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DEAN'S DIGEST

Gender balance and equality in education

“Until we get equality in education, we won't have an equal society.”

Sonia Sotomayor

Sonia Sotomayor grew up in Bronx with her Puerto Rican parents during hard conditions of alcoholism, illness, and poverty. Despite all odds, she was appointed associate justice of Supreme Court of the U.S and has become a role model for young Americans. She relates her success to education and, hence, the quote points to the important role that education is playing in creating gender balance and equality, which ensures that every individual has an equal opportunity to make the most of their lives and talents.

This is not the U.S., so let's zoom in on Denmark: According to the World Economic Forum [Global Gender Gap Report 2020](#), Denmark ranks lower than the other Nordic countries and we seem to fall behind, despite the fact that we educate more women and focus on creating equality. So, what is ITU's role here? ITU is highly committed to the gender balance agenda, which is also reflected in the forthcoming strategy. People at ITU work hard to attract more women in IT, increase the number of female students at our programs, and offers attractive career paths for faculty. ITU is also aware of avoiding gender bias in external communications to ensure that qualified female teachers are hired. These action examples reflect the work to erase institutional bias, because not only AI tools are biased; organizations, including the universities, also often work as unintended “inequality engines”. Gender balance, equality, and diversity affect the learning environment and our wellbeing positively by reducing feelings of alienation, isolation, emotional stress, and disengagement. It is therefore pertinent to surface the, often deep-seated, cultural biases that can lead to sexism and inequality which the student environment survey revealed issues of at ITU.

A transparent approach towards equality

Cultivating relationships of trust is important for speaking openly about sensitive issues. We are often anxious raising and discussing sensitive issues publicly but avoiding the conversation can sustain a biased environment. Let me bring an example from my former workplace, DTU, where I was member of the steering committee for gender equality and diversity: despite the systematic work to

create gender balance and equality, students hang up posters with examples of sexual harassment and gender biased behavior a few of years back. Within an hour, the management removed them¹. The learning point is? Good intentions and rational prescriptions are rarely sufficient to change a culture of inequality, but it is a **first step**. Though ITU successfully created a compelling narrative of more women in IT, hires female faculty, applies reinforcing mechanisms by changing incentive structures, systems, and processes, and encourage capability-building, we *still* need to consider what it takes to deal with changing a biased culture. It requires continuous “reprogramming human thought and behavior” through reflection of our mental models and, hence, “deep learning” at the individual and cultural levels.

Second step can be to lead with data and diagnose accurately, by measuring what matters. Stats combined with stories can pave the way and spark awareness of the bumpy road to equality through education. If we put on the equality spectacles and “talk the walk” of our students: what do they observe, hear, and experience? What norms, values, expectations, and artefacts regarding equality do the ITU power structures and daily practices reflect? We may ponder what are the consequences of our students most often face male external examiners throughout their study? What does it signal to them that we no longer have a Diversity officer? Questions like these can encourage us to define what equality aspects to handle at different levels.

A Third step could be to deconstruct prejudices and inequality-enforcing individual and cultural biases and reconstruct more objectively by assessing if we practice what we preach and consistently and thoroughly. This would contribute positively to ITU’s strategy for a thriving learning environment as being inclusive means that the ITU culture encourages *diverse, respectful, and tolerant* behavior towards other fellow beings. Equality is not just important for Denmark’s reputation; it is also vital to the students’ performance now and in their future careers. This obligates us to define the measures and incentives that can strengthen our social, cultural, empathetic, and communicative skills that can lead to gender balance and equality and work together to erase institutional bias at ITU. We must therefore search for—and deploy—human and digital deep-digging tools to build an effective ethical compass for navigating in sensitive and subconscious waters.

Fourth step is thus to build in accountability and ongoing measurement of gender balance and equality at ITU. Surveys should be supplemented with daily awareness and willingness to “talk the walk” and to listen to great as well as sad stories of life at ITU. A way to move ahead is to scrutinize our individual role in perpetuating bias in the daily management or teaching and define our (new) role in breaking down institutional bias, cultivate allies and create a movement. I therefore encourage us all to openly discuss these issues.

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Inspirational reading: Tiffany Jana & Ashley Dias Mejias (2018). *Erasing institutional Bias – how to create systemic change for organizational inclusion*. BK Publishers. (I have a paper version – if you want to borrow it, let me know ☺).

¹ <https://www.berlingske.dk/samfund/dtu-ledelse-fjerner-anonyme-metoo-plakater-jeg-vaagner-paa-kampsax-ved-at-han-har>