

Gender quotas & positive action: An attack on meritocracy?

Structural incentives for gender balance in research organisations

Taking steps to address gender imbalances is essential to ensure women's career progress and promote diverse and inclusive research environments. Positive action (sometimes referred to as positive discrimination or affirmative action) is widely acknowledged as a crucial tool for achieving this goal. However, resistance persists, and opinions diverge about which are the most effective and valid strategies. Do gender quotas or economic incentives challenge meritocracy? Can balancing the numbers really improve institutions and knowledge?

This policy brief provides an overview of the multifaceted debate around positive action, the arguments for, arguments against and pathways for implementation. The policy brief draws insight from the Gender Equality Plan development process of and interviews performed by MINDtheGEPs. It ends by presenting two case studies from Italian universities.

Gender imbalances in universities and research centres remain significant, with noticeable disparities between male and female researchers. Despite efforts by the EU to address this issue through policies, progress has been slow, and the representation of women in senior academic positions is surprisingly low. As a result, the focus has shifted towards achieving better gender balance in research organisations through proactive measures. Positive action is a direct way to address this lingering imbalance.

However, policies promoting positive action are controversial. Resistance to such policies is often rooted in concerns about merit and the research meritocracy. Despite the common belief in "science being value-neutral" and "merit being the main factor for success in research institutions and universities," research shows that merit is an ill-defined concept and that the current framework for excellence tends to favour men over women.

Given the contentious nature of these incentives and their alleged potential to undermine the academic meritocracy, it's important for decision-makers to engage with the various arguments.

Consensus building is key in introducing these measures, which highlights the need for dialogue, negotiation, and discussions among various stakeholders, including governing bodies, delegates, departments, mentors, and mentees.



This policy brief is intended for a diverse audience, including research performing organizations encompassing both public and private universities, research centres, the European Commission, and members of the scientific community.

Cite as: Cipriani N, Solera C, Holm Bodin A. (2023) Gender quotas & positive action: An attack on meritocracy? Zenodo. DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.10024373

Positive actions in focus

Numerous scientific bodies and research organisations have engaged in discussions and implementation of positive action at different levels. The **key areas** for implementation are...

- **Recruitment**, spanning from full professorship levels to below
- **Composition of evaluation committees**, including those overseeing universities
- **Allocation of research grants and fellowships**

There are generally three **different pathways** to implementation of positive action...

- Governed by **government legislation**
- Enforced by **academic institutions**
- Mandated by **funding entities**

Which positive action is most effective depends on the organisational, national and international contexts in which they are considered for implementation. Attention to context is key, or the actions taken might **be ineffective**.

Quotas for research grants and fellowships

In Europe, several funding bodies have embraced quotas for research grants and fellowships. Notable examples include the Swedish Research Council, the Research Council of Norway, and the Helmholtz Association in Germany. For certain funding programmes, these organisations strive to achieve equal success rates for male and female applicants.

Arguments against...

Resistance and concerns raised for positive actions for grant and fellowship quotas include...

- Limited evidence of systemic biases in funding decisions may lead to scepticism about broad corrective measures.
- Using quotas to ensure equal success rates might be seen as favouring weaker applicants over stronger ones, potentially undermining the merit-based system.

Arguments for...

Advocates of positive actions offer counterarguments...

- Introducing quotas could mitigate unconscious biases inherent in review processes.
- Quotas enable a more inclusive applicant pool, reflecting diverse perspectives and backgrounds.
- Ensuring equal success rates sends a positive message to underrepresented groups, potentially boosting application rates.

Positive actions for full professorship hiring

There are several approaches to implementing positive actions to break the glass ceiling for hiring at the full professorship level. Examples include:

1. **Germany's Gender Quota "Cascading Model":** The Research Council and German Research Foundation support a model where gender-specific slots are determined by the ratio of women to men in the level just below. Institutions set quotas based on these ratios.
2. **Athena SWAN Charter in the UK:** This charter promotes gender equality by formally recognizing good practices for women's representation and career advancement in STEMM fields.
3. **Italian Structural Incentives:** Universities in Turin, Trento, Modena and Reggio Emilia, and Sapienza University of Rome have introduced structural incentives. Departments hiring female full professors receive bonuses through "personnel points" that influence budget allocation.

Arguments against...

While positive actions in full professorship hiring are supported, there are also concerns...

- Un- or under-qualified people could be hired or promoted.
- Individuals hired under and institutions using these policies may end up carrying a 'quota stigma'.
- Positive action may be detrimental to women's causes as it delegitimises female candidates.
- Positive action is disrespectful in assuming that women cannot get full professorships on their own merits and must instead rely on positive actions.
- Affirmative action may not *actually* address the causes of the leaky pipeline, why women drop out in greater numbers after postdoctoral level, the reasons for horizontal segregation, or entry-level students' subject choices.
- Positive actions may begin to be applied to other groups with low success rates, for example applicants from underrepresented countries/regions or from other minorities. This might be perceived as a threat to the majority.

Arguments for...

Advocates of positive actions argue for their implementation...

- The current understanding of merit and excellence predominantly favours pathways, subjects, and approaches traditionally associated with males, while disregarding other important aspects like caregiving. Additionally, the prevailing "publish or perish" approach can be detrimental to both women and men, inhibiting innovative and cooperative research.
- Underrepresented groups, like women, need effective means to rectify their low representation. Positive actions implemented in hiring processes can quickly increase their presence.
- Using positive actions shows a commitment to achieving gender equality, which reflects the inherent value of equality.
- Elevating the visibility of women in senior academic roles can inspire female students and young researchers, and have a "role model effect." Witnessing accomplished women in influential positions can motivate aspiring individuals to pursue their goals, overcoming gender-related barriers.
- Positive actions and gender quotas hold potential as catalysts for change, prompting institutions and organizations to reassess their recruitment and advancement strategies, fostering a more inclusive and supportive atmosphere.

Quotas in the composition of evaluation committees

Universities and institutions worldwide are adopting internal guidelines mandating a specific percentage of women within scientific committees. For instance, gender quotas for committee composition were introduced in Finland (1995), Spain (2007), and France (2014). In 1999, the European Commission aimed for a minimum 40% women representation in Marie Curie scholarships, advisory groups, assessment panels, and monitoring panels.

Arguments against...

Also in the case of positive action for more equal composition of evaluation committees, there is resistance and concerns are raised...

- The correlation between gender composition and success rates of female applicants is ambiguous, with inconclusive results from analyses on the impact of increased proportion of women in the committees.
- Uncertainty persists about the minimum number or percentage of women required to induce meaningful change.
- A potential burden could fall on a few women in high positions that become overloaded with committee responsibilities.
- There's a risk of limiting women's research time, affecting their scientific output.

Arguments for...

Advocates of positive actions offer counterarguments...

- Studies revealing discrimination against women during the review process provide support for quotas.
- Increased representation of women makes both men and women more attuned to gender-related issues and unconscious biases.
- Greater female presence can mitigate isolation and tokenism.
- Diverse committees bring broader perspectives to discussions.
- If these women risk experiencing an overload of work, organisations can mitigate it by including relief from administrative duties and support in research and non-research tasks as part of the committee assignment.
- More women in decision-making roles can serve as role models.
- While the results of the effects of more women in evaluation committees are unclear, it's crucial to note that a holistic approach is required, addressing all policies simultaneously and promoting a cultural shift within organisations.

Breaking the glass ceiling: University of Trento's approach

"The main resistance emerged within departments, particularly from several male faculty members (some of whom coined the term 'discount woman'), and occasionally from certain female faculty members as well, who expressed concerns about potentially devaluing the female staff members. As time passed, the initiative gained greater legitimacy and wider acceptance, although pockets of resistance still persist." – Barbara Poggio, Vice Rector for Equality and Diversity and Coordinator of the Centre for Interdisciplinary Gender Studies.

The University of Trento implemented a structural incentive strategy to bolster the presence of women in full professorship roles. This approach focused on external recruitment. If a candidate from the underrepresented gender wins international funding and calls, such as those from the European Research Council, their affiliated department receives a reward in terms of the 'Punto Organico', which loosely translates to 'Personnel Point' – a funding mechanism that positively impacts the department's internal funding in the subsequent budget year.

This positive action was tailored specifically to the Italian academic landscape. The University of Trento led the way as the first Italian institution to pioneer this approach. In 2013, collaborative discussions involving the Equal Opportunities Delegate, Rector, and Academic Senate led to the creation of this policy. Part of a broader university policy aimed at rectifying gender

disparities, this initiative aimed to bridge the substantial gender gap in the highest tiers of academia. Initially approved by the Academic Senate in 2014, the action underwent subsequent revisions and refinements in following years. This initiative played a pivotal role in promoting gender balance, given that women accounted for just 10% of full professors during its launch.



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"Since its approval, the percentage of women among full professors and associate professors has experienced significant growth (with a doubling for full professors). A more current impact analysis is currently in progress." – Barbara Poggio

Breaking the glass ceiling: University of Turin's approach

"The primary resistance stems from a lack of awareness of the measure and apprehensions of potential discrimination against male staff" – Marianna Filandri, Member of Comitato Unico di Garanzia (The Guarantee Committee for Equal Opportunities) at the University of Turin.

The University of Turin has followed in the footsteps of University of Trento. The measure of incentivising the hiring of the underrepresented gender through financial incentives (increasing the 'Personnel Points') is an effort to narrow the gender gap in leadership positions and as full professors in all types of selections and calls, both internal and external. The measure was initially proposed to the rector in July 2022 by the University's Guarantee Committee for Equal Opportunities as part of the Positive Action Plan 2022-2024 currently under discussion. Subsequently, through collaboration between the Guarantee Committee for Equal Opportunities, the Equal Opportunity Rector Delegate, and the MINDtheGEPs team, it became a central element in the design of the university's new Gender Equality Plan.

This measure was refined in constant dialogue with the rector, vice-rector, general management, and through an exchange of best practices with other organisations within and outside the MINDtheGEPs consortium. It was ultimately approved by both the Academic Senate and the Administrative Board at the end of May 2023.



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"While it's not the sole policy proposed and incorporated into the GEP [Gender Equality Plan], it's certainly the most transformative one. Therefore, its acceptance required consensus-building through various negotiation spaces, reflections, and discussions: formally with governing bodies, the GEP Implementing Board, and Delegate Network, and subsequently, with each department council. Informal discussions took place with mentors, mentees, and colleagues during coffee breaks or seminars.

Cultural and structural actions must work in tandem to achieve profound and lasting change. They must address different facets of the challenges women and research organizations encounter within the so-called 'crystal labyrinths.' In this instance, our efforts were directed at breaking the glass ceiling. The next endeavor will focus on breaking the glass door" – Cristina Solera, University of Turin, scientific coordinator of MINDtheGEPs.



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MINDtheGEPs (Modifying Institutions by Developing Gender Equality Plans) has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement no 101006543. The views and opinions expressed in this policy brief the sole responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Commission.