environment in Sweden and Germany is probably partly due to the perception that only so much can be done on local level. In both Germany and Sweden we encountered many researchers who saw and acknowledged the problems with the quest for excellence, but who were quite despondent about possibilities to deal with the problems. In their view, if some researchers get highly rewarded in spite of not really contributing to or even being detrimental for their work environments, this does influence the research climate. Young researchers see what is rewarded and the “excellent” seniors have no reason to change their behaviour.

Those who were disillusioned about the chances to change the local context, suggested that we, instead, should influence research funders. Ultimately it is the funding system that exacerbates work environment problems, many of which hit women harder than men. The ambitions of utilizing more of the research potential in Europe by engaging more women in research seem to be in conflict with the ambitions of focusing on excellence, as the concept is defined in the implementation of current European research policies.

Discussing what should be rewarded with funds on the local level can only make minor corrections to the system. Maybe the concept “sustainable development” should be used also when considering research policies – the present quest for excellence was not seen as sustainable for many individuals, but maybe not even for research as such. Changing the criteria for excellence funding to put weight on, not only research as such, but also the contribution to the discipline, for example evaluating how a researcher has promoted junior researchers of both genders, is necessary for excellent research to be sustainable. One impetus for changing criteria may be the problem taken up at RWTH: if the conditions do not get better, academic research may lose a number of its excellent people.

6.1 Evaluation of our efforts and achievements

When it comes to evaluating the excellence task, and its influence on gender equality in the partner institutions, RWTH and UU were different from SWU. At RWTH and UU we cannot really claim that the excellence task had a major impact. There are gender discussions at both institutions, even if

they are more widespread and have resulted in more practical actions at UU, also as a result of the excellence mapping and excellence workshops. However, at both institutions the FESTA excellence task was only one of the activities involving gender equality that had been going on. The excellence task, thus, has been a contributor to gender equality work, but not an influential factor as such. The idea of tying gender and work environment to the excellence concept was interesting as it could give new perspectives to work environment problems, but it also brought in a level over which individual researchers and individual institutions have little control and thus could divert the interest from local actions.

One of the rationales for creating the excellence task was to find a way to discuss gender issues in a way that would not arouse resistance. At SWU the excellence task functioned well in this respect. At RWTH and UU, very little active resistance was encountered when conducting the task. At RWTH the disinterest in the workshops may be interpreted as passive resistance from the part of the academics. At UU disinterest in open workshops is said to be common, not only when it comes to gender issues. Passive resistance was possibly shown by male academics in choosing not to attend occasions when gender issues were advertised to be the topic. However, we still think that in regard to the issue of resistance, combining gender with excellence, or any other aspect that is of interest for both men and women, is probably advantageous. The problem lies in making this combination effective when it comes to promoting gender equality – and if it becomes effective, resistance may also arise.

In sum, in Germany and Sweden, many individuals, women in particular, were already aware on the issues. However, changing organizational ethos and disadvantaging practices obviously requires more than arranging workshops. We found interesting data on how researchers perceive excellence, but it was difficult to turn into actions, in particular at RWTH. At UU some important practical changes were made, to a large extent due to the task being at the right places at the right time: these discussions were already to some extent “in the air”, and the departmental contexts were action-oriented and could be fueled by the task.

At both UU and RWTH our assumptions of researchers’ interest in discussing the excellence requirements of funders in relation to their own working conditions were proven false. At UU, even if the interest of ordinary researchers was not overwhelming, there were more arenas where discussions could take place, both on departmental and faculty level, and the FESTA team was invited to inform such discussions. Yet, tying gender equality work to excellence the way UU and RWTH tried to do does not seem to be the most optimal way of working. The success of the task at SWU might partly be due to their more holistic approach of combining discussions about excellence with discussions about other FESTA tasks.

At SWU, the excellence concept being new but very relevant for in particular young researchers’ future careers in the EU research climate, it was interesting enough to attract people for discussions. There, not only the results of the mapping of the situation locally were presented, but they were also compared to results at UU and RWTH. It was the differences which were interesting and stimulating enough to make a difference in people’s ideas and perspectives, even if they were just attending one single workshop. We could say that SWU was doing something that already, in different ways, had been done at RWTH and UU long before FESTA, and that the excellence task is useful in that kind of work. We do not know yet whether the changed mindsets also will result in changed organizational

practices – and if they do, the high positions of the FESTA team in the organization will probably be an important contributing factor.

Thus, the usefulness of using the excellence concept and discussions on excellence funding as leverage for gender equality work on local level seems to be contextual. Many people have bought into the concept and are not able or do not want to see and take action to moderate its effects. However, to some extent this varies between our three different contexts.

6.2 Lessons learnt

Even if funding organizations and national and European policymakers have the main responsibility for creating sustainable research environments, some actions can be done even on local level under the current conditions. We have learnt a number of lessons during our work with discussing gender and excellence and implementing changes. In this work the Bulgarian context was quite different from those in Germany and Uppsala, which, even if also different from each other, had more similarities. That is why we present two sets of lessons learnt, one from the East and one from the North-West

6.2.1 Lessons from SWU

The Bulgarian situation may be applicable, to some extent, to other post-communist countries and other countries that have not followed the models of excellence and gender equality that are more or less uniformly applied in Western Europe. Implementing the task we have learnt that:

To discuss gender and excellence

- Advantages can be taken of the fact that both gender and excellence are new concepts. A curiosity can stretch over both, and the discussions can be moderated in a particular way so that the participants discover by themselves various implications of gender in the excellence quest.
- An effective strategy is to put excellence and gender on a broader ground, i.e. combine them with other themes, challenges and perspectives.
- Organizing systematically workshops, meetings, and other events can have stronger impact than conducting detached seminars and talks. At least initially it keeps the enthusiasm and engagement at a higher level.
- Comparing the local with something that is local in other institutions stimulates discussions and opens up perspectives. It is important to have concrete data from other countries (e.g. statistical data, organizational charts, responses from interviews; etc.) and present them in thought-provoking ways.
- Open discussions are much more effective than presenting data only. It is recommendable to devise appropriate scenarios prior to the meetings in order to keep the participants active and focused.

- Creating an informal and enjoyable atmosphere during the discussions makes gender equality issues emerge spontaneously and positive attitudes can easily be established.
- Providing real life stories, concrete cases and suitable examples has strong impetus on participants and result in lively talks and higher extent of involvement. Besides, successful women can be used as role models and be anchored to positive conceptual frameworks.
- Settling an appropriate venue with a cozy environment where all meetings are regularly conducted is much more effective than constantly changing the places and looking for whatever is available.
- Inviting people, both women and men, who have already demonstrated true interest, positive attitude and inclination to contribute, can boost the gender work and help establishing critical mass of supporters. Additionally, involving academics not only from STEM, but from other domains (e.g. Humanities, Social Sciences, etc.) brings new opportunities and perspectives for the gender work, broadens the influences and strengthens the positive effects.
- The commitment to the participants should start before the discussion (e.g. by making personal invitations, providing material, talk to them in person, etc.) and continue after the discussion (e.g. keeping up the contact with sending new information and invitations).

Working with gender and excellence

- Engaging people with influence and power (e.g. administrative, positional, symbolic, etc.) provides great number of benefits and guarantees more favourable conditions for diverse gender initiatives.
- Interviews, when conducting surveys, can be used as a powerful tool for awareness raising, promotion, gaining support, collecting practical ideas, etc.
- Sustainability can be ensured by institutionalizing the efforts (e.g. creating institutional support structures like, for example, Gender Studies center; special 'gender' section at a library; enrolment of PhD students in gender relevant disciplines; etc.).

6.2.2 Lessons from RWTH and UU

To discuss gender and excellence:

- The presentation of material, whether written or orally presented, should be straightforward, succinct and to the point.
- It is good to have local material to connect to.
- It may be necessary to suggest solutions and discuss them instead of working out solutions with the participants, to keep the discussion focused and purposeful. However, this is a balance act, as it is easy to become perceived as managerialist.

- To engage people in special occasions for workshops and discussion can be difficult, in particular if it is obvious that the occasion is about gender.
 - It may be better to announce an occasion and conduct the discussions about excellence as such, and discuss gender effects as one aspect of the problem.
 - If the occasion is explicitly about gender, the probability that mainly women attend is relatively high. This can be seen as a disadvantage or used as an advantage.
- There can be a trade-off between arranging a workshop and using an occasion that belongs to a structure (regular meetings for different groups or bodies). If you are part of a meeting or a meeting series, the time you can use may be shorter than if you plan a workshop by yourself, but you may reach more people.
- It is useful to connect both to high level authorities, local leaders etc., where possible, but also to people working with gender equality to initiate and sustain discussions about excellence and gender. It is good to have several contacts and arenas.
- Put forward good role models, both male and female, who are both excellent researchers and good leaders. When possible, use them and their experiences in discussions.

To work with the downsides of excellence:

- Foster healthy subcultures by facilitating networks, meeting series, coffees and lunches etc., where work environment issues, such as work life balance, can be discussed and different solutions supported.
- Make sure that the initiatives and obligations of the institution when it comes to supporting good work environment and gender equality are properly communicated. Researchers get most of their local information from their research leaders and peers, and in particular in environments dominated by unhealthy excellence ideals and male researchers, information about gender equality may not be automatically communicated.
- Be careful to distribute duties besides research, such as teaching and administration equally.
 - There is a particular risk that if there are few women they are expected to be role models for students and sit in committees and, thus, get a larger share of teaching and administration.
- In distributing local research funds the consequences of the Matthew principle (i.e. giving even more resources to those who already have) should be considered.
- An important way of using local funds is to increase the employment security for young researchers. (For example, increase the length of contracts, provide subsistence between projects, provide career counseling and prepare career paths – that is, take responsibility for their subsistence beyond a single research project.)
- Creative solutions to the requirements of mobility should be applied: part time mobility; mobility on commuting distance – which can be quite long; allowing active creation and utilization of international networking to count as virtual mobility; facilitating moving with families in different ways etc.
- PhD students and junior researchers need also other contacts and arenas than their supervisors and research groups, to counteract being subjected to power plays and to foster independence.

- While excellent researchers are important in many ways in the local contexts, formal power should ensure democratic and transparent decision making.

7. Appendix

7.1 SWU questions for the evaluation survey

1. What do you think about the recent idea of the Prime Minister that the next President of Bulgaria is a woman?
2. What kinds of qualities, according to you, have helped many Bulgarian women achieve very high positions in the country and abroad?
3. Is it possible for women scientists to attain such a big success in the fields of STEM? How?
4. Have you ever perceived any 'hidden or unwritten' criteria in evaluating research achievements, applied consciously or unconsciously, and influenced by the sex of a researcher?
5. In your opinion, what should our university do in order to support and facilitate women in their aspirations for higher scientific and career achievements?
6. Has your opinion about the place, role and equality of women in academia changed since the first interview?
7. Has our project had any impact on you to change your opinion?
8. What would you do to achieve better results in changing the perceptions towards women at our university?
9. Is it possible for a woman researcher to maintain balance between her research aspirations and household/family duties?

7.2 RWTH questions for the workshop

Science as a way of life

How are female and male researchers, with liabilities outside of the scientific work field, able to fulfill this picture of an excellent researcher?

Do the participants agree on this definition of an excellent researcher?

What can the university do to establish equal opportunities for researchers with and without non-scientific responsibilities?

Working atmosphere and the culture of presence in science

Is there a feeling of appreciation for all scientists including those with non-scientific responsibilities?

How big is the influence of being available all the time on the perception of performance?

What does it take to create a working atmosphere that is supportive to all researchers?

What has to be done to achieve this all-supportive atmosphere?

Mobility in science

What aspects of internationality really do improve research?

How can the positive aspects of a long stay abroad be achieved in an alternative way?

What are the problems at individual and organizational levels and how can they be solved?

Young academics between dependence and personal growth

How can gender aware promotion contribute to the decision of female scientists to pursue a career in academia?

What are the possibilities to support young researchers, in a frame that is not supportive, with many non-permanent contracts, small opportunities of doing research independently and becoming a professor late?

7.3 RWTH questions for the evaluation survey

- Do you recognize (female) professors who try to give a different picture of an excellent scientist?
- Do you know examples of (female) professors or (female) scientific staff members who have organized their careers in a different way?
- Do you know examples of (female) professors or (female) scientific staff members who organize their work environment in a different way?
- Is this supported by their colleagues and acknowledged by the faculty?
- How can change be supported so that we could find more positive examples in the future in order for them to become the norm?
- What can the individual do to support change? As a stakeholder but also as professors and scientific staff members?
- What could have been another approach concerning the topic regarding the workshops? What could have been done better?

7.4 UU questions for the workshops

Informal power

How does (excellence) money give influence at this department?

Is it a problem? Why or why not?

Excellent and marginalised research areas

How is "breadth" in relation to "depth" valued at this department?

Does it matter if some areas get marginalised or (almost) disappear? Why?

Are there research areas that are getting marginalised? Is this a problem?

(If yes: is there something that can be done on departmental level to prevent this?)

Independence

When does a researcher become independent?

How does a researcher become independent?

How can one help young researchers to become independent?

Are there differences in independence between young female and male researchers?

Research and life outside research

What are the norms about parenting at this department?

Do people talk about their kids? Is it OK/common to give parental duties as a reason for not participating in some work activity? Do women and men do this to the same extent?

How are the problems that can be caused in research projects because of parental leave handled?

What are the norms about life outside work at this department?

Do people talk about activities outside work? Is it OK/common to give activities outside work as a reason for not participating in some work activity? Do women and men do this to the same extent?

Do people take vacations?

Are there concerns about losing in the international competition because of Sweden's liberal parental and vacation practices?

Are there further changes in policies, practices or norms that could facilitate the combination of work and family for young researchers?

Young researchers look for a good work environment

If a young researcher is looking for an excellent environment, with a good climate – what does s/he see when looking at this department?

What is possible to do at the department to improve the climate and work environment?

What can be done in particular for young researchers?

(Possible ideas: Meeting cultures, publication practices, possibilities to influence decisions, information channels, arenas for collaboration and socialising, receiving newly employed).

Requirements for mobility

What is the situation at this department?

How do new PhD's with partner/family manage the expectations of moving abroad for a post doc? Do women and men solve it the same way?

Those young researchers that the department manages to attract – how have they solved the problem? Have women and men solved it the same way?

Is there something that the department can do to ameliorate the situation for either group?

(Possible ideas: Outgoing: Discuss the question in one's networks; Help finding sites where it is easy to take the family/commute; Accept "part time post docs" – part of the time home, part at another institution, when that is possible.

Incoming: Develop support structures to make it easier to commute or bring family/partner here.)

Teaching

How is teaching distributed at this department? Are there patterns regarding who gets to teach "heavy" and "light" courses, basic and advanced courses etc.? (Do these patterns follow excellence and/or gender lines?)

Are there departmental strategies to ameliorate the teaching-research combination? Do people share their individual strategies in particular with junior researchers?
Are there ways in which the department can further ameliorate the teaching-research combination?

