Building gender and diversity into innovation projects

Research and innovation require diverse knowledge and ideas to address complex problems. For this reason, state-of-the-art research and innovation builds gender and diversity into research projects.

Introduction

EU research programme policy and design is recognised as world leading in how it incorporates gender into research and innovation projects. The transition from Horizon 2020 (H2020) to the new Horizon Europe programme has been marked by greater gender equality initiatives, such as mandatory equality plans for applicants. The business case for including gender and diversity in research is simple: research excellence and innovation requires addressing gender and diversity because sex and gender bias produce poor scientific results and impede innovation. Now more than ever, there is a need for research to find innovative solutions to urgent and complex problems. The multi-actor approach has been adopted at an EU level as a means of bringing together diverse actors and stakeholders, to generate new knowledge and better solutions. Diverse groups are recognised as positively contributing to high-performing teams, while involving those directly impacted means solutions are designed that meet their needs and are more likely to be adopted.

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What do diversity and gender mean?

Diversity encompasses a range of categorisations, such as gender, race, age and marital status. The sociological concept of

intersectionality originates from the fields of social justice and activism. Intersectionality critically examines intersecting categories of difference along with associated power relations, and how these shape experiences, opportunities and outcomes for individuals and social groups. Put simply, social groups – differentiated according to gender and other features, such as cultural values, economic wealth, and educational attainment – have different types of opportunity and are included to greater and lesser extents in how opportunities are pursued. 'Everyday racism' (Naughton, 2016) or forms of bias, often expressed subtly in how social groups behave towards each other, compromise the rigour of innovation processes. Powerful group norms become the 'status quo' and less powerful groups can regard themselves as not relevant to innovation and/or often must work hard to be at the decision-making table. Female farmers frequently have to prove they are 'real farmers', while much human health research is only recently beginning to recognise the importance of gender and sex in designing solutions by, with and for women and men.

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Research excellence
H2020 and previous EU research programmes have provided practical research guidelines to address gender equity, using these areas to assess research project proposals and performance against three gender criteria. These gender criteria are: fostering gender balance in project teams; ensuring gender balance in decision making; and, integrating the gender dimension into research and innovation content.

What have we learned from other research projects?
LIAISON and FAIRshare are two current H2020 projects involving Teagasc that have utilised H2020 gender criteria within their project work. The LIAISON project consortium elected a gender delegate at an early stage from within their project team, to act as a contact point to address any concerns and to ensure gender was addressed within project work. This delegate is a permanent actor at all project meetings and decision-making processes. All matters are assessed through a lens of gender. This gender delegate role has raised awareness of gender at consortium meetings and dealt with practical gender queries in project work, as they arise. Periodically, the gender delegate assesses how the project is performing against the three H2020 gender criteria, with a comprehensive survey administered at the project midpoint as an awareness-raising exercise. The FAIRshare H2020 project built on this initiative in LIAISON, using a survey for self-assessment to see how the FAIRshare project team has been performing. It adapted the survey tools utilised by LIAISON. The survey has demonstrated that the project team has achieved gender balance at project team level, with gender balance also at decision-making level. The survey has been important as a means to raise awareness of gender, particularly in a project at the nexus of digital technology and agriculture.

Conclusion
Gender and diversity are resources available to researchers, and when integrated appropriately within a research project, they will produce research excellence. H2020 gender criteria provide a framework, a means of achieving research excellence and, together with a focus on intersectionality, will ensure inclusion and state-of-the-art research and innovation. Teagasc social scientists have the knowledge and tools to support meaningful incorporation of gender and diversity considerations in research and innovation projects.

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