

Successful implementation of quotas for rectorate positions — may we rest on our laurels?

Angela Wroblewski

INTRODUCTION

A central objective of gender equality policies – both in general and in academia – is to increase the share of women in top positions. Austria has a long tradition of gender equality policies in higher education that dates back to the late 1980s. Over this time, these gender policies have had a threefold objective: (1) increasing the share of women in all areas and hierarchical positions; (2) avoiding gender bias in appointment procedures; and (3) strengthening the field of women’s studies (later gender studies). This policy mix was based on Rosabeth Moss Kanter’s (1977) thesis of the critical mass. It was assumed thereby that an increasing participation of women in higher education would lead to an increasing share of women in top positions as well as cultural change.

Although women conquered universities at student and researcher level, they initially remained excluded from top positions (full professorships and management). To rectify this situation, a quota for university bodies (rectorate, university council, senate and all commissions set up by the senate) was introduced in 2009 through an amendment to the law governing the organisation of universities (Austrian Universities Act 2002). This amendment stipulated that university bodies had to consist of at least 40 percent women, a quota that was subsequently raised to 50 percent by a further amendment in 2014. The law also provides sanctions for noncompliance as decisions by a body that does not fulfil the quota can be contested.

As a consequence, the share of women in top management positions in universities increased significantly within a couple of years. The share of women in rectorate positions increased from 22 percent in 2005 to 49 percent in 2019. The most significant increase was seen in 2011, when the share of women in rectorates increased by almost 10 percentage points (from 32 percent in 2010 to 41 percent in 2011). In other words, only two years after the introduction of the quota regulation, the overall share of female rectorate members lay at over 40 percent. The number of female rectors likewise increased: in 2007, there was just one female rector in Austria; from 2011 onwards, more and more women were appointed to this role, with their share reaching its peak at 38 percent in 2016 (2019: 29 percent). For the sake of completeness, however, it should

be noted that the increase in the share of women among full professors has been far more moderate (from 16 percent in 2006 to 25 percent in 2018). When compared with other countries, Austria ranks above EU average for female heads of universities yet below the EU average for the share of women in Grade A positions (EC 2019).

We can therefore conclude that Austria's introduction of a quota for decision-making bodies in universities has had the desired result. The quota forces those who are responsible for the composition of a body to search for qualified women members. And as the results show, they have been successful in doing so. Interestingly, a recent empirical study on women in university management shows that, on average, women take up a position as rector or vice rector at a younger age than their male counterparts and are less likely to have held a full professorship prior to entering the rectorate (Wroblewski 2019). Hence, their situation differs: men often hold a rectorate position in the final stage of their academic career and retire after their term in office; women, in contrast, hold this management position earlier in their career but do not have the option to return to a chair afterwards.

This increasing participation of women in gatekeeper positions (Husu 2004) carries the potential for cultural change, since it is often assumed that women in decision-making positions will promote women and put women's issues on the agenda. So, does this prove true in practice? To what extent does the increasing participation of women in decision-making bodies contribute to cultural change? To answer these questions, we conducted a study among Austrian female rectors and vice-rectors, which focused — among other things — on the relevance of gender equality goals for women in rectorate positions (Wroblewski 2019).

FEMALE UNIVERSITY MANAGERS AND CULTURAL CHANGE

There has been much critique of the implementation of the quota regulation in Austria, especially with regard to committee work (e.g. participation in senate, *Habilitation* or appointment committees) and the additional burden it places on the few female professors. In other words, "Why should 20 percent do 50 percent of the work?"

The situation is different for rectorate positions since these generally also have resources at their disposal. In the public debate, increasing female participation in rectorates is seen as progress towards gender equality. While this assessment is strengthened by the fact that women are not only assigned "soft" rectorates (e.g. responsibility for student affairs or human resources), they are nonetheless still underrepresented in vice-rectorates responsible for research, most of which are headed by full professors. In some cases, women head the vice-rectorate that is formally responsible for gender equality, diversity or the advancement of women at their university. All of these women embrace this responsibility and see these topics as priorities for the rectorate. They also interpret the reference to gender equality, diversity or advancement of women in the name of their vice rectorate as a demonstration of the rectorate's commitment to these topics. However, while most of them did not actively seek this responsibility, they recognise and accept its importance. As one such vice-rector noted: "Somebody has to do it. But it was also something that interested me."¹

Those female vice-rectors who are formally assigned this competence pursue different priorities in this regard during their terms of office (e.g. advancement of women, involvement of fathers in unpaid work). These priorities and the concrete measures taken depend both on the level of importance accorded to gender equality at their university when they were appointed to the rectorate as well as on their own corresponding experience. Those of them who work at universities with longer traditions of gender mainstreaming and the advancement of women and/or those with expertise in these fields (e.g. through participation in a working group for equal opportunities or knowledge of gender research) build on the structures that are already in place and work closely with the corresponding experts in their organisations.

At the other end of the scale are the female vice-rectors who are not formally responsible for gender equality, advancement of women or diversity — and also had not wanted this to be the case. As one of them explained in our interview: "It was relatively clear that these tasks would

¹ The interviews referred to in this article were conducted by the author in the period from May 2017 to June 2018, as part of a study on women in higher education management (Wroblewski 2019). The study was based on a series of 23 interviews with women who had held a rectorate position in Austria in the previous 15 years. These women represented 16 of the 22 universities in Austria.

not fit in any way with my portfolio.” These women also formulated clear reservations towards positive action or specific measures (e.g. the quota regulation) and assigned the responsibility for gender equality to experts in the organisation. Consequently, they did not consider gender equality to be a main task or priority of the rectorate. One interviewee formulated this as follows: “I am a feminist at heart, but we didn’t even think about institutionalising the topic. [...] We had so many other things to do that were of higher priority.”

Formal competence or non-competence for the advancement of women, gender equality and/or diversity also cannot be linked directly to a feminist background or gender expertise (or lack thereof). While most of the interviewees who are formally responsible for these topics do have a feminist background, some of those who are not are also feminists and/or gender experts. Regardless of their formal competence, those of them who see themselves as feminists all seek to change the structures and processes in their area of responsibility and take a closer look at the actual situation there both for women and men. They also realise that people expect female managers to adopt a different style of management to men. As one interviewee noted: “Even our young colleagues expected that of me.”

However, they do take issue with the general assumptions that female rectors or vice-rectors are frequently confronted with. These include, for instance, the assumptions that the gender equality problem is “resolved” with the appointment of a woman or that women in rectorate positions are expected to change the system and “do something for women”. This is clearly expressed in the following comment by one of the female vice rectors interviewed: “As a woman in such a role, you are basically always the one who is subject to inadmissible generalisations like [...] ‘We’ve got a woman now, she should do that’.”

Furthermore, experiences with the Austrian quota regulation show that the increasing female participation in decision-making does not automatically initiate cultural change. Indeed, of the women interviewed, only those with a feminist or gender studies background formulate a gender equality goal for their term in office and aim at initiating sustainable change. They do so by adapting decision-making processes or criteria, putting women’s issues on the agenda or actively promoting women. However,

since gender expertise is not yet included as a selection criterion for rectorate positions, it does not seem realistic to count only on feminists in rectorate positions to initiate cultural change.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

With the introduction of a statutory quota regulation, Austria succeeded in significantly raising the participation of women in university management functions in a short period of time. Yet while this was the result of active search for qualified women to fill these positions, gender expertise or competence in gender equality only appear to have played a limited role in their selection. When interpreting this result, we need to distinguish between the descriptive and substantive representation of women as suggested by Sarah Childs and Mona Lena Krook (2008). Descriptive representation refers to the number of female representatives, whereas substantive representation stands for attention to women’s concerns. The increasing level of female participation in top positions indicates first and foremost that access barriers for women to these positions have been successfully dismantled. But this does not automatically bring about cultural change. Furthermore, the law does not address cultural change in the quota regulation context: it is an implicit assumption rather than an explicit goal. This tacit expectation harbours the risk that women in rectorate positions will be automatically assigned responsibility for gender equality and thus also saddled with the corresponding load. Helen Peterson (2015) describes this risk of overload as a potential exploitation of women “in the name of gender”.

To increase the substantive representation of women in higher education management, cultural change first has to be formulated as an explicit gender equality priority for such bodies. Second, gender competence should be a prerequisite for all rectorate members regardless of their gender. It should be a required qualification for rectorate positions and should be verified in the selection process. This would also require the inclusion of gender competence in training and qualification programmes for higher education managers. Making gender competence a general requirement for all rectors and vice-rectors would also allow us to challenge the problem raised from a feminist or gender mainstreaming point of view that gender competence is automatically ascribed to women by virtue of biological sex.

To address this blind spot in the gender equality policy mix, the Austrian Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research initiated a political discourse on gender competence in higher education. This began in October 2016 with the establishment of a working group² set up by the Austrian Universities Conference³. This working group was moderated by a departmental head at the ministry and was given the mandate to develop recommendations to raise gender competence and awareness for gender diversity among managers of higher education institutions. These recommendations should be concrete, action-oriented and address all relevant stakeholders (individuals and committees). Targets and background information should be provided for each specific recommendation.

As a first step, the working group developed a definition of gender competence that distinguishes gender competence from gender expertise and follows both the gender mainstreaming tradition and a pedagogical concept of competence.

Gender competence requires recognition of the relevance of gender attributes for one's own field of work and responsibility. This recognition is combined with the willingness and ability to deal with these gender attributes in one's own work context — if necessary with the support of gender experts. Gender competence also requires the ability to act on the basis of this reflection and to set actions which tackle these gender attributes and its gendered consequences. Hence, gender competence requires constant reflection on the gender dimension in one's own field of work. Gender competence is a basic competence that all stakeholders should have. Hence, university teachers, researchers, administrative staff, managers as well as students should all be gender competent. Gender expertise, in

2 The working group consisted of representatives of higher education institutions, student and staff associations, the Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research and gender experts.

3 The Austrian University Conference (*Hochschulkonferenz*) is a consortium of all higher education institutions in Austria which aims at facilitating cooperation between institutions and formulating common positions for higher education policy.

contrast, is defined as a profound knowledge of gender theories and/or experience with gender mainstreaming implementation processes.

The working group also prepared a position paper containing a total of 36 recommendations for building up gender competence and ensuring its consideration in all higher education processes and tasks. These recommendations are divided into four sections — gender-competent management, administration, teaching and research. Each of these sections explains the central idea for this particular area and includes 2 to 18 recommendations — along with details of the rationale behind them (i.e. why they are relevant for gender equality), the responsible stakeholders and the groups who will benefit.

Recommendation 6, for example, is as follows: “The working group recommends that higher education institutions (HEIs) define gender competence as a requirement for all members of committees.” HEI management is responsible for implementation; committee members and (future) applicants will benefit. The recommendation is justified as follows: HEI committees take numerous personnel and strategic decisions. Hence, committees are of central importance to avoid gender-biased decisions. HEIs may offer training measures for whole committees or individual members, which explain gender competence and its relevance for appointment procedures. In order to act in a gender competent manner, the whole committee — and not just its individual members — has to be gender competent. The recommendation closes by referring to concrete training measures already implemented at one Austrian university and one non-university research institute as well as to existing guidelines for gender-fair appointment procedures.

The members of the working group used the slogan “Because it is 2019!”⁴ as a springboard for their discussions and recommendations. This slogan expresses their commitment to supporting gender equality in higher education institutions. However, the policy paper, which was presented and published in early 2019, does not in itself change anything. It is now up to the Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research to

4 This is an adaptation of a quote from the Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, whose response to a question regarding the gender balanced and diverse composition of his cabinet was: “Because it is 2015!”

moderate a process to strengthen gender competence at institutional level. Given the organisational structure of higher education institutions, concrete measures now need to be developed and implemented. The ministry is using the existing steering instruments to support measures aimed at strengthening gender competence in higher education institutions. Public universities have to include such measures in their performance agreements⁵, while universities of applied sciences have to explicate activities that focus on gender competence when applying for additional study courses.⁶ To complement these activities and support a political discourse on gender competence, the ministry plans to organise annual events to establish a networking and mutual learning platform for universities which should also support joint or common initiatives. The first such event will take place in autumn 2020.

In addition to the plans outlined above, the goal of strengthening gender competence in HEI processes will also have to be incorporated into existing steering instruments. This will require not only the formulation of corresponding goals at an HEI level but also the development of indicators to measure gender competence in HEIs. Given the complexity of the gender competence construct, doing so will be a challenging endeavour. But it will also constitute an essential step towards cultural change and provide important input for the discourse on gender competence in academia.

5 Each university negotiates a performance agreement with the Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research which defines its budget, tasks and objectives (including concrete gender equality goals) for a 3-year period.

6 The budgets for universities of applied sciences are based on their student numbers (study places).

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