

# Gender awareness and attitudes toward gender equality among students participating in teacher training

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## Summary

### Introduction

Gender equality is regarded to be one of the core factors of any democratic society and the facilitator of economic growth and societal well-being. Although Estonia is often pointed out as a success story of post-socialist transformation, we are anything but successful when comparing different gender equality indicators of Estonia and other European countries. The largest gender pay gap in the EU, both horizontal and vertical segregation in education and the labour market, and men's considerably lower life expectancy are just a few of the issues that mark the state of gender equality in Estonia.

Education is often considered to be one of the key institutions that should be addressed in order to promote equal opportunities and mainstream gender equality. On the one hand, education and schools as institutions do not operate in a vacuum and are informed by the general tendencies, values and attitudes that are prevalent in the society. At the same time, education is a powerful tool for changing the societal attitudes and empowering the next generation. Therefore, it is important to mainstream gender equality in the curricula, school culture, teaching materials and methods in order to prevent the reproduction of gender stereotypes that influence the well-being and choices of pupils. Successful mainstreaming of gender equality, therefore, cannot be achieved without giving (future) teachers the necessary knowledge, tools and teaching methods to understand and tackle gender stereotypes and mainstream gender equality.

This study seeks answers to the following research questions: 1) How do university students perceive gender equality in the society? 2) What is the level of gender awareness among students based on the example of

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labour market behaviour? 3) What are the expectations and attitudes of the students in terms of treating the issue of gender equality during their specialisation studies?

## Methodology

The study reported in this paper uses a mixed methods design. A mixed methods approach is particularly appropriate for this analysis, given the complexity of gender awareness dynamics and attitudes towards gender equality which are addressed in our research questions. The rationale for mixing both quantitative and qualitative data within one study is grounded in the fact that neither approach is sufficient, by themselves, to capture the dynamics and nuances of a situation (Creswell, 2005; Creswell et al., 2003; Ivankova et al., 2006). We use both quantitative analysis of survey data and qualitative analysis of focus group interview data as complementing methods which allow for a more robust analysis and nuanced context by taking advantage of the strengths of each (Creswell et al., 2003; Ivankova et al., 2006).

The final sampling frame for the survey was 2,748 students from all the higher education institutions in Estonia, excluding doctoral students. The survey data was collected electronically with the aim to explore students' awareness, attitudes and experiences of gender equality. The sample for focus group interviews included teacher training students from one university and consisted of 20 individuals. Four semi-structured interviews were conducted using open-ended questions to explore the participants' learning experience in university and attitudes related to gender equality.

The survey data were analysed by using various statistical methods, such as chi-square test for independence, comparison of group means (t-test, analysis of variance), and correlation analysis for investigating relations among variables. The focus group interview data were analysed using qualitative inductive content analysis. The inductive approach was chosen in order to capture clear expressions as well as hidden messages and interpretations related to the research topic (Laherand, 2008). This process included open coding, creating categories and abstraction (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). The coding process was undertaken using a software package for Qualitative Content Analysis (QCAmap).

The results are presented according to research questions and illustrated by quantitative and qualitative data.

## Main results and discussion

Our findings suggest that students perceive that men have a slightly better position than women in the Estonian society. Only 17% of the teacher training students perceive the situation of men and women as equal. The focus group interviews conducted in this study cast light on potential reasons why students perceive the position of men and women as unequal. The students brought out the fixity of gender roles and self-reinforcing gender stereotypes at home and school. The subjects stressed the desirability of the family model based on gender equality, where both of the parents contribute equally to the functioning of the family.

Our results are in line with previous studies. While most Estonians perceive that men have a better position than women (Vainu et al., 2010), it is interesting that Estonians do not consider gender inequality an important problem. The divide between reality and perception with the problem of gender gap is apparent. The ability to recognise gender stratification is discouraged by gender stereotypes that are evident in the society. The key element here is low awareness of the importance and consequences of gender equality, deeply rooted predispositions and attitudes towards gender equality as well as a low level of competence to recognise and address gender inequality.

The results of our study provide new insights by demonstrating what are the expectations and attitudes of students in terms of treating the issue of gender equality in university studies.

The results indicate that the expectations of the teacher training students concerning the teaching of gender topics in university are high. Interestingly, significant differences exist between students in teacher education and other subjects. Teacher training students concluded that the awareness of gender issues is more likely necessary for their profession and these topics should be integrated into course assignments and Bachelor or Master theses.

Despite the relatively high expectations, the students reported just a couple of courses in which these issues are discussed. Thus, it is not surprising that students' and teacher trainees' level of awareness on gender equality and labour market behaviour is relatively shallow. While most of the students are aware that there is a Gender Equality Act, a quarter of them are unaware of such a law. This result confirms that gender equality has not been an important topic in general education or teacher training. At the same time, the teacher holds one of the key positions to break the norm and gender stereotypes (Fine-Davis & Faas, 2014). If current teacher

trainee students and future teachers have random awareness of the topic, then the change towards a generation with a deeper knowledge on gender equality and less stereotypical attitudes is unlikely to appear.

Another interesting finding is that more than a quarter of students are not able to provide evaluations about the degree of awareness of the gender issues of their professors. This indicates that one possibility of better integrating the gender equality topics might be to encourage activities that *challenge teacher educators in their pedagogical work to move towards more gender equality in teacher education* (Kreitz-Sandberg, 2013).

The gender topic still holds a marginal position in Estonian teacher education (Sugu ja soolisuus ..., 2015). If teachers are to play a positive educational role in addressing gender issues influencing social justice and inclusiveness, teacher education institutions will need to ensure that their graduates are well equipped with the attitudes, motivation and skills to enact this role (Cushman, 2012). There are a variety of interlinked difficulties in integrating a gender perspective into teachers education, for example misconceptions around gender, the myth of having already achieved gender equality, a packed curriculum and course planning (Kreitz-Sandberg, 2013; Lahelma, 2014).

Students in our study expressed high demands for attractiveness of course content as well as competent teaching staff in the courses that address the topic of gender equality. Teaching methods that treat the student as an active participant such as group work, discussions, case study analysis, were considered appropriate and engaging methods. Research (Hedlin & Åberg, 2012; hooks, 2010) reveals that the lecture method is not suitable for teaching topics related to gender and equality, but effective study outcomes are achieved by dialogue with students, while enabling them sufficient time for reflection and analysis of various ideas. Teaching staff in university teacher training programmes can emphasise the importance of gender equality by challenging their values and helping them to recognise their stereotypes through critical pedagogy, social and juridical dimensions (hooks, 2010). For a successful study process, it is important to consider both students' and university teachers' perspective on gender equality and inclusion of gender education in the teacher training curriculum. Hence, we have identified a clear need for exploring university teachers' reflections on gender policies, their perceived role and stereotypes related to gender equality.

*Keywords:* gender equality, gender mainstreaming in teacher education, attitudes, gender awareness, teacher training, teaching in university