



# Addressing gender imbalances in leadership in higher education and research institutions: the GEARING-Roles experience

In EDMA's Project Repository Journal, Volume 2 (July 2019), GEARING Roles (GA 824536) explained the importance of gender equality plans (GEPs) as a tool to promote a real, structural change in academia, getting deeper into and questioning the different gender roles still present in higher education and research. This implies the perpetuation of gender inequality in the exercise of power and decision-making, which results in a lack of representation of diversity and of half the population.

GEARING-Roles' GEPs incorporate a gender perspective in academic leadership and decision-making. Notable gender imbalances persist in the academia that can be explained by gender bias. Research by Cardiff University (Santos and Dan Van Phu, 2019) concerning over 2,000 academics at top UK universities found that gender was the only aspect affecting academic rank when skills, degrees and family obligations were otherwise comparable. Researchers from Harvard Business School likewise showed that maternal and domestic duties such as childcare do not account for why women are not promoted to leadership roles. Their findings highlight how key challenges come from structural and human biases.

Line managers' perceptions and women's own self-perceptions together create a 'sticky floor' effect—a counterpart of the 'glass ceiling'—in which many women's

careers stall at middle management and opportunities for advancement narrow for top positions. For example, line managers assume that women are unable to work as long hours as their male colleagues, reducing women's consideration for roles in which travel is required.

Latent biases about women's social roles can serve as a 'sticky floor', the foundation to a series of unintended and semi-consciously enacted hurdles—such as assumptions that women have little desire for these kinds of things or, simply, may not be able to handle the work. As a consequence, new roles are not discussed, development opportunities are not offered, and annual reviews do not

communicate what might be needed for a career promotion. This occurs in business, politics, and academia.

Incorporating this research—and seeking to combat gender bias in academic decision-making and hiring practices—work package five of the GEARING-Roles project has three main objectives which are to:

1. encourage equal participation in leadership and decision-making
2. analyse and redefine leadership models from a gender perspective
3. support awareness-raising and behavioural changes that support inclusive leadership.

## INCLUSION OF WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP POSITIONS



GEARING's partners developed a unique plan to achieve these goals, trying to approach this area with a combination of tools that enable us to follow a path towards a more inclusive and bias-free leadership.

## Where are we? Setting the scene

We started by learning what has been done in other institutions. For this purpose, we identified inspiring practices about leadership and decision-making in higher education, research institutions, and other organisations worldwide. These include training initiatives implemented with capacity-building programmes, mentoring projects, and awareness-raising activities, all reinforced with structural and direct support commitments. We want our research to be available and useful for any other institution seeking structural change in this field, so we created an [online interactive tool](#) on our website, where further information about the practices can be found.

The second step in our road to structural change was assessing each GEP implementing partner's unique situation to choose the best strategy for it. We believe quantitative indicators were important, but not enough to get a picture of the initial situation, so we also wanted to give voice to the different groups of interest at an institutional level. We did it through different methods. Project partners conducted interviews with institutional leaders who were, in some cases, in charge of appointing new managerial posts and other positions; held group reflections that addressed gender and leadership with teaching, research, and administrative staff; and shared reflections at the consortium level on how gender perspectives were and weren't taken into account in senior managerial decisions and promotions.

Once we set the scene and knew what worked in other institutions, we created our own set of activities, trying to add something innovative to the way things were delivered before us.



Figure 1: Deusto Team reflecting on their biases in decision-making.

## Working with our leaders

Any structural change in the field of leadership can be successful without the commitment of current managers of the organisation. So, different workshops in the context of our 'mutual learning' visits were planned. The main objective of these workshops is to get leaders to know each other and exchange their experiences about how to consider the gender perspective in the management and decision-making in higher education and research, with the assistance of work package coordinator to channel the conversation. To date, two workshops have been performed.

In the workshops already held, we have reflected on the consequences of women's limited representation in leadership. First, we put together ideas and experiences from the different participating partners covering gender perspectives in management, communication, work-life balance (WLB), pay, cultural values and leadership's awareness. Finally, to go beyond the mere reflection and engage our leaders, a participatory activity was planned, in which everyone positioned their own organisation regarding the different areas discussed during the session, followed by a

final collective discussion. This served as an initial contact with the project.

Then, in the second session, we worked around the idea of removing barriers to women's advancement in decision-making processes. In this sense, we gave the leaders some basic tools to identify potential gender biases in these processes and the practical consequences of these biases. As with the first session, to get leaders involved, they were asked to design and share with the group the decision-making process for the appointment of deans (for the universities) or top management positions (for the research institutes), putting particular emphasis on biases that may be encountered at each phase of the process. Each team presented to the group, and a final shared reflection was carried out. With this second session, we wanted to make them feel that their organisations are not free from biases, so we need them to be sensitive to them.

Other workshops and mutual learning visits are planned throughout the project to develop gender-sensitive and informed leadership and governance further and enhance the commitment of the leaders and the bonds with the partners.



As a complement to the own reflection of the leaders inside the consortium, we planned to invite guest speakers to bring their expertise to the table. In this sense, COVID-19 has shown us the potentialities of the digital world and opened a window of opportunity to strengthen the activities of the project. Consequently, we took a step forward and developed a set of four webinars with guest speakers, out of the regular meetings that were already scheduled.

Of these four webinars, two of them (in collaboration with H2020 GE-Academy project) will be open to the general public, as a way of telling the world what we are doing, and two will be for GEARING-Roles GEP implementing partners. Creating these sessions in an online format allows the participation of senior management and the use of different participatory techniques (Blackboard, breakout rooms and polls) to enhance participation. The webinars respond to needs the partners identified in the assessment stage. Priority issues common to all institutions were the lack of awareness by senior management teams, resistance to implementation, and

gender bias.

For the first open webinar, Maxime Forest and Lucy Ferguson delivered an introductory session on bias and resistances in leadership and decision-making. They also answered the question of why gender equality should matter to meritocracy and academic excellence. In the second webinar, the GEARING-Roles partners discussed the potential biases partner organisations may experience.

Not only the current leaders should be approached with activities regarding leadership. If we are seeking a substantial change in terms of gender diversity in decision-making, we also need diverse candidates to get on board. For these candidates, we will implement a two-day leadership programme, open to women in senior management positions and who are seeking to advance to senior management. At the end of the training, these women will be able to:

- critically assess stereotypical traits commonly associated with leaders, recognise stereotypical expectations, and feel empowered to counter them

- recognise common hurdles and institutional biases women may face, and find ways to circumvent or overcome those
- feel strengthened in their self-confidence and potential to be capable (future) leaders, as well as supported by their peers.

## Disseminating our work

The GEARING-Roles consortium launched a dissemination campaign to engage the audience with the need for women's greater representation in leadership in higher education and research institutions, and how to better support their opportunities for fair access to top management positions. The dissemination campaign uses a GEARING-developed algorithm that identifies online accounts concerned with similar topics (here: gender) and the relationships among them. These nodes allow us to visually identify the interactions between accounts working on the same topics as GEARING-Roles, which facilitates the project's collaborative contact with external actors and further strengthening the impact of our campaign.



Image 2: Screenshot of the last GEARING-Roles open webinar.

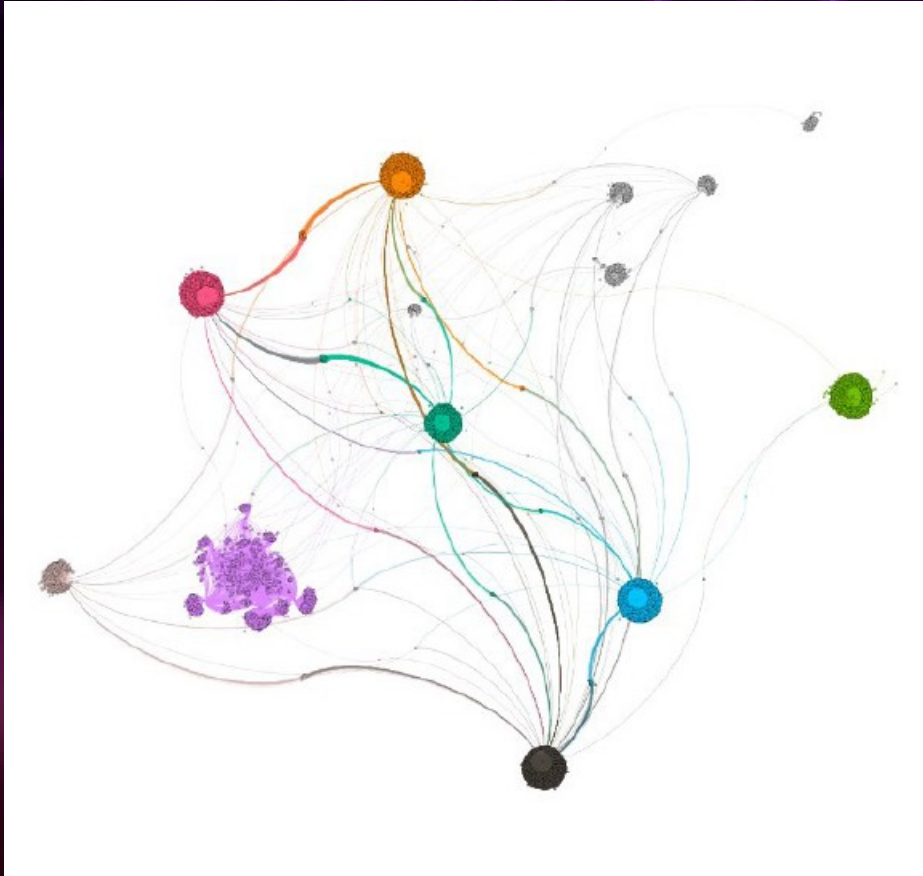


Image 3: Interactions between Twitter accounts identified by the algorithm.

The leadership campaign remained active for a week on Twitter, united with the hashtag #GEARINGLeaders. Participants included eight sister projects, 17 high-impact Twitter accounts and 54 tweets with an average mean of 899 impressions.

With these activities, GEARING-Roles aspires to effect more diverse management representation and practices in academia, putting in practice what universities often try to transmit to their students: the importance and richness of diversity in every aspect of life.

And there is still a lot to come: a survey to assess and redefine our managers' leadership model, another set of two webinars with guest speakers (the next one on 30<sup>th</sup> September with Fiona MacKay) and GEARING-Roles second annual conference, dedicated to leadership and decision-making in academia. Stay tuned!

## PROJECT SUMMARY

GEARING-Roles aims to implement six equality plans to pursue the recognition and promotion of the research career of women, their incorporation in decision-making positions, and the promotion of a culture of equality in organisations, deconstructing sexual roles to unveil gender biases that operate in processes of decision-making, selection and promotion of people and in the attribution of value and recognition.

## PROJECT LEAD PROFILE

UDEUSTO was founded in 1886 and has a long and well established tradition. UDEUSTO's mission and educational goal is firmly grounded in academic excellence and social responsibility, aiming at generating economic sustainable growth and making positive contributions towards the construction of fairer and more inclusive society.

## PROJECT PARTNERS

GEARING-Roles is a multi-stakeholder network of seven academic (six universities and a public research funding body) and three non-academic institutions (a public body and two private companies), supported by 19 stakeholder organisations, built on a solid collaborative track and expertise, and a myriad of regional realities, unique national contexts, and diverse organisational cultures.

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