



**GENOVATE**

Transforming Organisational Culture for  
Gender Equality in Research and Innovation

**Developing Learning Circles:  
'Sharing and Learning'  
from the GENOVATE Project**

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# GENOVATE

Transforming Organisational Culture for  
Gender Equality in Research and Innovation

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GENOVATE<sup>1</sup> is a European Commission FP7-funded action research project, which operates across seven<sup>2</sup> European partner institutions with different institutional and national contexts for gender equality. GENOVATE sought to promote gender equality in research and innovation through the implementation in each partner institution of a context-specific Gender Equality Action Plans (GEAP).

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<sup>1</sup> See also <http://www.genovate.eu/>

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Throughout this document reference is made to the binary genders of men and women whilst acknowledging other forms of gender identities and expressions.

## Preface

Research institutions, universities and organisations at large have a growing interest for gender equality and diversity to be integrated into all stages of research and innovation including strategic planning, promotion, recruitment, performance reporting and transformation. Creating and finding open spaces where these processes can be approached from different perspectives, in which multiple stakeholders can express and share their interests and experiences, and where critical conversations, discussions and knowledge sharing can take place is fundamental for advancing collaborative projects and actions aimed at profound organisational change. Learning Circles, therefore, are useful resources that facilitate organisational safe spaces where multiple stakeholders from different backgrounds, sectors, disciplines, and nationalities reflect, in a relaxed and collaborative atmosphere, about gender equality and diversity as collective projects; and their impact and relevance for/in research and innovation fields. The advantages of Learning Circles are manifold: they represent intersectional, interdisciplinary and even transnational arenas and opportunities for experience sharing, and knowledge generation/transfer.

As a result, disciplinary and sector boundaries are bridged, a diverse and rich wealth of personal and professional capabilities and realities are brought together, and new alliances are forged. They are also opportunities for developing new long lasting networks within and across institutions that can unravel potential synergies and strategic spaces for transformative organising/actions/politics that are frequently overlooked in the daily functioning of organisational realms. The emergence of new gender equality organisational agendas, a collaborative and multi-focal approach to problem-solving and policy making, as well as best practice sharing and promotion are important processes and outcomes for sustainable gender organisational change.

This resource, therefore, offers a detailed evidence-based account of the GENOVATE consortium experience with Learning Circles, which were a recurrent and productive practice throughout the duration of the GENOVATE project, and which promoted active, fresh, engaging, and democratic participation in gender equality as a collective organisational project, with solid foundations in the diverse strengths of their multiple participants. Faithful to the spirit of GENOVATE and the very learning circles dynamics, this resource therefore offers examples and good practice for mutual learning on gender equality integration in research and innovation across and beyond organisational boundaries. We hope the pages below offer inspiration and support throughout similar exciting journeys.

We are grateful to GENOVATE international advisory board members, strategic collaborators, colleagues and our institutional leaders and managers for their support and contributions to the project.

*The GENOVATE Coordinator  
On behalf of the GENOVATE Consortium*

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## Introduction

This resource draws learning from GENOVATE, an action research project used as case study, to provide useful information, on developing National Learning Circles. In particular, it describes how the GENOVATE project partners utilised Learning Circles for knowledge exchange within Higher Education [HE], Research and other institutions nationally and internationally.

This resource is for institutions that would like to learn more about setting up new National Learning Circles, or would like some tips on how to improve their National Learning Circles within a knowledge exchange context.

## What are Learning Circles?

Learning circles are a task-based, participative and collaborative method often used in community learning with clear links to social change, active processes of learning, and organisational transformation. They are a common-sense approach for both conducting meetings and facilitating less formal gatherings in a way that encourages high involvement of all stakeholders in planning and implementing culture change, engenders mutual respect among participants, builds a sense of community and facilitates both personal and organizational transformation” (Norton 2003: 285).

Learning circles can be defined as learning communities consisting of a number of team learners/members that work together to gain greater insight into a range of topics organised around themes. These topics/themes are negotiated and defined by the different participants, who collectively and collaboratively engage in a process of learning and experience sharing through open dialogue.

## Background to Case Study - GENOVATE

GENOVATE is an action-research project which aims to ensure equal opportunities for women and men by encouraging a more gender-competent management in research, innovation and scientific decision-making bodies, with a particular focus on universities. The project is based on the implementation of Gender Equality Action Plans (GEAPs) in six European universities and brings together a consortium with diverse experience in gender mainstreaming approaches.

All consortium partners come from different disciplinary backgrounds and have different national context. However, each of the institutions shares common challenges for gender equality in research and innovation, and all have identified three common areas for intervention:

- Recruitment, progression and research support
- Working environment, work-life balance and institutional culture
- Gender and diversity dimensions of research excellence and innovation.

For GENOVATE, National Learning Circles (NLCs) represent participative and collaborative opportunities where GENOVATE partners and stakeholders share experiences, knowledge and learning on the effective transformation of gender organisational cultures in higher education. Taking the form of ‘Share and Learn’, the experiential learning approach involved participants in the formulation of action steps and plans for participants to take back to their own communities or organisations.

## GENOVATE National Learning Circles

Each of the GENOVATE six core partners organised and delivered National Learning Circle[s], providing a forum to engage in dialogue with relevant stakeholders in their own countries. The learning circles offered a safe and respectful context for sharing ideas, views, and experiences.

- University of Bradford [UNIBRAD]'s organisation of NLCs (November 2015 and June 2016) were attended by a diverse group of stakeholders, which included journal editors, researchers, staff from different UK universities, professional societies and research councils (i.e. senior staff, managers, researchers, lecturers etc.), diversity experts, and human resources staff from other sectors including Health and Social Care. UNIBRAD's NLC addressed dissemination and sustainability issues, which considerably influenced the participants' interests and attendance.
- University College Cork (UCC), on the contrary, shared their NLC (December 2015) with Irish governmental bodies, policy makers, and (non) academic stakeholders (i.e. Athena SWAN, Irish Federation of University Teachers) who would be potentially interested in how a broader institutional and governmental gender equality strategy could be forged, supported and sustained in the long run.
- Lulea Technology University (LTU)'s organisation of two NLCs in June 2015 and 2016 respectively, which brought together a group of attendees from different Swedish universities, the private sector, a municipality and a funding agency to discuss and share knowledge and experiences on institutional gender mainstreaming, gender action plans, and job recruitment.
- With a more local institutional focus, the Università degli Studi di Napoli "Federico II" (UNINA)'s organisation of three NLCs (February and March 2016) which were mostly attended by members of the Italian academic community, including the Italian National Evaluation Agency (ANVUR), and gender budgeting consultants. UNINA's NLCs focused on the structural changes carried out at UNINA under the auspices of GENOVATE; and future outreach work to implement these measures nationally and ensure sustainability.
- In a similar fashion to UNINA and UNIBRAD, Trnava University (TU)'s organisation of three NLCs (October 2013, February 2015, and June 2016) which aimed at liaising cross-regionally with other Slovak universities, and with governmental bodies (i.e. Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family) whose support would advance the transformation of organisational gender politics and cultures.
- Finally, Ankara University (2013, 2014, and 2015)'s work by and large with local and internal stakeholders in decision-making positions regarding organisational structural changes; and with legitimating capacity in relation to context-specific gender policies. They also liaised strategically with key national stakeholders in the advancement of gender equality in Turkey such as the Association of Turkish University Women (ATUW)<sup>3</sup>; Cukurova University Women Studies Centre (CU WST); FESTA and EGERA Turkish partners (Istanbul Technical University and Middle East Technical University respectively); and the Milliyet newspaper, which works as AU GENOVATE TEAM national media representative; and disseminates GENOVATE goals and message to a broad audience.

### **GENOVATE used Learning Circles to:**

- Bring together key stakeholders to develop a vision for gender equality in research and innovation within research institutions in GENOVATE countries;
- Develop a greater understanding of work already being undertaken in this area and provide the opportunity to learn from each other; and
- Explore areas of potential joint working across the country and beyond, linked to the development of a sustainability strategy.

## **Why Learning Circles?**

Learning circles are non-hierarchical arenas which build on strong democratic principles such as effective service-learning community partnerships, reciprocity, equal participation, and collective wisdom (Riel 2004, Riel and Polin 2004). As a result, *they encourage new synergies and connections among community members, state and non-state actors, which would then influence community action and advance organisational transformation.*

Learning circles rely on collaborative shared learning, partners are actively involved in decision-making processes, knowledge dissemination and production; and develop a collective sense of “ownership” about the issues addressed, which translates into long-term shared responsibility, commitment and strong partnerships. Therefore, *they are powerful tools for enacting transformative change across different sectors of society and for cascading knowledge throughout different social groups.* They are instrumental in disseminating context-specific and institutional issues that emerge in both partners and stakeholders’ country and organisational contexts.

### **GENOVATE National Learning Circles provided opportunities to:**

- Discuss GENOVATE’s issues and concerns, partners’ progress, challenges encountered, good practice on gender equality policy-making, project achievements and end-project goals;
- Offer a collaborative “sharing and learning” experience in which consortium partners’ present and examine examples of local and focal institutional action, identifying and exploring powerful synergies and transversal collaborations in a top-down and a bottom-up fashion, not only within their own organisations but also with other relevant institutional bodies and actors, key in decision making process in HE and gender equality issues;
- Congregate an interdisciplinary and transversal group of stakeholders that included scholars, gender equality practitioners, policy-makers, consultants, HE senior management, staff members and intra-consortium partners.

The diversity of GENOVATE NLC attendees’ profiles and backgrounds corresponds to each partner’s NLC focus, priorities and agendas, and reflects institutional trajectories in HE gender mainstreaming before and during GENOVATE. This diverse character influenced the range of NLC themes, which will be the focus of the next section.

# The Process of Developing National Learning Circles

Learning from GENOVATE

- Establishing overarching NLC theme(s)
- Developing and sustaining a positive culture
- Establishing the NLC stakeholders' governance
- Implementation Monitoring and Evaluation

## Establishing overarching NLC theme(s)

GENOVATE NLCs offered open, structured spaces to reflect on achievements and ongoing challenges - individual (institutional) and collective. They also strengthened technical knowledge expertise and capacities through learning, with the objective of deepening actions and transforming existing commitments and agreed actions into results. Within this framework, each partner institution focused on specific areas of interest that reflected and addressed their particular needs, in light of their contextual and local realities, and their institutional, legislative and social frameworks more broadly. Bearing this in mind, GENOVATE NLCs overarching themes include:

- Good institutional practice in promoting gender equality
- Transformation of institutionalised gender biases
- Support for equal access to opportunities and career progression for women
- Sustainability of gender equality actions/initiatives and ethos
- Development of a gender sensitive framework of excellence in research and innovation

Each partner institution therefore engaged with these issues from different angles as described below:

*UNIBRAD NLCs* (2015, 2016) explored localised, context-specific, and national implementation of GENOVATE in HE, together with targeted organisational interventions to transform gender cultures and organisations effectively. The first NLC focused on GENOVATE learnings and tools, whilst the second one was part of the UNIBRAD Conference "Making Diversity Interventions Count" and provided an avenue for international learning involving partners from UCC and AU. UNIBRAD NLCs discussed GENOVATE implementation by looking at specific examples of contextualised approach to implementing gender equality action plans with case studies from AU, UNIBRAD and Reading Universities; together with the applicability of GENOVATE tools to academic and non-academic contexts.

Other important NLC themes were: a) the need and opportunities to identify spaces with potential for organisational change; b) review, monitoring, and updating of existing gender equality policies (i.e. GEAPs, career progression for women academics), and c) collaborations with specific institutional departments (e.g. Human Resources, Research and Knowledge Transfer Support Unit) and organisations from other sectors such as the National Health Service, Trades Unions, Research Institutes and Professional Societies.

With the objective of 'Promoting Gender Equality in Higher Education in Ireland', UCC's NLC covered and reflected on the achievements and challenges realised and encountered in such a process so far. Framed by the momentum towards promoting gender equality in higher education in Ireland, the invited participants identified multiple achievements that varied in nature, but with significant commonalities in their realisation at institutional level. These included:

- Evidenced based research including data collection and analysis
- The development of gender equality actions plans
- Support from senior management and broad based engagement of all



In addition, UCC also pointed out the importance of national legal frameworks that support and uphold gender equality in higher education (i.e. the positive obligation to integrate gender equality into strategic planning processes under s.42 of Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Act 2014, the decision of the Higher Education Authority to establish a review; and the extension of the Athena SWAN to Ireland).

**UCC** participants also identified commonalities in the challenges experienced in promoting gender equality at institutional level, such as lack of senior management involvement; slow pace of cultural change; and resistance to gender equality.

**LTU** organised two National Learning Circles (June 2015 and 2016) which focused on a) developing and promoting gender-aware and sustainable recruitment processes and practices; and b) integrating a gender and diversity perspective into innovation systems. In so doing, the NLCs opened an opportunity to discuss and examine LTU Code of Practice, which is a set of recommendations to embed gender equality and diversity into research and innovation. How to implement this code factually, effectively and efficiently were main aspects of the debate, which also covered other important questions such as recruitment and commercialisation strategies, LTU GEAP implementation, actors' involvement in the LTU Code development and implementation, and LTU Code's contribution to sustainable structural and cultural change.

**UNINA, TU and AU** focused their National Learning Circles on the development and evaluation of their gender mainstreaming policy. In the case of UNINA, NLCs focused on gender mainstreaming in STEM fields; gender budgeting; UNINA's code of practice for a gender dimension in research evaluation (as it was the case with LTU); UNINA's mentoring programme; and GEAP sustainability and dissemination strategies.

TU's NLCs delved into GEAP implementation; recruitment, progression and promotion strategies; and their gender climate assessment. Attendees also celebrated TU's presentation of GENOVATE tools (i.e. GENOVATE Toolkit), which were welcomed as useful and efficient implementation instruments.

In a similar fashion, AU's NLCs also focused on organisational gender mainstreaming issues (i.e. GEAP, curricula development), and reflected on their Gender Equality Climate and Culture Report, and AU's Equality Impact Assessment. The NLCs offered a great opportunity for knowledge exchange and for sharing AU's experiences of GEAP implementation through GENOVATE.

In addition, UNINA, TU, and AU used their NLCs as opportunities to assess and strengthen their recruitment, promotion and retention policies to support women in their professional development in HE through mentoring programmes (UNINA); devising career development plans (TU), and advancing particular promotion policies (AU). Ensuring and reinforcing internal and external stakeholder collaboration with respect to their gender equality agenda was also a shared goal of partners' NLCs.

The foundation of specific monitoring institutional bodies such as a gender observatory (UNINA), and the Equality Coordination Unit (AU), together with the feasibility of promoting a national HE gender policy were also powerful themes among partners.

## Developing and sustaining a positive culture

- Ensure visibility of culture - climate change efforts, and achievements in transforming gender organisational politics and practices, for society to support sustainability of the implementations in the future.
- Embed transformative measures and GENOVATE actions in institutional structures to ensure sustainability.
- Continue to offer safe spaces and support to the HE institutional communities through GENOVATE Cafés and Gender equality Change Academy Teams to ensure bottom-up action.
- Encourage a wide range of women in academic and professional roles to think of themselves as leaders, to develop leadership skills, and to help institutions to maximize the potential of these women.

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## Establishing Stakeholder Governance

- Involvement, active participation, and commitment of senior management and institutional bodies/ representative to gender equality sustainability.
- Cultivation and application of a bottom-up, top-down blended approach to organisational gender equality policy development and implementation.
- Work closely with HR and senior management teams to influence recruitment and selection procedures, ensuring the commitment and performance of top management.

## Implementation, Monitoring and Evaluation

- Constant monitoring, implementation, evaluation and reformulation (whenever necessary) of Gender Equality Action Plans, as they are strategic tools for long-term change realised through medium-term actions.
- Working with faculties/departments to implement specific gender equality action plans so that they can take ownership of the plans within their faculty/department.
- Alignment and effective mainstreaming of gender equality action plans with other institutional policies and programmes.
- Developing principles for ensuring strength based interpretation and implementation of actions in collaboration with institutional processes, such as Athena SWAN.
- Long term action planning embedded within other gender initiatives e.g. Athena SWAN, gender-specific leadership programme, gender observatory.
- Creation of pertinent monitoring bodies and officers for gender equality in HE institutions (e.g. appointment of a university wide equality officer (UCC); the Equality Coordination Unit (AU); the creation of a Gender Observatory (UNINA) that promotes and supports Women's Studies in STEM fields; gendered critical analyses of research evaluation; on-going gender budgeting; women's academic careers; on-going monitoring of equal opportunities practices; and gender-sensitive fundraising).
- Develop deliberative space and networks, most particularly for Team and Institutional GENOVATE Management Board members, to ensure continued action for gender equality: specifically implementation of GENOVATE's proposed gender equality actions.
- Regular documentation, sharing and reporting of gender equality and/or discrimination practices in the academic context.
- Set targets to review practice and recruitment guidelines to ensure they are up to date and still relevant to the context in the future.
- Seek to ensure GENOVATE actions are formally documented and embedded in written policy.

## Communication, Knowledge Transfer and Dissemination

- Collaboration with other institutional bodies to share good practice/ benchmark gender equality actions plans, disseminate gender equality tools, refine tools to meet institutional context to suit various audiences.
- Continuing NLCs in conjunction with other universities and institutions, to further disseminate GENOVATE findings and test the usability of GENOVATE resources.
- Develop a strong communication strategy, optimising social media and new media environments to catch potential stakeholders' attention, both locally and internationally; and create a solid culture of gender awareness in society more broadly.
- Continue development of knowledge exchange strategies, internally and externally, to deepen technical knowledge, expertise, ideas and capacities for strategic effect.
- Targeted contributions to professional forums so that the impact of GEAPs and the GENOVATE Gender Equality Change Academy Framework can have the highest impact in gender studies and equality research.
- Apply for research funding on gender equality, if possible, to deepen research and existing actions.
- Ensure longevity of the GENOVATE Café digital approach through its adoption by other institutional projects.

## Conclusion - Lessons learned and Actions

This document is based on a synthesis of the wealth of themes, discussions, and proposed actions that the GENOVATE consortium partners tackled in different NLCs, as well as the conclusions reached regarding the sustainability of the project aims and goals beyond its own momentum.

Importantly, NLCs offer a safe and collaborative space for knowledge-sharing and collective learning from partner's experiences drawn from the translation of GENOVATE roadmaps and ethos into factual changes in partners' respective institutions. Bearing this in mind, NLCs participants roughly arrived at the same conclusions and shared similar lessons.

To begin with, NLCs addressed the increasing interest among universities, companies and other organisations to integrate a gender/diversity perspective in "recruitment and promotion", "research and innovation". This growing concern must be addressed by framing gender equality and policy action as

- a matter of social justice;
- as an inclusive project for women and men alike, in which "men" are importantly, part of the solution; and
- as fundamentally rooted in and responding to broader domestic /national/ international policy mandates, and existing human rights legislation.

This understanding and approach will reinforce the imperative for gender equality and promote ideological, structural and cultural change. Consequently, engagement with the 'gender question' has to be continuous, actively committed to by senior management and actively supported by formal and informal champions at all institutional levels.

In this respect, another important conclusion focused on the visible and relentless commitment and support of senior leadership /management for gender equality, and their legitimating role in advancing gender equality in HE organisations and institutions. Their regular involvement at all levels, and especially in progress reviews, is essential to ensure sustainability and effective implementation of contextual structural changes. However, as important as "having senior management on board" is involving the broader university community so that organisational change can be enacted at all institutional levels, and it is perceived as a collaborative and participative process. Therefore,

incorporating a blended top-down, bottom-up is fundamental to enact profound social change, and gender equality will be perceived as a collective project that matters for all.

In terms of implementation and monitoring, **gender equality must be seen as progressively relevant and therefore integrated into reporting of institutional performance and strategic planning processes.** Developing a solid and efficient monitoring strategy is fundamental for identifying potential and actual lack of progress, and openings for diversity interventions such as gender targets, positive action. In this respect, the production and use of gender disaggregated data is fundamental for reviewing and updating existing gender equality policy frameworks, particularly gender equality action plans. This set of data provides effective measurements for action, and evidence base to mandate change. Likewise, carrying out consistent monitoring and evaluation processes will facilitate the realisation of mid and long-term goals/actions, and factual transformation towards more gender equal organisational cultures.

Finally, **the NLCs concluded that developing a strong communication, knowledge transfer and dissemination strategy is key for sharing good practice, establishing a cross-sector policy network, and enacting social change more broadly.** In so doing, optimising knowledge exchange opportunities; disseminating and publicising gender equality actions and plans; sharing achievements, key learnings and challenges; producing and circulating research outputs via written material, infographics, targeted seminars, and presentations are also some of the elements that need to be addressed to ensure sustainability, knowledge transfer, and the incorporation of the GENOVATE Model for Transforming Research and Innovation, along with other GENOVATE resources at other levels of both public, private and third sectors.

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## Notes

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