

Gender Action Plan



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The Gender Action Plan sets out a series of actions that colleges and universities across Scotland should implement into their own gender action plan and outcomes in order to decrease gender imbalance at their institutions

Target groups: Colleges and universities

Focus: To address gender imbalance at subject level

Objectives: The plan was published in August 2016 by the Scottish Funding Council (SFC), motivated by the need to develop Scotland's young workforce. It was created to address gender imbalances found within subjects across colleges and universities and help start changes in infrastructure, policy and process. The main aim is to tackle gender imbalances within subjects and to have no subjects with over 75% of students of a particular gender by 2030. Particular importance is given to the top ten subjects where gender imbalances are seen (construction, childcare, mechanical engineering etc.). Male students at Scottish universities are also underrepresented, so another aim is to increase male enrolment to 47.5% by 2030 (5% less than female students, rather than 15.4% less).

Methodology: Implemented throughout Scotland, it outlines specific actions to tackle these issues, although the SFC is aware that a wider approach needs to be taken. Institutions must set some of their annual outcomes with SFC to address gender imbalances within subjects, and develop their own gender action plan to outline how they will achieve this. This is the standard to which each institution should be held accountable, but in practice this was difficult to implement as funding is based on all outcomes, not just the ones that the Gender Action Plan addresses which made monitoring difficult.

Key success factors in the short term are reaching 2021 milestones, as well as reaching the outcomes each institution set. One of the challenges was meeting the demands of the work, as the SFC lacked the capacity and resources to support colleges and universities sufficiently. In the first year, they could only dedicate time to already committed actions, rather than supporting institutions, and holding them accountable, when they came across barriers: 'we should have been higher level in what we said in order to give us flexibility to see how things worked out in practice and be able to adapt our response accordingly' (Rachel Adamson, SFC).



Impact: The plan is applicable to all colleges and universities funded by SFC (all colleges and universities in Scotland, excluding those privately owned). It was found that some of the subjects the plan focused on improved at college level but not at university level.

At colleges, 8/10 of the subjects identified with the largest gender imbalance decreased from 2011 – the two where imbalances grew were construction and IT. The biggest decrease was seen in building services, where the gender imbalance decreased by 6.2%, followed by engineering by 4.9%, mechanical engineering by 3.6% and hair and personal care by 2.4%.

The same was not seen in universities, where the gender imbalance of students was second highest since 2011 at 58.5% women and 41.4% men. The same trends can be seen at the subject level where gender imbalances increased. In 3/4 of the subjects that saw high levels of men, male enrolment increased by 4.6%, 2.3% and 2%. Engineering decreased with 3.2% fewer men enrolled in 2016-17 as opposed to 2011. For all of the subjects where women are overrepresented, the imbalance also grew, and only remained the same for teacher training which remained at 81% of students being women.

Regardless of this lack of success, ‘the Gender Action Plan has worked to draw attention at a senior level to the issues so it has been successful in getting institutions to face gender imbalances in a more joined up way’. Resources will be needed to develop senior managers as well as fostering a whole institutional understanding of what tackling gender imbalance means. The plan also highlights at an institutional and managerial level the need for gender equality.

Conclusion: ‘I think for me the key for other projects would be around being more focused on the outcomes you want to achieve and understand the areas that you do and do not have influence over. In our Gender Action Plan, we tried to cover all of the issues that people had raised and if we were to do this again, it would be a shorter, higher level document that said “these are the key barriers that our institutions are facing, and these are the high-level actions we will take to address them”. This would have given us more flexibility to respond to their challenges’.

It was found that there is not enough focus on tackling gender inequality in the school system: ‘there are initiatives to get girls and women into STEM but little research or understanding into the wider cultural influences behind inequalities’. It is also important to recognise what is meant when a gender group is underrepresented and this will alter how it is dealt with. For example, one of the most female-heavy university courses is Psychology, but there is a lack of women professors in Psychology. In this instance, although there is a high representation of women at undergraduate level, the outcome for women is poor and lower than for men. Does this have the same priority as computer science, where there are few undergraduate women and therefore few professors and few working in the industry?

‘If I were to do this differently, I would focus more specifically on the areas we have influence over and can make a real change in, work with more institutions and carry out more efficient reporting of results to better support institutions and hold them accountable for their actions’.



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<http://www.sfc.ac.uk/publications-statistics/corporate-publications/corporate-publications-2016/SFCCP052016.aspx>

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