The battle for balance

Professor Dr Jens Christian Djurhuus, of the Danish Council for Independent Research, speaks to Public Service Review about improving the gender balance in the Danish research community...

The gender gap in Denmark remains wide. In terms of leadership opportunities within employment and academia, the country has the lowest number of women in positions of authority in the EU. In recent years, inequality has been addressed and efforts have been made by a variety of organisations, including the Ministry of Employment and Gender Equality, trade unions, and the Danish Council for Independent Research, which over the past three years has taken positive steps to identify and encourage female research scientists. The council functions through the Danish Agency for Science, Technology and Innovation, one of the country’s key research policy organisations, which acts as secretariat.

Professor Dr Jens Christian Djurhuus, Chair of the Council for Independent Research, explains the current situation. "In the most junior of positions, such as those in PhD research, we now have a preponderance of female students,” says Djurhuus, “and in the last three to four years, the situation has also changed as regards post-doctoral researchers.” Until 2008 the majority of post-doctoral work provided with grants from the council was undertaken by males, Djurhuus explains, but in the last couple of years that has changed. “We now have equality in numbers and are seeing the same success rate for both males and females,” he says.

Despite these successes, the professor explains that there remains a problem in achieving gender parity among more senior researchers. A prime example of this, he says, is an annual special grant programme designed to identify the most promising researchers under the age of 45. “The programme is endorsed by the Minister of Science, Technology and Innovation, and that programme has never achieved equality,” he says. "Usually, we identify five to seven researchers who receive grants every year. Last year, we gave seven grants, and two of those were to females, while this year, we had five grants available and all of them were given to males.”

In the most senior positions, Djurhuus continues, gender disparities became wider. "When you come to consider associate professors in the universities, and when you come to full professorships, we still have a very large difference between males and females.” The percentage of females in the more senior research careers was getting smaller and smaller as the career path took people closer to the position of full professors. “To close that gap,” says Djurhuus, “will take a lot of time.”

Even here, progress is being made. "You see the position slowly shifting and we have made some aggressive initiatives in the council since 2008 and 2009. We have had a special programme for female research leaders, which generated enormous interest.” The fact that the chance of getting one of these leadership grants is fairly slim, he says, has not stopped people from applying. "In the first year, we had 204 applications to fill six available grants, and in 2009, we had 194 applications, of which we could provide grants for nine.”

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The subject areas for these leadership grants was not restricted in any way and covered all five areas of the council’s remit: Humanities, Medical Sciences, Natural Sciences, Social Sciences, Technology and Production Sciences. That particular initiative has now ended, the professor says: “The reason why the council has now stopped is that we wanted to introduce a new research career programme for both males and females, but with emphasis on female applicants.” In promoting equality, the professor explains, the council remains restricted by Denmark’s existing equality legislation.

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1 National figures for 2005 indicated that only 4.4% of women were in senior management positions within the private sector, and only 7% held company directorships.