Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences

# Advancing Gender Equality Among Professors at Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences: A Comprehensive Analysis (2023-2024)

**Author(s)**
Sanches, N.; Hanna, F.

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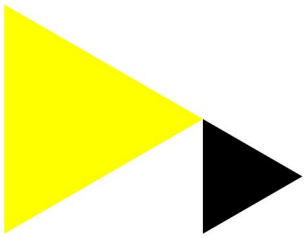

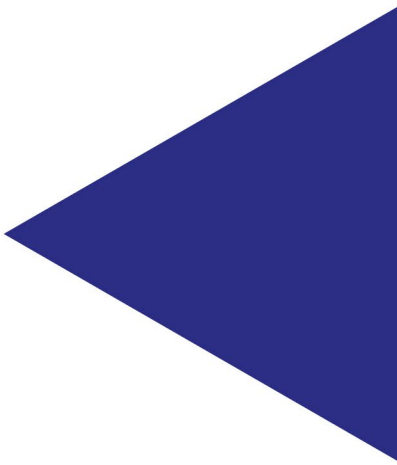

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Creating Tomorrow

# Advancing Gender Equality Among Professors at Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences: A Comprehensive Analysis (2023-2024)

N. Sanches (MSc) & dr. F. Hanna
Centre of Expertise Urban Education - Amsterdam University Applied Sciences
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This research was conducted on behalf of HvA HR Central.

**Samenvatting**

In dit onderzoek hebben we gekeken naar de genderverdeling onder lectoren binnen de Hogeschool van Amsterdam (HvA). Ondanks de vooruitgang in de vertegenwoordiging van vrouwen in het hoger onderwijs, blijven vrouwen ondervertegenwoordigd, met slechts 43% van de lectorposities in 2024. Bij de Faculteit Business en Economie is slechts 29% van de lectoren vrouw. Daarentegen laten zowel de Faculteit Digitale Media en Creatieve Industrie als de Faculteit Gezondheid een meer evenwichtige genderverdeling zien, met respectievelijk 50% en 55% vrouwelijke lectoren. Op basis van onze bevindingen raden we aan dat de HvA zich proactief blijft inzetten om de genderverdeling onder lectoren HvA-breed volledig in evenwicht te brengen. Dit omvat het verder versterken van het commitment van het College van Bestuur, het implementeren van een robuust monitorsysteem en het stellen van duidelijke doelen om gendergelijkheid onder lectoren te bevorderen. Onze analyse kent enkele beperkingen. We missen details over de aanstellingsuren van de lectoren en hebben geen informatie over hun inschaling. Bovendien zijn recentelijk associate lectoren toegevoegd, maar zijn deze niet meegenomen in onze analyse.

**Summary**

Our study looks at gender differences among professors at Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences (AUAS). Despite progress in female representation in higher education, women still make up only 43% of professors as of 2024. While this is a 12% increase from last year, gender gaps persist. Specifically, the Faculty of Business and Education has only 29% women in professor positions. In contrast, the Faculty of Digital Media and Creative Industries and the Faculty of Health have more balanced gender distributions, with 50% and 55% women as full professors, respectively. We suggest AUAS should keep working to balance gender in full professor roles by strengthening executive commitment, setting clear goals, and monitoring progress closely. Our analysis has certain limitations. We lack specific details regarding the professors' appointment hours and their salary scale information. Furthermore, the recent inclusion of associate professors has not been accounted for in our analysis.

## Introduction

For several decades in a row, international studies have called attention to the prevalence of major gender imbalances among professors in academia (Flood et al., 2020). Even though the number of female students and research staff has increased significantly over time, women still appear to be underrepresented full professor functions (e.g., Essanhaji & van den Brink, 2022; Husu, 2000). Research conducted in the Dutch context reveal similar imbalances[1]. For example, at the University of Maastricht, in 2020, 26% of all professors were female compared to a percentage of female students of more than 50%[2]. This has led us to ponder the question of whether such pervasive imbalances also exist at the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences (AUAS), and if so, whether gender equality at the AUAS can be increased through specific implementation and monitoring strategies. Hence, this paper suggest implementation and monitoring strategies that help the AUAS to counter the gender imbalance in academia. To this end, we will focus specifically on research on promoting gender equality.

There are several reasons why it seems relevant to focus on aspects of gender equality in academia. First, a focus on gender equality is in line with the United Nation's sustainable development goals (SDG), fundamental values of the European Union[3], and the mission statement of AUAS. Hence, both economically and morally, closing the gender gap is can be considered an important step to be taken. Second, from a business case point of view, balancing gender diversity among professors has the potential to drive scientific discovery and innovation (Nielsen et al., 2018). This, in turn, can lead to more favorable positions, often expressed in

[1] Home - LNVH
[2] Feiten & cijfers - Over de UM - Maastricht University
[3] ec_rtd_gep-faqs.pdf (europa.eu)

terms of (inter)national educational and research rankings, which are important for higher education institutions, as they help acquire funding for research, enter into lucrative partnerships with companies and governments, and attract new students (Deresiewicz, 2015). For example, results from an empirical study about the citation impact of gender diverse teams revealed that mixed-gender publications (co-authored by men and women) receive more citations than non-mixed papers (written by same-gender author teams) or single-author publications (Maddi & Gingras, 2021). Last, from a social point of view, there is consensus that every person deserves equal and fair opportunities in life without being discriminated based on identity related aspects such as gender[4].

This study starts with describing the context in which the AUAS operates and their strategic plans regarding increasing the number of female professors. Then, we will provide an evaluation of the current AUAS strategy regarding this aim. Finally, we will discuss some main challenges when implementing and monitoring such strategies.

**General introduction to the AUAS**

The Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences (AUAS) is an educational institution for higher education in the Netherlands, located in different areas of Amsterdam. AUAS was established in 1993 after a fusion of two higher education institutes. Since then, it has grown into an institute consisting of seven faculties, including the Faculty of Business and Economics, Faculty of Applied Social Sciences and Law, and Faculty of Education. The AUAS houses 50.000 students and offers 71 Bachelor's, Master's, and Associate degree programs. Moreover, it is perhaps one of the biggest employers in the field of higher education, both in the Netherlands and in Amsterdam, with almost 5,000 employees. More than half (57%) of the employees are

[4] Home | Adviescommissie Divers en Inclusief Hoger Onderwijs en Onderzoek (dihoo.nl)

identified as female. Unfortunately, the AUAS does not further specify these numbers according to the level of the staff (e.g., academic staff, administrative staff, or support staff).

Formally, the AUAS is a foundation with a two-tier board: The executive board and the supervisory board (for a simplified overview of AUAS, see footnote[5]). Without getting into too much organizational details, each faculty has its own dean and different supporting units, such as the communication office and human resource department. And within each faculty, there are educational programs which are led by one or two program managers. These program managers and corresponding management teams eventually are responsible for the operations. Apart from these program managers, each faculty has its own research department. This faculty-wide departments are the so-called centers of applied research and are directed by a manager, who also is a professor.

**Professors at university of applied sciences**

In addition to providing high-quality education, the AUAS, like any other Dutch higher education institute, functions as a research institute for applied science. This means that the AUAS aims to directly contribute to innovations in the professional field and solutions for demanding practical issues. Compared to academic research institutes, the AUAS works more closely together with different internal and external stakeholders on practice-based projects. At the same time, however, AUAS also has research staff where the position of a professor is at the top. Unlike the position of professor at academic universities (e.g., University of Amsterdam), the position of professor at the university of applied science has only recently been created. In 1999[6] the first experimentations were conducted with these professor positions and were further developed and formalized the last two decades. The number of professors at AUAS has grown

[5] Het bestuur en de afdelingen van de HvA - HvA
[6] Geschiedenis - Vereniging van Lectoren

by more than 600 over time. Nowadays, these professors also play an important role in research and policymaking both locally as well as nationally[7].

**Situation at AUAS**

Within AUAS each faculty has its own professors with a specific research focus[8]. As a rule of thumb one can assume that the larger the number of students is, the more professors a faculty has. For instance, in 2024 the faculty of Sports and Nutrition houses approximately 3,000 students and has five professors, whereas the faculty of Applied Social Sciences and Law houses almost 8,000 students and 13 professors. Currently the AUAS has appointed 65 professors[9]. Based on our analysis of the professors' profile (photos and professional biography) at AUAS, 28 of these professors can be categorized as female, only one of which as a woman of color[10]. These numbers at the AUAS do not stand alone. Other studies about gender imbalances in academic have revealed similar patterns (e.g., Ysseldyk et al., 2019). Table 1 shows the gender distribution among professors within each faculty[11]. Notably, although the overall gender distribution at the AUAS may be considered as imbalanced, between faculties clear differences are visible.

Table 1. Gender distribution among professors within AUAS faculty

| AUAS faculty | Total (2023) | Women (2023) | Total (2024) | Women (2024) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Faculty of Sports and Nutrition | 5 | 1 (20%) | 5 | 2 (40%) |
| Faculty of Business and Economics | 7 | 2 (29%) | 7 | 2 (29%) |
| Faculty of Health | 10 | 5 (50%) | 11 | 6 (55%) |
| Faculty of Applied Social Sciences and Law | 12 | 4 (33%) | 13 | 6 (46%) |
| Faculty of Digital Media and Creative Industries | 10 | 5 (50%) | 12 | 6 (50%) |
| Faculty of Education | 8 | 2 (25%) | 8 | 3 (38%) |
| Faculty of Technology | 12 | 4 (33%) | 9 | 3 (33%) |

[7] Groeiende rol voor lector als verbinder - ScienceGuide
[8] There are four professors whose chairs are institution-wide, yet they are also affiliated with a specific faculty.
[9] Professors at the AUAS - AUAS (amsterdamuas.com)
[10] Among male professors, only on could be identified as person of color.
[11] Data collected in March 2023 and March 2024.

For instance, the proportion of female professors at the Faculty of Sports and Nutrition and Faculty of Education is imbalanced, whereas the male-female ratio is balanced at the Faculty of Health and the Faculty of Digital Media and Creative Industries. Unfortunately, no historical data exists that could help to establish trends over time. Based on conversations with the AUAS diversity officer, it should be noted that the distribution in Table 1 has slightly increased over time. Nevertheless, given the aim of AUAS to close the gender gap, as they did for middle and top management, this unequal distribution still remains to be solved.

**The AUAS' strategic plan and Point of Attention Inclusion**

Both the AUAS strategic plan for 2021-2026 and the Point of Attention Inclusion for 2018 emphasize the importance of enhancing diversity and inclusion, with a particular focus on increasing the representation of women in top positions, including professor roles. This acknowledgment suggests that the AUAS recognizes the presence of gender imbalance within academia. While the plans also address other aspects of diversity, such as religion and ethnicity, for the purpose of this essay, we are focusing specifically on gender diversity. However, it is essential to note that all dimensions of diversity are significant and warrant attention.

**Evaluation of the AUAS' Strategic Plan and Point of Attention Inclusion Plan**

To systematically evaluate both documents, we will apply Hache's model of strategic planning (1999, as cited in Ngcobo, 2013), which consists of a preparatory stage and an implementation and monitoring stage. This framework has been widely employed in educational settings to analyze and assess the development of such documents (Ngcobo, 2013). Hence, this model seems suitable for evaluating the AUAS strategic plan.

**The strategic formulation stage**

This stage refers to formulating a vision, goals, and timeline. Typically this stage includes the investigation of the problem and a series of discussions among diverse stakeholders of the institution regarding the aim, feasibility, and necessity of the strategic plan. In this stage a clear vision needs to be formulated and communicated with different stakeholders. The best way to do this is by collaboration. This entails that all stakeholders (i.e. any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization's objectives) of the organization are involved and up to date from the first to the final stage. This is done to create commitment at each level of the organization.

Following a study about internal and external stakeholders in Higher Education (Savga & Kyrchenko, 2018), several relevant internal and external stakeholders can be identified regarding the context of higher education. In Table 2, we marked how these stakeholders were included in the first stage. This was done based on conversations with the AUAS diversity officer as documentations are absent or not accessible.

Table 2. Stakeholders involvement in the strategic formulation stage

| **Due to the formal participation in the governing body (whose members had the right to vote)** | **Through formal participation in advisory bodies** | **Through formal involvement in self-evaluation** | **Through informal provision of information** | **Through regular participation in surveys** | **They were not involved** | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | | **Internal Stakeholders** |
| | | | X | | | Teaching staff |
| | | X | | | | Research staff |
| | | | | | X | Administrative staff |
| | X | | | | | Program managers |
| X | | | | | | Management at the faculty level |
| | | | | X | | Students |
| | | | | | | **External Stakeholders** |
| | | | | | X | Employers |
| | X | | | | | Local government |
| | | | | | X | OCW |

These results show that during the development of both documents some stakeholders played a larger role than others. For instance, the management at faculty level had voting right, whereas students played a minor role in realizing the AUAS strategic plan 2021 – 2026. Moreover, Table 2 reveals that especially middle and top management had a significant role in designing a problem, vision and goals, and timeline.

This raises the question of what criteria have been used to prioritize stakeholder involvement in drafting both plans. As this question formally remains unanswered, we can only make educated guesses about why the AUAS chose to walk this path. First, it is more efficient to make such plans in small committees, which increases the effectiveness of decision-making. Second, due to the corona situation larger stakeholder meetings were difficult to organize. Thirdly, it appears that involving all stakeholders in the development of such plans is not currently standard procedure for the AUAS executive and supervisory boards.

Another observation is that the goals related to the diversity pillar lack clear timelines in both documents. This raises the question of how progress will be measured and evaluated without them. For example, how will stakeholders know when the AUAS has been successful in appointing female professors? Because of this lack of specificity, researchers have argued that the chance of strategic success increases when organizations are able to set meaningful and explicit targets during the first stage (e.g., Battilana et al., 2019). Unfortunately, this does not seem to be the case at the AUAS.

**The implementation and monitoring stage**

An important factor to successfully implementing a strategic plan and achieving the set goals is achieving organizational commitment and continual monitoring by the management and stakeholders. When evaluating the AUAS strategic plan for 2021-2026 and the 2018 Point of

Attention, we observed that there is limited discussion on this topic. Specifically, it states the following on page 19 of the strategic plan:

> "*Diversity and inclusion are anchored in HR policy. Employees, faculties, staff and services bear responsibility and show ownership for creating an inclusive organization within the centrally formulated vision and AUAS-wide frameworks. They are optimally equipped for this*"

and on page 4 of the inclusion plan:

> "*The goal is an equal distribution of - also - higher positions between women and men."*

One important question is how diversity and inclusion are integrated in HR policy. Who will be involved in doing this? If it is the current staff members, then what makes that they will make different choices? Especially, when it comes to recruiting female professors, unconscious biases can play a role in the creation of job advertisements and job interviews.

Another aspect that stands out is the idea that everyone in the organization is responsible for creating an inclusive organization. How does this idea translate to reality? Or, to put this in the words of Battilana et al. (2019), how are stakeholders socialized in embracing this value? This is perhaps one of the most daunting questions. Some individuals will, but clearly not everyone, feel the same urge. Which formal procedures are there, such as formal training about gender inequality or other social-value-creating activities? Will there also be spaces of negotiation created for informal socialization opportunities where different stakeholders can meet each other and share experiences, beliefs, and values related to increase gender equality and particularly about regarding female professors at the AUAS? These are questions that have yet to be answered.

A third observation we made is that it remains a puzzle who is accountable for which part of achieving the goals (cf. Bhattachary & Polman, 2017). Perhaps this will be further discussed

with stakeholders. However, both documents makes it difficult to hold someone accountable for the process and the outcome. At the same time, in particular internal stakeholders can more easily pass their responsibility on to other stakeholders as they might not feel explicitly addressed by the strategic plan. For instance, the research department could easily argue that hiring female professors is a HR responsibility and to a lesser extent a responsibility of the research department (i.e., We are here to conduct research, not to hire new people). At the same time, the HR department could argue that the research culture is characterized by a 'chilly climate' and therefore women are less well willing to apply for professor positions (Maranto & Griffin, 2011; Essanhaji & van den Brink, 2022). In short, the ball is thrown back and forth without anyone feeling and taking real responsibility for the situation.

Finally, the role of the executive board remains unclear. Strategic leadership is important. Their level of commitment matters (Bhattachary & Polman, 2017). Both documents do not contain explicit text about the effort the board self is willing to make. An organization is also a bundle of people. One could argue that the formulation of the text in such documents lack a human touch, missing the embodiment of someone who brings the envisioned goals into life.

**First steps towards gender equality among professors**

While both the Strategic Plan and the Point of Attention Plan exhibit certain shortcomings, they also hold the potential for successful implementation. The following additional steps can be considered in order to achieve gender equality among professors. First, the diversity pillar should be given even more priority by the executive board (Bhattachary & Polman, 2017). What this could mean, in more concrete terms, is that at least one board member will be actively involved in discussions about the moral and the economic aspects of gender

equality. This can be done through different media platforms, such as *HvanA*[12]. Moreover, executive board members need to personally monitor the situation regarding the issue of gender equality among professors. If possible, board members also should have theoretical knowledge about this topic. If relevant knowledge is missing, it could be helpful to get board members educated on this topic. Within the organization, various experts can provide the board with training opportunities, but also external organizations can be reached out to, such as the National Network of Female Professors. In addition to a better understanding of the issue of gender equality, formal training might send a more powerful message to (internal and external) stakeholders about the importance of gender equality for the AUAS. This in turn can contribute to the level of involvement of especially of different stakeholders from within the organization.

Second, it is important that the executive board establishes clear targets and makes itself accountable regarding the number of female professors at the AUAS (cf. Bhattachary & Polman, 2017). This number can be in line with the number of female students at a faculty or a 50/50 gender parity. In fact, an exact ratio can be discussed internally to create more leverage in achieving the goal, but most importantly measurable outcomes are needed as they build accountability and enable the AUAS to report about the progress that has been made. It also helps to detect possible relapse in time. This is particularly relevant as the struggle for gender equality is not a linear one (Flood et al., 2020). A moment of carelessness might result in a stagnation or even a decrease in female professors at the AUAS.

Third, to be successful we believe it is essential that the executive board performs step 1 (given diversity pillar more priority) and 2 (establish clear targets) in collaboration with internal and external stakeholders. This might foster organizational commitment. As noted by

[12] Vrouwelijke lectoren: hink-stap-sprong op de carrièreladder - HvanA

Bhattachary and Polman (2017), it is mainly the challenge to get the middle layer internalize the aims besides senior management and some individuals in the AUAS. To do so, we suggest that internal and external stakeholders are identified first and their different perspectives and interests are understood. Then the relationships between stakeholders and objectives can be mapped. From that point onward, stakeholder relevance can be prioritized and relevant issues identified. These steps can then be communicated explicitly. Among others, this results in transparency, it helps stakeholders to understand each other at a deeper level, and creates a form of continuous engagement with each other. Eventually, the outcomes can be monitored by an appointed monitor that is trusted by various stakeholders.

As an example of what those steps might look like in practice we developed the following visualization (see Figure 1). In Figure 1, it becomes visible which stakeholders are directly impacted when the AUAS aims at balancing the gender equality among professors. This means that these stakeholders in particular should play a significant role in further specifying the strategic plan 2021 – 2026. For teaching and research faculty the gender equality aims can impact personal career paths, whereas for the diversity officer it means a role of independent monitor.

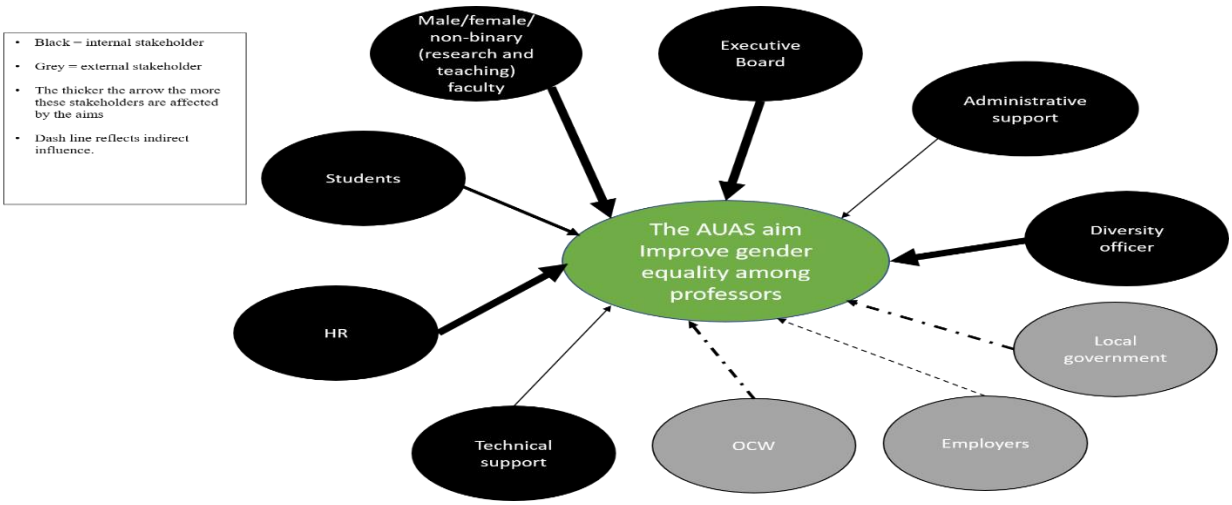

Figure 1. *An AUAS stakeholder map and prioritization*

One way to monitor progress is by tracking the actual number of female professors against the number of male professors within AUAS. Additionally, experiences of female professors need to be recorded to see where other improvements can be made in order to retain them. Third, numbers and experiences need to be shared with the stakeholders so that they also can hold the board accountable. Hence, for the board this means that they need to feel a sense of urgency to meet the goals, such that they can be held accountable for the results. When it comes to HR this can imply that they need to unlearn certain biased language in job descriptions regarding this aim. Local and national government are indirectly affected because they formally have voting right at an institute level regarding, but they might be cut in research funding by the European Union or other funds if gender equality is not achieved.

**Key challenges to achieve gender equality among professors**

There are many challenges when implementing gender equality policy interventions. One frequently mentioned challenge in the literature is related to intersectionality. This refers to the belief that humans consist of multiple interlocking social identities (Riner et al., 2021). Specifically, it means that gender does not operate independently from other social aspects, including race, sexuality, and disability. When it comes to gender equality policies the perspective of intersectionality is often not included in the formulation of strategic aims. Not applying an intersectionality perspective might result in overlooking the needs of marginalized groups and create other situations that need to be addressed namely how do we increase the number of female women of color for example.

Another, challenge concerns the narrative on why the gender imbalance remains. It is imperative for the AUAS to continuously communicate that gender inequality among professors

is not the result of a lack of enough talented women, but rather a problem of injustice and power that historically has developed toward the current situations (Nichols & Stahl, 2019). Consistently conveying this message is crucial because, over time, stakeholders at AUAS may lose sight of the rationale behind these objectives. In the worst-case scenario, this lapse in understanding could lead to a backlash, a risk inherent in pursuing emancipatory goals, such as the endeavor to augment the presence of female professors.

**Limitations of this study and future research**

As with other studies, this study has its limitations. One limitation of our study is the absence of precise data on the appointed hours of professors. This lack of information hampers our ability to fully grasp how gender imbalances might influence the distribution of workload and commitment levels, particularly among female professors. Incorporating such data in future research endeavors could prove invaluable, as it is essential for gaining a comprehensive understanding of the breadth of gender-related challenges within the educational system.

The absence of data on the salary scale of female professors could hinder our interpretation of the results. Salary scale is a critical factor influencing various aspects of female professors' experiences, including their motivation and performance. Thus, including the salary scale specific to women is essential for accurately analyzing the collected data and comprehending the challenges they may face within the educational system.

Finally, the recent inclusion of associate professors at AUAS is a recent development overlooked in our study. Failing to address this group might yield an incomplete understanding of the present scenario and introduce potential biases into our conclusions. Hence, it is imperative to factor in this new lecturer category in future research and explore its influence on the study's outcomes.

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