Performing excellence and gender balance in higher education

Vivian Anette Lagesen[1] · Ivana Suboticki[1]

Abstract

Universities are expected to strive for excellence but also for gender balance. Narrow interpretations of excellence in universities hinder women's advancement in academia. In this paper, we ask if there are ways that these policies may be reconciled. Excellence is an "empty signifier" that must be filled with meaning. We have investigated how Heads of Departments enact "excellence" and gender balance in hiring processes in four Norwegian universities. Many HoD argued for broadening excellence criteria and framed excellence as a *collective* rather than an individual concern. This allows for reconciling top-down institutional demands for excellence and diversity while catering to local needs. Thus, our paper suggests that in a context where increased diversity among faculty is called for, this may open up a space for critical reflection about the criteria for assessing academic quality.

Keywords Excellence · Meritocracy · Recruitment · Hiring · Performativity · Heads of Departments

Introduction

Universities are expected to strive for "excellence," but also for gender balance. Narrow interpretations of "excellence" in universities have previously been found to be a barrier to women's advancement in academia (O'Connor & O'Hagan 2016; van den Brink & Benschop, 2012). However, despite this apparent tension between excellence discourses and hiring and promoting women, "excellence" and diversity co-exist as university goals. The recent Communication from the Commission regarding a European strategy for universities states that: "Excellent and inclusive universities are a condition and foundation for open, democratic, fair and sustainable societies as well as sustained growth, entrepreneurship, and employment" (European Commission, 2021). Similar statements are echoed in university strategies and action plans, while gender disparities and other forms of exclusion remain persistent across

✉ Vivian Anette Lagesen
  vivian.lagesen@ntnu.no

  Ivana Suboticki
  ivana.suboticki@ntnu.no

1   Department of Interdisciplinary Studies of Culture, Norwegian University of Science and Technology, NTNU, NO-7491 Trondheim, Norway

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Europe. In the EU-28, for instance, women only account for 24% of professor positions (European Commission, 2021). Thus, there is a need to investigate how policies of excellence and policies of gender balance in higher education are enacted and how they potentially interfere. Is "excellence" a dominant goal or moderated when gender balance is emphasized?

"Excellence" is an empty signifier and must be provided with meaning (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Weingart & Massen, 2007). Commonly, university rankings are used for this purpose. Thus, the quest for academic excellence depends on quantitative indicators selected by the companies that do the ranking. This means that universities aim to succeed on the selected indicators that, in turn, are emphasized to schools/faculties and departments because this is assumed to shape their reputation (Sørensen & Traweek, 2022). Departments then face the challenge of responding to university leadership's demands for "excellence." This may impact their strategies of recruitment and promotions, which again influence the gender balance. At the same time, departments are responsible for implementing gender balance policies. In order to study what impact university policies and demands may have, we need to know more about how excellence and gender balance policies are interpreted and acted on in practice. Heads of Departments (HoDs) are responsible for facilitating and administering the hiring processes and play an important part in deciding whom to hire and why. Thus, HoDs are pivotal in how "excellence" and gender balance policies are interpreted, understood, and thus given weight and impact. In our paper, we are asking:

1. How are "excellence" and gender balance policies interpreted and understood by HoDs? Are these colliding policies when enacted in practice?
2. Which strategies are enacted by HoDs to potentially reconcile these policies?

Our case for investigating this is Norway. Norway is an interesting case to study concerning gender balance and "excellence" for two reasons. First, it has a long history of gender equality policies in higher education and research. It started in the mid-1980s and intensified over the last 20 years. However, women constitute only a third of full professor positions (https://dbh.hkdir.no/). In the last 10 years, there has been an increased focus on getting more women into full professor positions, and academic institutions in Norway have enacted more measures for gender balance than most other countries (Drange et al., 2023; Husu, 2015). Thus, we expect gender balance to be high on the agenda among academic leadership. Moreover, in Norway, there is a pursuit of excellence on the national policy level (long-term plan for research and higher education), at universities (university strategies), and through funding mechanisms (e.g., Research Council of Norway). Although there has been a recent shift from "excellence" to other criteria such as "social relevance" and "high quality," excellence discourses have not disappeared (Sørensen & Traweek, 2022). Thus, academic leaders must consider both gender balance and excellence demands when they are recruiting. May we see a shift in the understanding of excellence that is more beneficial for promoting gender balance?

Excellence in academic recruitment and selection

Universities as institutions have been profoundly transformed during the last century. The pursuit of "excellence" has been a pivotal driver of this transformation (Michavila and Martinez, 2018), together with neo-liberalist ideology (Sørensen & Traweek, 2022). The

pursuit has been firmly founded on the assumption that academia is governed by merito-cratic principles (Scully, 2002). The measuring of excellence is to an increasing extent done through different metrics (Burrows, 2012; Taylor & Braddock, 2007; Sørensen & Traweek, 2022). However, "excellence" may be vastly differently interpreted by univer-sities and defined by very different factors (Sørensen & Traweek, 2022) and there may be an idiosyncrasy at the local level in the perception and practice of excellence goals (Moses, 1986; Percy & Salter, 1976).

University visions of "excellence" are often framed as being internationally leading, high-quality, first-class institutions in teaching as well as research (Deem, 2009). How-ever, in practice, literature on the evaluation of excellence has revealed a rather narrowly interpreted version of excellence, mainly based on international university rankings and publication counts (Deem et al., 2008; Lund, 2012). Narrow criteria for the evaluation of excellence are a problem because they overlook the richness of academic practices (Bil-lot, 2010; Ferretti et al., 2018) and limit (curiosity driven) scientific inquiries in favor of career-oriented publications (Olssen & Peters, 2005; Perry, 2012; Tourish, 2020). Studies have also found that it produces systematic biases that disadvantage minorities, especially women (Castilla & Bernard, 2010; Moss-Racusin et al., 2012, O'Connor, 2015; Powell & Arora-Jonsson, 2022). Excellence ideals performed have been found to be an impediment to women's careers in academia (Morley & Lugg, 2009; Powell, 2016; Powell et al., 2018; Stewart & Valian, 2018; O'Connor & O'Hagan, 2016). Narrow excellence ideals are also described as especially harmful to women in employment because they tend to favor men, thus leading to a persistent gender imbalance in the highest positions in academia (van den Brink & Benschop, 2012; Nielsen, 2016).

Studies of the role of excellence as an evaluation criterion in hiring processes have mainly been based on interviews with scientific committees and analysis of recruitment and evaluation reports (e.g., Orupabo & Mangset, 2022; Reymert, 2021; van den Brink et al., 2010), training of committee members (Sheridan et al., 2010), and surveys among faculty employees (Carlsson et al., 2021; Castilla & Benard, 2010; Moss-Racusin et al., 2012). However, since department heads have a significant role in managing hiring pro-cesses (Nielsen, 2016; van den Brink et al., 2010), we need to study how they perform this role, given that they are important change agents of diversity and gender balance (Subot-icki, 2022; Su et al., 2015).

The definition of "excellence" used by university leadership is less helpful to depart-ment heads who need to operationalize the concept. Previous research has found that pur-suing excellence in recruitment and hiring practices often builds on the idea that excellence may be objectively measured through peer review to assess academic quality and perfor-mance and, conversely, set standards for academic achievements (Deem, 2009; Lamont, 2009; van den Brink & Benschop, 2012). This is rooted in the general (Western) norm of meritocracy, which asserts that talent, ability, merit, and skill shall determine peoples' opportunities and rewards (Young, [1958]2017; Wooldridge, 2021). Hence, it builds on an assumption that excellent scholarly achievement and knowledge can be evaluated in an objective and value-free way. In practice, however, academic evaluations are imperfect, with substantial subjective and idiosyncratic features (Lamont, 2009; Zivony, 2019). What are the consequences of such insights and what may they mean to heads of department?

One way such subjectivities come to light is in relation to unconscious bias and gender stereotypes, with underrating of accomplishments of women and minorities and overesti-mation of the achievements of white middle-class men (Valian, 2005; Stewart & Valian, 2018). Moss-Racusin et al. (2012) investigated how individual men and women faculty rated fictitious CVs of men applicants as more competent and hireable than identical

women applicants, while Herschberg et al. (2018) argue that such evaluations are rooted in the institutionalization of evaluation policies and macro-discourses of excellence and are not just individualized. Similarly, but in contrast, Williams and Ceci (2015) found that men and women faculty members were twice as likely to prefer women applicants to tenured academic positions. A Norwegian study (Carlsson et al., 2021) found that women candidates were perceived as more competent and hireable than equally qualified male applicants, while a German study found that in cases of equally qualified men and women, women were 20% more likely to get tenure (Schröder et al., 2021). In a longitudinal study of hiring patterns in an institution in Norway, Moratti (2021) found gender-specific patterns depending on internal vs. external affiliation of the applicants. Women had an advantage (and men did not) when they were internal applicants, except when competing with external men applicants. External women applicants, on the other hand, were at a systematic disadvantage. This may indicate that local negotiations in the hiring process may benefit women, perhaps because of departmental needs or policies.

No matter which gender may be favored, these studies highlight the pitfall of believing in value-free evaluations because it creates the risk that unconscious gender bias in the evaluation may be overlooked (Castilla & Benard, 2010; O'Connor & O'Hagan, 2016; Stewart & Valian, 2018). Moreover, such findings defy generalizations of both systematic bias and lack thereof. Instead, it calls for exploring local ways of dealing with excellence discourses. For example, how do department heads deal with knowledge about gender bias?

Other studies related to the performance of excellence criteria have found that men have an advantage in career advancement when excellence criteria are narrowly defined. Lund's (2012) study of the local constructions of "academic excellence" at a Finnish university found that the main feature of an "ideal academic" was to have many publications in highly ranked journals. This systematically disadvantaged women because they had an overload of teaching and home responsibilities. Van den Brink and Benschop's (2012, p.512) Dutch study found that an "excellent" academic was understood to be good at everything, hence the ideal is "a sheep with five legs." Despite that this definition of excellence included teaching, they argue that excellence is a construction that disadvantages women because the evaluations nevertheless undervalued teaching and management activities and thus overlooked important contributions of women. An added problem is that women often do most of the "academic housework" (MacFarlane & Burg, 2019), which often includes non-merited tasks such as service, administration, and support for students and colleagues (Angervall et al., 2015; Angervall & Beach, 2018; Guarino & Borden, 2017; Steinþórsdóttir et al., 2021; Winslow, 2010), in addition to extra responsibility at home (French et al., 2020). Thus, an emphasis on "excellence" is considered to perform negatively on gender balance achievements.

However, studies of how excellence is operationalized in actual hiring procedures show mixed results with regard to gender balance. Orupabo and Mangset (2022) studied the understanding of excellence in recruitment processes by interviewing department heads and faculty and analyzing written documents in Norway. They found that the recruitment process was subject to several logics. First, a "logic of inclusion" characterized the recruitment stage of the hiring process where openness and concern for diversity were pursued by trying to reach out as broadly as possible. Then, in the sorting and evaluating phase, a "logic of exclusion" took place where the number of participants was reduced predominantly based on productivity in English A-level journals. Thus, the diversity concern disappeared. The authors argue that research should pay more attention to when and how gatekeepers incorporate diversity into their evaluation of merit throughout the hiring process.

According to Reymert (2021), the third and final stage of the hiring process, where candidates participate in interviews and conduct trial lectures, allows the emphasis on other skills that are strategically important to the department. Whether diversity is considered strategically important in this final phase remains to be investigated.

We would expect that managerial influence on hiring processes would support gender balance concerns. However, it has been found to be a disadvantage to women. Van den Brink et al. (2010) analyzed policy documents and appointment reports from seven Dutch universities and interviews with 24 women and 40 men in their function as chairpersons, members, and HRM advisors in appointment committees. Even when formal and transparent processes were in place, they discovered that micropolitical relations shaped the appointment procedures at various points: lobbying for new professorial chair positions without considering its gendered effects, composing committees in a way that limits their well-balanced and transparent appointment, having closed appointment procedures or predefined candidates in open recruitment processes, or tacit selection criteria based on committee members interpretations. This micropolitics causes particular challenges for women who usually have to prove their excellence (s. 1474). Moreover, department heads have a decisive role because they can influence such processes at all stages. Thus, the way that excellence is defined and the way the procedures allow for a negotiation of excellence can exclude women.

Similarly, in a study of department heads and academic hiring in Denmark, Nielsen (2016) found that department heads influenced appointments through the profiling of job announcements, screening, and in closed-call hiring. Moreover, Nielsen observed that department heads influenced hiring decisions based on personal preferences. Thus, even in highly formalized processes, meritocratic systems for assessing excellence leave a "managerial space" that HoD can exploit (p. 396).

O'Connor & O'Hagan (2016) interviewed Irish faculty involved in recruitment processes. They found that excellence in research was deemed far more important than excellence in teaching and service. There was a taken-for-granted understanding of excellence as an objective and gender-neutral measure. While some interviewees were critical of certain superficialities in how excellence was interpreted, such as discrepancies in perception of which criteria were considered most important, these were "typically pragmatically accepted" (p. 1947). The interviewees acknowledged that the evaluation process was not objectively performed. They talked about how, for instance, the chair would be influential in deciding how to interpret excellence, how subjectivities, disciplinary differences, "horse-trading" (Lamont, 2009), and gendered micropolitics, usually to the detriment of women, disrupted the idea of excellence and practice as an objective construction. However, the gendered dimensions of these pitfalls were exclusively mentioned by women in the study and thus not by men respondents (O'Connor and O'Hagan, 2016).

To sum up, the scholarship reviewed above illustrates the pitfalls of excellence ideals and how they exclude certain groups, like women, from higher education. The literature mainly argues that the way excellence ideals are enacted creates conditions that are captured in the theory of gendered homophily, leading to the "cloning" of white, middle-aged men professors (Essed, 2004). Our study will pursue the same research agenda, but based on previous findings (Suboticki, 2022), we assume that the department heads we study have more nuanced practices when defining excellence and using it as a criterion in hiring.

To explore this, we depart from an understanding of excellence as being "empty of meaning'" (Moore et al., 2017), that there are no predefined objective criteria from which excellence can be assessed. Rather, criteria for excellence are formed and given meaning through practices of assessments. As Sørensen and Traweek (2022, 12) assert: "Excellence

may be morphed, re-morphed, contested, resisted, and ignored in the phase of the strategic as well as the mundane work that needs to be done at a university." Scholars and managers construct excellence in many and potentially unpredictable ways (Lamont, 2009) and it is evaluated differently across disciplines (Stirling, 2007). One of the key spaces where a particular understanding of excellence is constructed and legitimized is hiring procedures.

We build our analysis on a constructivist approach when we investigate how department heads describe the hiring process, and what they are looking for in candidates, and how they proceed in practice to achieve what they want. Through this, we investigate how "excellence" demands and gender balance policies are interpreted and made relevant in hiring processes.

Our constructivist analysis is inspired by scholars within Science and Technology Studies (STS). Ian Hacking (1999) approaches constructivism with an emphasis on the dynamic interplay between classifications and the entities they classify, asserting that categories not only describe but also actively shape and influence the things they categorize. In this view, he emphasizes the co-evolutionary relationship between knowledge, social practices, and the classified entities, suggesting that as categories change, the phenomena they label can also transform. Further, we follow Bruno Latour (1987, 2007) in denoting that empirical analysis should describe actors and their actions rather than explaining them. Thus, we aim for a transparent description of our findings. Further, we are inspired by John Law's (2009) focus on performativity and enactment when doing constructivist analysis. Studying the performativity of words like excellence, merit, and quality implies analyzing how they acquire meaning and guide actions when they are used, in our case in academic hiring. The words do not just shape action. Action simultaneously shapes the meaning of quite open-ended concepts. Thus, excellence, merit, and quality are enacted in a specific situation. To study such enactments means to observe how the words are staged and how they are included in the way department heads tell how they perform hiring processes, and thus become parts of the realities of hiring faculty.

In the following, we will describe the data, the data collection, and analytical strategies. We will start by giving an overview of the context of the data.

Case and method

Our data consist of qualitative interviews with HoDs about their experiences and conducts in hiring processes at four Norwegian universities. Hiring procedures may vary slightly across universities, but there are some common steps that we describe here, from the point of view of the HoDs role and responsibilities:

1. Appointing a pre-call search committee
   Sometimes the HoD may appoint a pre-call search committee before the call text is made to explore for talents and make sure the call text is tailored to include their interest and expertise.
2. Drafting the call
   HoDs are responsible for drafting the call. It has to be accepted by the faculty before the announcement.
3. Appointing a scientific committee
   The department head appoints a scientific committee of experts. This committee comprises at least one external (usually two) and one internal scientific expert. Both

genders must be represented. The committee's task is to make a scientific evaluation of the candidates, based on instructions they receive from the department head.

4. Appointing an interview committee

   After receiving the scientific committee's report, an internal interview committee is appointed, which consists of the HoD (as an observer), at least one faculty (research group or teaching leader), a student representative, and an HR staff. The committee's task is to conduct interviews and evaluate a trial lecture from the top-ranked candidates. They submit their report to the department head.

5. Making recommendation

   The HoDs make a final recommendation based on the internal interview committee's report and the scientific evaluation and send it to the faculty, to a hiring committee, which is led by the Dean and consist of some members of the faculty board, and student representatives. The hiring committee reviews the recommendation (after a quality check by HR). If the hiring committee accepts the recommendation, they do the formal hiring. Sometimes, they may have objections and send them back to the department. This could for example be due to a lack of clarity or the recommendation is not argued well enough. The hiring committee has the authority to change the succession of the candidates, but this rarely happens.

The process is illustrated in Fig. 1.

There are some formal principles in a national framework to guide the decision process and evaluation of the candidates, but these are quite generic. Some faculties may also have rules, but these are usually quite general. Thus, this allows HoDs much flexibility to decide what to emphasize throughout the hiring process.

Our data set consists of 26 semi-structured interviews with department heads at four of the largest Norwegian universities (Uni 1–4). The interviews at Uni 1 were conducted face-to-face in 2016 ($N = 11$) and on Teams in 2021 ($N = 3$). Interviews at the three other universities ($N = 12$, four at each) were conducted via Teams in 2020. Fifteen interviewees were men and eleven were women, and three had international backgrounds. All were between 35 and 65 years old and four had an international background. The interviewees came from a wide range of fields: the natural sciences and mathematics (9); information technology and engineering (7); and humanities and social sciences (10). When sampling the interviews, the aim was to gain a diversity of gender and disciplinary background—including traditional STEM disciplines
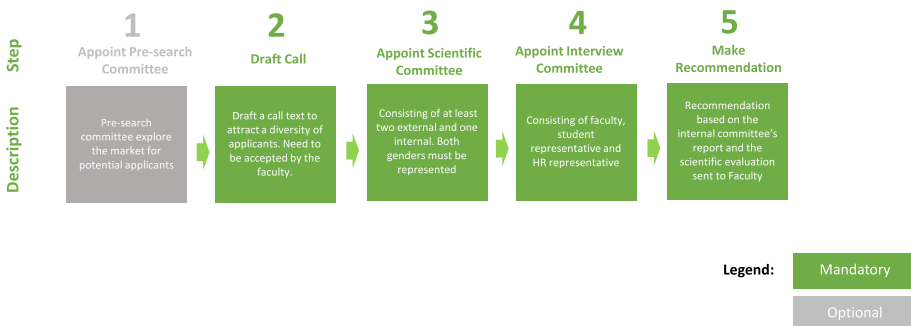

Fig. 1 Hiring procedures

and humanities and social sciences. A majority of the interviews were done in Uni 1. However, we could not find any clear patterns with regard to gender, discipline, or university setting of the interviewees with regard to their accounts of the hiring procedure and how they viewed gender balance policies and "excellence" demands. While for example, one HoD from STEM expressed that he believed it was easier to follow meritocratic principles in STEM disciplines, rather than other disciplines, other respondents in the STEM fields would claim the opposite. Another example is a woman department head from the humanities who did not consider gender balance to be a very relevant task for her, despite the department being gender imbalanced. Thus, it was quite idiosyncratic what was expressed about excellent demands and gender balance policies and did not follow gender, university setting, or discipline. Moreover, we deem the data set too small to make any such generalizations.

Each interview lasted approximately 1 h. We started by asking fairly open-ended questions and covered several topics, such as their most important tasks and responsibilities as HoDs, why they took the job, and what they deemed most important when hiring new employees. We want to emphasize that we did not ask them specifically about what they considered "excellent," but rather whether they experienced demands for excellence from the leadership and how it affected them in their job. We also asked them about how they dealt with gender balance issues, if they regarded gender balance as a problem in their department, and whether they had enacted any measures for improving gender balance. We also asked if they were familiar with the content of the action plan for gender balance and diversity at their university.

Most of the interviews were conducted in Norwegian, and a few in English. All were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. The authors have translated and edited the Norwegian citations used in this paper for grammatical mistakes.

In our analysis, we started by coding thematically the elements that the HoDs emphasized as critical criteria when hiring a new employee. Thematic coding, as proposed by Gibbs (2007), refers to identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes within qualitative data. It involves systematically segmenting data into meaningful categories and then exploring these segments to capture the core idea or theme they represent. While inspired by grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), thematic coding is thus less "grounded" in its approach than abduction, which focuses more on the creative and innovative interpretative process to account for unanticipated observations (Charmaz, 2006). We focused on how they talked about "excellence" and "gender balance," in general and regarding hiring processes. Although we do not have first-hand insight into what they did in practice, we asked them about their practices and if they could give us examples of what they did to achieve their goals. Thus, in the analysis, we apply a constructivist approach (Hacking, 1999; Latour 2007; Law, 2009) to see how they give meaning to different understandings of "excellence" and how this affected their view on hiring processes and gender balance. We were particularly interested in how their accounts and arguments could indicate changes in meanings and practices. For instance, many department heads changed their ideas of how excellence should be evaluated in their department because they had previously followed a narrow logic focused on publication counts. We then divided the presentation of the analysis into three main parts, namely (1) how did they interpret excellence demand and view excellence criteria, (2) which strategies and practices did they enact, (3) and how were "excellence" and excellence demand seen as reconcilably with gender balance concerns.

Interpretations of "excellence" and excellence demands

As shown above, HoDs have an influential role in the hiring process in Norway. Almost all department heads we interviewed said they were frequently told by the leadership to "hire the best" and look for "excellence" when hiring. Moreover, merit-based hiring was seen as a matter of course in a meritocratic organization. One HoD from a STEM department stated:

(…) we are in favour of excellence criteria. (…) a department or research field advances through good international collaboration and peer review in good journals. And that is how you are taken seriously in the academic world and society. (Uni 3,4)

As we see from this quote, the interpretation of the word "excellence" among our interviewees usually related to publication counts and quality, and international collaboration. This focus on publications and research as the main indicator of excellence in hiring is in line with what Orupabo and Mangset (2022) found was emphasized in the evaluations made by scientific committees.

However, many department heads challenged this view and practice by predominantly hiring for this interpretation of excellence. For example, a department head from an engineering department also said s/he supported the idea of predominantly striving for excellence. He was concerned that the push from the leadership to always go for excellence had gone a bit too far and that it was important also to cater for the broader specter of employees.

(…) it is this rush [pushed from above] to go for excellence. And it would be wrong to remove that. But at the same time, we must ensure that we are also cultivating the breadth and the top. It is unrealistic that everyone is on top all the time (…) I wish we had been better at that balance. (Uni 2,2)

This department head was critical of the idea that everyone in the university should be on top. This was a concern expressed by many of the department heads. Some of them had also taken steps to avoid such a narrow definition of excellence and to cater more for other concerns in the hiring process. One department head from an engineering department said he had stopped looking for only "merits" when hiring.

And I certainly do not do that anymore, only look for merit. Oh, no! (…) (Uni 1,1)

To explain why he was not just looking for individual merit he gave an example.

Let's say you have a research group with, for example – let's take the smallest we have – that is three persons. And then you get in a primadonna, a foreigner, with high scores on this and that. It is not sure that it will work out well. Rather the contrary. So, 'getting the best', as we are often told to do, is not that straightforward (…) (Uni 1,1)

Thus, according to this department head, in some contexts it would not be in the best interest of the department to hire people only based on their merits in publications and international relation. But this concern about hiring for the kind of "excellence" usually emphasized in scientific committees was more widespread. One HoD said, "academia is screwed together in the wrong way, by only awarding publications and not so much teaching" (Uni 4, 2). Another HoD said that while scientific excellence was desired, other qualities were at least as important:

Yes, of course, we want to get someone scientifically at the forefront (…), But we are increasingly concerned with education and that one should function in other areas. (Uni 1,2)

Thus, the criteria for merit were, for the department heads, more diverse and broader than the criteria they experienced was used by the scientific committees. This is very much in line with a previous Norwegian study of what scientific committees emphasized (Orupabo & Mangset, 2022). For most department heads, teaching was perceived as an increasingly important criterion. For this reason, they were skeptical of the legitimizing tools committees used to assess merit, most notably publication counts and h-indexes. The concern was that this was given too much weight by the scientific committees, even if the committees were explicitly asked to consider the quality of the publications (not just counts) and teaching merits.

Strategies for enacting broader criteria

As shown above, the HoDs were in charge of administering the whole process of hiring, from making the call to the final recommendation to the faculty. This means they interacted with the scientific committee and the internal interview committee. The interaction with scientific committees had led many HoDs to be doubtful about the objectivity of the meritocratic apparatus. Quite a few HoDs approached scientific assessments from a critical standpoint. During the hiring process, they had interaction with the committee. They did not rely solely on the committee's ranking in their subsequent actions.

I do not place as much emphasis on them [scientific committee assessments] myself as I did when I was completely new in the role [as department head]. Because I have gained some experience. But I trust in their distinction between 'qualified' and 'unqualified' (Uni 2,5)

Scientific committees' evaluations were treated critically by department heads. There were several reasons for this. First, in contrast to several previous studies (Nielsen, 2016; O'Connor & O'Hagan, 2016; O'Connor et al., 2020), most of the department heads we interviewed were keenly aware of so-called unconscious bias and explicitly stated that they did not expect the meritocratic system to be value-free. This represented a change from earlier time, according to one of the interviewees. It was a perception that had emerged with time, not least regarding knowledge about gender bias.

(…) Twenty years ago, you just put a stamp on the expert report. When we know how much discrimination against women takes place in many of these systems, it is clear that it was to their disadvantage. (Uni 1,2)

Many department heads were aware of the risk of unconscious gender bias and that this bias was tricky precisely because it was unconscious. One department head described (some) bias or lack of neutrality as a human condition that can happen to everyone:

Like everyone else, I probably think that [the scientific committee] do as good and honest work as they can. But they also have the same challenge as, like us, when we think we are neutral, we may not be anyway. (Uni 2,5)

Moreover, for some, this was also an experience they had made themselves in the processes of hiring. One department head said s/he had learned that the outcome of the assessment was dependent on the committee members and their perspective disciplines or research fields:

There are different types of research, and the assessment committee will therefore evaluate based on their views. Even if you try to have a breadth [of perspectives and fields], even if there is breadth in the committee, there are three people. You try to make sure that they have slightly different views, but what comes out is not an objective conclusion. (Uni 1,4)

Thus, it was an acknowledgement that even if they strived to make the committee cater for a broader set of considerations by making it as diverse as possible, it does not univocally lead to "objective" outcomes. Thus, in their interpretation of the committee evaluations the positionality and idiosyncratic nature of such work was acknowledged by many of the department heads (Lamont, 2009). Thus, an objective and replicable judgment of excellence was considered difficult among our interviewees.

The second reason for treating the scientific evaluations critically was that many department heads considered teaching as a more important criteria when hiring than the committees usually did. One department head emphasized that this had also been subject to change, and that they were increasingly more concerned with teaching skills and other skills.

Yes, of course, we want to get someone scientifically at the forefront (…), But we are increasingly concerned with education and that one should function in other areas. (Uni 1, 2)

Thus, many interviewees saw teaching as an increasingly important criterion to consider when hiring. One department head argued that giving teaching more emphasis in the evaluation was also a way to foster a better gender balance in the hiring processes.

Among many of our applicants, we see that the women often have more teaching than men, and then you see that the men have better numbers in terms of publications. (…) If you say that the most important thing is the research, then both the teaching and the women lose. (Uni 2,5).

Thus, the lack of attention given to teaching by scientific committees was considered not only unfortunate but also represented an example of how evaluations were potentially biased in favor of men applicants. One department head also found that the gender balance within the scientific committees could affect whether publications or teaching was emphasized in the evaluations.

Another strategy to divert attention away from publication counts was to make committee members evaluate publications based on content. While committee members were instructed to do so according to the DORA principles, one department head from the humanities had an impression that this was not practiced in reality, at least not by all committee members:

I have no evidence to back this (…), but my impression is that men, at least within [discipline], are often very focused on where people have published their stuff. (Uni 4,1)

He referred to this as a "male macho culture behavior" and instructed committees to pay special attention to the content of the papers, to counteract such a culture. This referral to a "macho culture" was mentioned in a department within one of the male-dominated disciplines in the humanities. Thus, several HoDs shared similar reflections, namely that scientific committees needed to value teaching higher to account for an area of expertise women often excelled in. Another reason was a more practical one, namely, that department heads struggled if they hired staff that proved unfit for teaching, which we will return to below.

However, making scientific committees include teaching achievements in their assessment was a difficult task, according to our interviewees. Sometimes committees resisted or ignored the department head's instructions to emphasize teaching. A department head of a STEM department said:

Often the candidates are only ranked on research. Even though we try to emphasize in both reports and announcements that teaching and teaching experience are also significant. (Uni 4,3)

If the department heads were not content with the evaluation report, there were some strategies they could enact. One was to send the report back to the committee and ask them to reconsider. One interviewee explained how he sometimes requested a re-evaluation if the committee ranked a male candidate higher and thus had neglected the policy to use moderate gender quotes in cases where men and women have almost equal qualifications:

They (the committee) so easily forget. They easily get hung up on the number of publications. So, sometimes we send the report back. (…) If not, I think it is within my authority and really up to me to use the moderate gender quotas (…). It is always very much appreciated when I do. It is probably applauded in the employment committees. (Uni 3,3)

This HoD viewed it as his responsibility to make adjustments to the assessment of the scientific committee if it did not do as instructed. He also assumed he was applauded for this by the faculty committee. Thus, his interaction with the faculty had strengthened his view that the gender balance policy should influence the ranking of candidates and not just publication counts.

Another strategy for avoiding an unwanted result from the committee's evaluation was to ask the committee not to do a ranking of candidates. This produced space and flexibility for the department head to rearrange if they wanted to. Department heads who had more experience in hiring felt more confident in questioning the evaluation processes and rankings.

"Suitability"—fitting local needs

An important reason why many department heads were eager to get more control over the hiring process, was their wish to recruit a person that in their opinion were the best possible fit for the department. Rather than looking for "excellence" in the shape of publication counts, department heads wanted to hire someone who was "suitable." One department head described an ideal candidate as:

One who produced scientifically, yes, but also one who likes to do things and initiate things, and who will take responsibility for things other than their research. Who are interested and take responsibility for teaching. Do all those things. (Uni 1,1)

Another department head described the most important criteria as someone who has collaborative skills and willingness to contribute to the collective, as opposed to people who are just "sitting in a corner and only doing their own thing" (Uni 3,4).

Recruiting someone who would be "a good colleague" was argued to be important because these positions were permanent, and commonly, the ones hired would remain in this job for most of their careers. One department head put it like this:

Getting the right personalities, those with a particular drive, is essential. They do the job because they like it, to do research, teach, and contribute to joint activities. (…) because everything we do is part of a collective effort. (Uni 3,4)

Qualities such as "having a drive" and "being collegial" were mainly evaluated during interviews and through references, something many HoDs paid great attention to. Therefore, finding the best-suited one seemed to be more critical for most department heads than striving for "excellence" in the shape of publication counts and international collaboration.

Previous research has found that such excessive demands usually make women perceived as less qualified than men (van den Brink & Benschop, 2012). Interestingly, in our data, "suitability" was also used explicitly as a leeway to consider other criteria, such as gender balance.

(…) And, sometimes it can be so that getting in a woman is good in itself, concerning 'suitability'. (Uni 2,7)

This department head said that since gender balance was an explicit goal in the institution, being a woman could be a criterion for "suitability." How was suitability decided then? The interview situation and the trial lecture were important contexts for evaluating "suitability." For this reason, many department heads were eager to have candidates come physically to deliver a speech and participate in an interview to ensure that teaching skills and personality could be evaluated upfront. One of the department heads admitted that getting a sense of somebody's character was challenging and often came down to gut feeling.

It is super tricky (…), and it is terrible to say, but it often comes down to a gut feeling. I am not a psychologist and probably have limited skills to judge people's personalities, but we have the interview and also make calls to references. We are too ill-equipped in these hiring processes in academia. But I believe we make fewer mistakes now than before when we hire (...) if it is not a team player or someone with social skills…you don't get hired. But I think most have got that by now (Uni 3,2)

As this HoD describes, part of the emphasis on interviews and collaboration skills also concerns how collaboration is becoming part of core academic practice.

People need to function well in a collegial way. If we do not hire people who have significant positive effects on colleagues, students, postdocs, fellows, and so on (…) then we have only hired one person, and no matter how excellent that person is, we have not received much more than that. So, I'm very concerned about personal qualities, and in some cases, I have disagreed with my interview committee and said that I think this person does not have the right personal qualities, and I chose to either disqualify the person or rank the person down the list (Uni 3,2)

Again, it was emphasized how the department gains very little if they hire an excellent researcher who does not contribute sufficiently to the collective.

Gender balance enhancing "excellence?"

As mentioned in the introduction, we wondered how HoDs dealt with the demands for "excellence" and the demand for gender balance stemming from national and institutional policies to improve gender balance among the employees (Lagesen 2021; Lagesen and Suboticki 2022). Some HoDs considered this difficult because it would disrupt meritocratic principles, and then foster criticism from others and also not be a comfortable position for the women either.

You cannot recruit weak women because they are women; they do not want that either. (Uni 1,2)

Most HoDs emphasized that it was important that the women they recruited were "qualified," but they were positive about making efforts to improve gender balance. Some had already made considerable effort to do so in their hiring processes, while others were aware that it was a goal but had not done much yet. One HoD in the latter category stated that there were many important criteria but stressed the overall importance of "suitability." However, he was open that gender could be a criterion when judging "suitability."

(…) we talked an incredible amount about suitability. So CV is important, but so is aptitude. (…) And then gender balance comes on top of that (…) there's absolutely no problem prioritizing it, provided the other is good. And often, it is the case that bringing in a woman is good in itself because of suitability.(Uni 1,1)

We interpreted this as an openness toward having gender balance as a factor in the considerations, arguing that being a woman could be one way of judging "suitability," if she is qualified. Other HoDs went further in arguing for improving gender balance. One HoD in the Humanities argued that gender balance was an important way to build stronger scholarly disciplines. He put it like this:

As humans, the way we think and see things are entirely conditioned by how we are socialized, the education we have had and the lives we have lived, and so on. So, I disagree with my colleagues who believe that reason is independent of age, socialization, etc. So, from my point of view, a better gender balance will lead to a broader diversity in thinking, which, in my opinion, is what we should always look for within our discipline. (Uni 4,1)

This quote echoes the claim of diversity as an asset, arguing that better representation raises scholarly quality. Thus, in his view, gender balance contributes to scholarly quality in the discipline, and hence also in his department.

There were several ways that department heads worked to improve gender balance in hiring processes. Some department heads considered interviews to be an arena where they could promote women by emphasizing particular skills and features of personality to argue them as "suitable."

Personal suitability is an aspect of how women sometimes may appear a bit different than men, and it is allowed for the department head to comment on individual suitability in the recommendation to the faculty. Even if she has to be scholarly eligible, of course. (Uni 2,1)

To create a potential for women in such interview situations, some faculties had a policy that all hiring processes needed to have at least one woman among the pool of interviewees.

One HoD at a STEM department who had improved its gender balance in top positions significantly said that the main reason for the change was that they focused on interviews as much as CVs in the recruitment processes:

We often see that women appear, at least to me, to be much more focused when they come to the interview. (…) many men (…) do not have a good strategy for interviews. And they don't show they have thought through what they will do (once hired). So, when you encounter women candidates on the same level, they have often done much

better in the (university) structure. (…). I am looking for those who can build activity on at [university]. That is what is essential. (Uni 1,9)

According to this department head's experience, women applicants tended to have a better plan for how they wanted to build research groups, networks, and cooperation with students, which was highly emphasized. Thus, qualities were seemingly not based on likability or manner (Van den Brink & Benschop, 2012) but rather on capacity for building the collective in the department.

Thus, we see there was diversity regarding how "excellence" demands and gender balance were reconciled. Some HoDs considered gender balance demands as challenging to meritocracy. In these cases, the department heads would only regard gender as a relevant consideration when women and men ranked equally through the scientific committee evaluations. Other HoDs tried to renegotiate the demand for "excellence" by broadening the set of criteria that they believed should be considered in hiring processes to pursue a goal of gender balance, and/or diversity. Most notably, HoD made an effort to reposition the perspective from which "excellence" is judged, i.e., from a focus on individuals to a collective (the department).

Discussion

We started out by reviewing how previous research has shown how "excellence" ideals have been a barrier for gender balance among academic staff (Van den Brink & Benschop, 2012, 2014; O'Connor and O'Hagan, 2016). Important obstacles found have been gendered biases among evaluators (Castilla & Benard, 2010; O'Connor and O'Hagan, 2016), micro-political practices of managers aimed at promoting individual preferences (Nielsen, 2016; van den Brink & Benschop, 2012; O'Connor et al., 2020), and a narrow definition of "excellence" (Billot, 2010; Ferretti et al., 2018; Orupabo & Mangset, 2022).

A few recent studies have, however, shown some optimistic developments, such as the inclusion of diversity considerations in the initial stages of hiring gender bias-benefitting women (Carlsson et al., 2021) and departure from metric systems in the latter stages of the process (Reymert, 2021). Yet, there has been a common finding that department heads' steering and management of hiring processes have resulted in "cloning" of white middle-class men who worked often worked against women and thus (Morley, 1999; van der Brink et al., 2010; Teelken et al., 2021).

Our study illustrates an alternative pathway. While the HoDs in our study had different interpretations of "excellence," many were critical of a narrow definition. This was an interpretation that had emerged due experiences and observations made, but also new knowledge about phenomena such as unconscious gender bias. Moreover, most HoDs considered it their responsibility to manage hiring processes in more inclusive directions and were explicit about the importance of broadening the criteria for hiring beyond publication counts. Their strategies were usually performed through so-called micro-political work, aimed to accommodate demands for greater diversity. They emphasized other elements such as teaching, collaboration skills, and willingness to take responsibility for the department as a whole, rather than only their own careers, etc. Some used this to negotiate the meaning of excellence to argue for a strategy for building more *excellent collectives* rather than mainly pursuing candidates with the most outstanding achievements. Quite a few of them were skeptical of such imagined "primadonnas" that were more interested in building their own individual careers rather than the department.

Thus, a binary was made between strategies for pursuing individual excellence vs. collective excellence.

Some of our interviewees constructed a notion of collective excellence, building on the idea of gathering individuals with different qualities in a team (department or research group). The construct of being "suitable" was used by several department heads and referred to the hiring candidates' ability to be collaborative, motivational, and take responsibility for the department, colleagues, and students. Thus, finding the "best suited" versus the "best" or most "excellent" candidate entailed a view that merit should not be limited to publications only and that criteria beyond a narrow definition of excellence should be adapted. For some, "suitability" included qualities such as diversity and features related to expertise and experience. Contrary to O'Connor et al. (2020), we found that the emphasis on "local fit" was not necessarily disadvantageous to women but could work in their favor. Thus, we see the potential for an alternative strategy, where excellent collectives and gender balance were not seen in opposition but as strengthening one another. The exclusion was not systematic and structurally skewed against women, but department heads' management allowed for other outcomes. The strategy of looking for "suitability" could potentially be used as an argument for recruiting underrepresented groups.

The department heads' strategies to redefine the meaning of excellence could be viewed as another form of micropolitics. It entails nudging specific candidates to apply and cultivating their excellence early, composing and advising scientific committees to look beyond publication metrics, and trying to broaden the criteria for excellence during interviews and trial lectures with candidates. Thus, local leaders were not only trying to assert strategic objectives in the final stages of hiring processes (Reymert, 2021) but also when announcing positions and scientific committee reviews, with varying degrees of success. Thus, our study goes beyond previous studies when we find that local leaders may promote diversity in recruitment decisions and thus disrupt the reproduction of inequality. Further, their management was not based on personal idiosyncrasies but on the strategic priorities of their departments. This shows that using the "management space" (Nielsen, 2016) may foster more diversity.

However, we see both opportunities and risks in such strategies. Our findings offer a slightly optimistic view of how excellence and gender balance can be reconciled in the work of local leaders. We interpret their effort to redefine the meanings of excellence as mainly a leadership strategy to strengthen their departments' academic quality in research and teaching and the work culture. Even if some department heads strongly believed in an objective meritocracy, many did not. We interpret this as a change indicating that gender balance policies have impacted department heads in Norway. While there was a varying degree of commitment to such policies, they could not be ignored but had to be responded to. For some department heads, it was an essential dimension in their strive for exemplary leadership in their departments and universities.

There are obvious risks in leaders influencing hiring procedures. As previous research has revealed, it can have exclusionary and gendered effects. Even though we find that such exclusion is not systematic, active measures need to be taken to hinder adverse outcomes. To circumvent gendered exclusion, van den Brink and Benschop (2012) note that it is not enough to improve transparency and accountability but that the protocols must be improved. One way to ensure that micro-political leadership in such cases as we describe is not limited to personal idiosyncrasies and biases is to anchor negotiations of excellence in leadership groups.

Conclusion

Our study shows that broadening the interpretation of excellence criteria and framing excellence as a collective rather than an individual concern in hiring process allows for the reconciliation of top-down institutional demands for excellence and diversity while catering to local needs. When academic merit and quality are determined in a context where increased diversity among faculty is called for, we see that this opens up a space for critical reflection about the criteria for assessing academic quality. This does not imply a dismissal of meritocratic principles. The belief in such principles is necessary to justify and give meaning to the investments of time and effort toward individual career advancement. It is also considered a measure of fairness (Sørensen & Traweek, 2022, p. 100). What happened was that more qualities counted as merit. When embedded in a decision-making culture where diversity was prioritized, quality criteria emerging from concerns for collective excellence would be legitimate.

Declarations

Competing interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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