

Putting gender mainstreaming into practice in Dutch universities: observations from within

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Abstract

From 2001 until 2004 an ESF-EQUAL project was launched at three Dutch universities. Aim of the project was to introduce gender mainstreaming as a means towards a better gender balance at universities, by developing and testing a variety of tools for gender mainstreaming in the academic context. This turned out to be extremely difficult. The issue was not so much that gender mainstreaming lead to the elimination of emancipation policy, which is an often voiced concern. The point was rather that gender mainstreaming as a concept and as a practice turned out to be too difficult to grasp for most of the policy- and decision makers. The project was above all successful in putting the issue of women's under representation on the agenda of the universities, but the result was a renewed call for affirmative action and measures that were visible and would lead to quick results. In this paper we will critically discuss the consequences of this project for the possibilities of gender mainstreaming in the academic context. What is to be expected from the 'actors normally involved in policy-making'? How to deal with the call for practical tools and quick wins? And how to deal with the call to combine a gender perspective with a perspective on "diversity"?

EQUAL project Bridging the Gender gap at Universities, 2001 - 2004

The call for improvement of women's representation in Dutch universities is still a very prominent issue; the Netherlands are – surprisingly – in the lowest ranks in the European context. Not even 10 percent of the professors are female. The need for more women in the academia is not only a question of representation in numbers; it also affects the content of science. A low percentage of women in leading positions (Women's Participation: WP) results into a low gender dimension (GD) in research. Keeping in mind the European definition of Gender Equality in science ($GE = GD + WP$), the predicted score for the Netherlands on Gender Equality (GE) will be in the lowest ranks.

From 2001 to 2004 the ESF-EQUAL project 'Bridging the Gender Gap at Universities' was launched in the Netherlands. The main objective of this project was to systematically introduce the concept and principles of Gender Mainstreaming in the context of Dutch universities. The idea was that by introducing a new framework for policy-making, i.e. Gender Mainstreaming, not only the number of women in higher scientific positions would increase, but that it would become possible to change the (masculine) university culture and increase the diversity of academic leadership and the quality of the management and policy making as a whole.

The project was based on the 'Manual on Gender Mainstreaming at Universities', published in 2001. In this manual an instrumental approach to Gender Mainstreaming specifically for (Dutch) universities was developed, build around four sets of tools: 1) measurement and monitoring, 2) implementation and organization, 3) building awareness and ownership and 4) gender proofing and evaluation. The EQUAL project aimed to test different tools described in the manual in the academic context, to be able to evaluate them and to develop them further. During the project a fifth tool, training of female scientists, was added to this toolkit. The definition of Gender Mainstreaming used in the manual which was the starting point for the project was the definition drawn up by the Council of Europe in 1996: "Gender Mainstreaming is the (re) organization, improvement, development and evaluation of policy processes so that a gender equality perspective is incorporated in all policies and at all stages by the actors normally involved in policy-making."

Three Dutch universities participated in the project: Maastricht University (UM), Radboud University Nijmegen (RU) and the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (VU), all focusing on different, relevant issues in their own university:

The **UM** concentrated on the implementation of gender aspects in research policies where they meet with HRM policies. Here, the aspect of gender mainstreaming lied in the spreading of expertise and best practices which were developed in a specific 'Research Atelier' project (Onderzoeksatelier V/m UM). It is believed that when better access to application procedures is achieved and all researchers are stimulated to participate in them, the 'earning power' of the institution as a whole will improve. At the same time the talents of female researchers can be better developed and used to assess the organizations' strategic targets. Within the Research Atelier two trainings were developed, one for researchers and one for coordinating researchers – senior researchers, appointed by the department to stimulate, support and facilitate their less experienced colleagues - , aimed to stimulate researchers to acquire research funding, to get subsidies and thereby increase their own ability to attract research finance from the UM at a structural higher level and at getting the most out of existing female and male research talent. The last was to be reached by rationalizing the procedures and stressing the strategic impact of external research funding. The training courses contained several elements: 1) transfer of knowledge on the most important subsidies and funds available, 2) training of skills and attitudes in the field of public relations and communication, gender mechanisms, financial administration, etc and mutual coaching in an Inter-Faculty Platform. A yearly 'Big Money Day' (Grote Gelddag) was organized as well. The training was open to all researchers, but addressed female staff members in particular. The Research Atelier was set up by the Centre for Gender and Diversity and was during the EQUAL project mainstreamed into the universities' knowledge centre on research funding. Another activity within the EQUAL project was the integration of a gender perspective in the second and following rounds of the so called 'Breadth Strategy', a local research funding strategy. A Gender Impact Assessment was carried out to assess the gender dimension in the first round of this strategy, looking at both the participation of women, as well as at the gender dimension of the research content. The assessment made clear that women are under-represented and the procedures are not gender-sensitive.

The **RU** focused on improving the recruitment and selection procedures for scientific and higher management personnel as a starting point for the introduction of Gender Mainstreaming in policy processes. The innovation of this project was not so much in the

content but in the application in a university context where selection of academic staff is for the better part a non-discussed, sometimes hidden, but mostly non-transparent process. The project was set up as a pilot project of which the results could be transferred to all Dutch universities. The core of the project was the development and implementation of a set of instruments that are specifically designed for the recruitment of academic staff. This set consists of fact sheets on for example sketching competence profiles and preparing selection interviews, which were published on the university website and disseminated during working conferences. The project targeted the chairman of faculties, the faculty's personnel officers, as well as faculty's staff members in their role as chairpersons of recruitment and selection committees. The first group was asked to identify problems in their procedures and to choose a scenario best suitable for their situation. For the two latter groups a training structure was developed focusing on the application of the developed instruments and on building awareness. Each department selected and appointed a 'recruitment officer' (either the personnel officer or the secretary of the dean) to monitor the recruitment procedures at her or his faculty and to enhance the gender awareness of the recruitment and selection committees. These officers were trained for this job and a network of recruitment officers was set up to share experiences. Before, during and after the project selection procedures were actively followed. The results of the instruments developed in the project are evaluated on a regular basis through a specifically designed form.

As the **VU** was merging with the Windesheim Hogeschool to become – in their own words – the 'University of the 21st Century', their project targeted the merger process to ensure that this new university has mainstreamed gender. This merger was an ongoing process which had no predefined outcome. The project therefore focused on the raising of awareness and building of ownership about gender issues among the people in charge of the merger: the ones responsible for developing new structures, new policies and new programs for the merged organization. A taskforce was installed, of which the chair – a female professor – was appointed ambassador for the project, and two coordinators, at both the VU and at Windesheim, were appointed. The main task of these people involved was to talk to others about the under representation of women in science. To raise awareness one of the main activities was the collection and publication of statistics and indicators on a regular basis. This was not common at the VU. One of the indicators used was the so-called Glass Ceiling Index, measuring at what point in

their career and to what extent women get stuck at a certain level. Other activities that were developed were the organization of conferences and work meetings, as well as making sure that the taskforce members of the project were represented in relevant committees and at meetings. Special attention was given to publicity: making sure that the issue of women and science was a topic in relevant magazines and other publications concerning the merger. Next to these kinds of activities several gender impact assessments have been carried out on specific developments within the merger: a new course in which both institutions worked together, as well as on several written documents about the merger. Also four studies were conducted to find out the causes of the low percentage of non-native Dutch students choosing a career in science.

Gender Mainstreaming in Dutch universities: results

The most important result of the overall project was that the issue of the under representation of women in science in the Netherlands was put on the agenda again and stayed on it during the years the project was running. This was mainly due by simply publishing statistics and indicators every year, by the organization of public events, and by a thorough PR strategy followed by the project leaders. The three different focus projects also had their own, local results in the form of publications, checklists, fact sheets and other reports. More important, was the awareness raising that was accomplished by the regular publication of statistics and indicators and by the organization of conferences, training sessions and internal publications.

But, did we also manage to introduce Gender Mainstreaming as a successful strategy to make sure that gender aspects became included in university policies in the participating universities? The most successful project in this sense is probably the one of the RU. At the moment it seems that the renewed recruitment and selection procedures are indeed implemented and that the developed tools are used and lead to hopeful results. The UM has also mainstreamed the Research Atelier F/m, but here the question is whether the gender perspective wasn't lost in the process. At the moment it seems that gender is not an issue any longer during the training sessions in which nowadays more men than women take part. The VU project has lead mainly to piecemeal results, instead of to lasting and strategic organizational changes. One of our hypotheses was that Gender Mainstreaming would work better in situations where completely new policies or organizations were to be developed. We were not able to test

this hypothesis properly due to the fact that the merger was not such a streamlined process altogether (in fact at the moment it seems that the whole merger is off). But our experience is gender mainstreaming was considered to burden the process, not in the least because the policy makers that were involved in the process lacked gender expertise.

This doesn't mean that our attempts to introduce gender mainstreaming in the three universities did not succeed at all. In all three contexts it did enhance actions to improve women's participation. In the case of the Maastricht University a percentage of 15% of all research money was put apart for initiatives and proposals of female scientists. In the VU/Windesheim University the policy concept for Equal Opportunities is widely spread throughout both organizations. People are enthusiastic; the VU even participates in the second EQUAL project. And to the RU the project has brought the conviction that it is 'possible' to integrate a gender perspective into (recruitment-) policies. Plus that the university can become famous for it. For this is one of the most successful good practices, in which many other universities have shown interest in afterwards.

The most important result of the overall project, though was that the issue of the under representation of women in science in the Netherlands was put on the agenda again. In fact, in this the project was so successful that universities started to call out for (more) practical instruments to make sure that more women would be able to have a scientific career. This call came not only from the universities participating in the project, but also from other universities. Moreover, they called specifically for measures that would enhance the number of women in science directly. They called for - and sometimes introduced - positive action programs, a call which wasn't heard in Dutch universities for a long time. So, contrary to the often voiced concern that the introduction of Gender Mainstreaming results in the loss of a gender perspective altogether (Nelen, 2002). Here something completely different happened: a project aiming to introduce the principle of Gender Mainstreaming, lead instead to a call for positive action. How could this happen?

Why the implementation of Gender Mainstreaming is so difficult (in the Dutch university context)

Of course there are things in this project that could have been done differently, which might have lead to a more successful implementation of Gender Mainstreaming. Our

experiences in this project though, also showed us that there are some more structural aspects that hinder the implementation of Gender Mainstreaming – especially - maybe - in Dutch universities. Here we want to focus on three types of problems we came across during the course of the project, and which are for a large part interrelated: 1) the organization of the Dutch universities and the place of gender and HRM-policies in it, 2) the role of the different actors involved, and 3) the enormous gap we experienced between Gender Mainstreaming as a theoretical concept and as a practice.

One of the conditions for the successful implementation of Gender Mainstreaming is the existence of equal opportunities policies and an infrastructure to accommodate them (*Neelen, 2002*). In the Dutch universities these policies and infrastructure are practically non-existing. Since the early 90's of the last century we witnessed the breakdown of equal opportunities in many areas in the Netherlands, and the academia was no exception. There are no sustainable equal opportunity policies, no money, and - most important - there is nobody 'in charge'.

This situation is further complicated by the fact that, within Dutch universities, there is a wide gap between HRM and other relevant policy departments and the core business of universities: scientific research and education. This gap becomes visible in the perceived hierarchical relation between scientists and policy officials, living in what seem to be separate worlds. In such a context, introducing Gender Mainstreaming in university policy will not have much effect. As long as scientists don't view HRM-personnel and other policy officials as experts in their own right, policy measures in general will not lead to much change. This was for example a major issue for the RU-project, in which HRM-staff was invited to play a role in recruitment and selection procedures, which normally involved only academic staff.

Another condition for Gender Mainstreaming is commitment from the top. In our EQUAL project this commitment was present (although it is questionable whether this included a real willingness to transform the entire organization, its policies and strategies). However, we found out that commitment from the top is not enough; since real change happens in the primary process, the commitment from the work floor is perhaps even more important. This commitment was often absent. The fact that nobody was responsible for gender issues became evident here: with heavy workloads already, most people didn't want to take on 'this extra task'. But more in general, most people didn't

feel the need to do 'something about gender', even if their management did. This last point is crucial, since gender is complex, and a particular kind of sensitivity is needed to understand the subtle mechanisms behind existing gender relations. Of course people can be trained to recognize these mechanisms and to learn about the working of gender, but to be trained effectively they need to be aware and – to some extent – enthusiastic or interested.

According to the definition of Gender Mainstreaming that we used it is 'the actors normally involved in policy-making' that are key to the implementation of this strategy. Our experiences with the EQUAL project make us doubt whether this is in fact a realistic claim. Especially considering another condition for the successful implementation of Gender Mainstreaming: knowledge and expertise on gender relations and the working of gender. This knowledge is in most universities at the level of the management and the policy-making level non-existing, and most of the time no effort is made to train staff in this area, and no money is spend to hire gender expertise if necessary (see also Benschop & Verloo, 2002). Making people responsible without giving them the right training, sometimes leads to the wrongful use of concepts and even of instruments. One example is the constant use we see of the term 'gender neutral' where 'gender sensitive' is meant. Another example is the false impression that the assessment of policies and the integration of a gender perspective require no 'extra' investments in means of time and money. It is understandable that the co-workers in the project did not want to put up extra barriers in a delicate process of acceptance of gender, but it is unrealistic to claim that integration of gender can be done in budget neutral way.

At the same time the expertise that is there is often not used. If we take into account that in many Dutch universities gender expertise is available as there are of gender studies experts in the faculty, we notice another gap: the one between gender experts and policy-makers.

All in all we observed a huge gap between Gender Mainstreaming as a theoretical concept and as a practice during this EQUAL project. Although the concept of Gender Mainstreaming is well developed, it is merely a theoretical concept, invented behind Bruxelles' desks, away from living learning organizations. Gender Mainstreaming as a concept was developed by scientists, gender experts in particular, and is not a result of policy practices. Considering the lack of contact within the Dutch university context between scientists, gender experts and policy makers this gap between theory and

practice is a persistent one. Especially since Gender Mainstreaming is – too – often used as just a terminology, suggesting that the organization does pay attention to gender issues. Gender Mainstreaming is – meant to be – a strategy aimed at fundamental change, not all initiatives related to gender issues should be advertised as gender mainstreaming. Such diverse ways of interpretation and use make the concept even harder to grasp (see also Roenburg and Spee, 2004).

Moreover, Gender Mainstreaming is a *long-term* strategy that needs to be monitored, evaluated and adjusted all the time. The results of the implementation of gender mainstreaming are not always directly visible. The call for positive action that we heard during and after the EQUAL project Bridging the Gender gap might be a result of this. The university management was/is mainly interested in quick results. These quick results can easily be gained by positive action policies, like the introduction of specific chairs for women, etc. During the EQUAL project the Dutch Organization for Scientific Research (NWO) also launched a program called ASPASIA. This program aimed at female scientists only, who could apply for research funding, and would become appointed associate professor if their proposal was approved. This program turned out to be extremely successful, being almost solely responsible for the raising of the number of female associate professors from 9 to 14% in only three years. The success of this program might have been an extra argument for university boards and management to introduce specific actions for female scientists in their own institutions as well. Gender Mainstreaming cannot offer such direct results. What it does have to offer are instruments ensure that possible gender aspects and effects of (new) policy measures and procedures are taken into account and proof that equal opportunities are guaranteed. This is more than ‘traditional’ equal opportunity policies have to offer. If interested in Gender Mainstreaming university managers and policy-makers are mainly interested in these practical instruments: checklists, etc. that can be used directly and – if possible – won’t take extra time. Verloo and Benschop (2002) warn us though, for the pitfall of loosing sight of the deeper analyses Gender Mainstreaming as a strategy and framework has to offer, if we focus solely on the development of practical tools. Ideally, the implementation of gender mainstreaming should be more than the sum of several practical instruments. In practice, the implementation of instruments is most of the time the utmost to be achieved.

Nevertheless, we finish with a hopeful perspective: many Dutch universities are aware that it's time to take action. Some universities are open for change and ask for a Gender Impact Assessment on their actual strategy plans. There are examples of universities (Leiden and Delft) working on integrated plans for action. We find that, dependent on the situation, intelligent combinations of Positive Action measures (where needed) and integration of a gender perspective (where possible) is a workable strategy for permanent change of the universities day to day practice.

Conditions for success

What makes organizations really want to change? The answer that lies ahead is: Pressure from outside! There are many examples of dinosaur organizations that nobody would expect to be able to change, which suddenly turn into 'dancing elephants' once confronted with – threatening – changes in the environment. Dutch universities are for instance very sensitive to changes in the financing schemes. Surprisingly: when conditions from the Ministry of Education provide more finance for courses of a certain length, faculties and universities are able to alter the curricula in just one year, keen as they are not to miss a single euro. Gender is however not such a prominent issue on the Minister's agenda that it is compelled by financial measures. In Germany for instance, we see that gender is part of the formal requirements for accreditation; and it works! Other examples are the introduction of a gender action plan as part of the applying procedure for research funding in the Sixth Framework Program. All applicants were able to make such a plan in which the gender dimension of the research proposal, as well as the participation of women in the research team are compulsory parts. Pressure from outside, with financial consequences seems the only strategy that is really effective. This is, of course a matter of political willingness.

In our current EQUAL project 'Priority for Participation of Women in Science', we have tried to 'organize' political pressure by the choice of our development partners. Our partners represent all parties concerned in and being able to make a difference in the Netherlands. We work with the Ministry of Education, the Research Council, the organization of Dutch Universities, two universities (Erasmus University Rotterdam and VU/Windesheim Amsterdam, but also with the International Information center and Archive for the Women's movement (IIAV) and two networks of female scientists. The projects of the partners are connected in three thematic 'streams': Assessment (Gender

proofing and research), Empowerment (coaching, mentoring and training) and Mainstreaming (in our case meaning implementation and integration). All partners execute different projects but a common goal is the joint agenda setting for gender in science in the near future. We are aware of the fact that this project is will not bring 'the final solution' and is only partly focused on gender mainstreaming. Our experiences with the first project, and the insights of Mineke Bosch (2002) made that we choose to start at the beginning: bringing all parties, policy makers, (women) scientists, gender experts and HRM professionals together and create a network - a community of practice that is able to develop working strategies on the different levels of change,

Together we are in a quest from awareness to expertise, identifying points of application to make a start with the fundamental transformation of the organization of science in the Netherlands in order to promote female talent to participate at all levels. Another important lesson we learned is that it is inspiring to link up to already existing initiatives and projects within the organizations, to make use and promote the enthusiasm of all actors involved. Which brings us at the dilemma we encounter daily: is it possible to carry out a transformation strategy like gender mainstreaming stepwise? This seems to be a *contradictio in terminis*, but reality learns that we have to take advantage of existing initiatives and needs, show practical short term successes AND keep in mind that piecemeal results do not automatically add up to gender mainstreaming but require a strategic vision on the future organization.

There is however another challenge to be tackled: the call for diversity meaning more than 'just' a gender perspective. Academia is an all white enclave in Dutch society. The student population is getting more divers in terms of color and background, but universities are not very successful in recruiting a diverse faculty. It is – too – easy to assume that gender awareness results automatically in awareness for ethnic diversity – and the other way around. The cases are comparable, but not the same, they require a more kaleidoscopic vision as the interests meet at 'crossroads' (Botman e.a., 2001). The two university partners are experimenting with approaches towards a broader diversity perspective. In the first EQUAL project we made a start with integration of diversity management en gender mainstreaming in the transnational cooperation with the University of Valencia (ES). The projects of both universities give us the opportunity to put these concepts into practice and to continue this inspiring process of bringing together different focuses in one direction.

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