

Enhancing Visibility and Gender Equality in Academic Excellence: The EXENKO Project

The research and development project EXENKO (11/2022-12/2024) intertwined research and practice on the relationship between academic excellence, visibility and gender. The concept of excellence, due to the structural transformation of science over the past three decades (von Schomberg, 2023), increasingly serves as a benchmark for research performance and innovation capabilities, as well as a criterion for the allocation of research funds. This ambiguity of the concept of excellence inevitably leaves interpretive space in the evaluation of academic achievements, which can reinforce gender-specific inequalities, as not every significant and outstanding achievement is recognised as such: The visibility of 'excellent' achievements by men is still significantly higher than that of their female colleagues. Furthermore, the question arises as to what 'excellent' actually means and what inclusion and exclusion criteria and mechanisms the term produces, particularly with regard to gender. Therefore, the practices of selecting the best and identifying performance are potentially subject to bias, which needs to be reconstructed and deconstructed, especially when it comes to making female scientists and their work visible.

The EXENKO project therefore collaborated with four universities - early-career researchers with doctorates (postdocs and junior professors), senior-level female academics with lifetime professorships and actors in university communication, a group that has so far received little attention in the practice of gender equality - to question their understanding of excellence, performance and innovation. In addition, the extent to which this shapes their visibility and visualisation activities was explored. The focus was on the following questions: Who is recognised as having 'excellent' research skills and how are scientific achievements brought into the academic and public debate and negotiated? The visualisation and public perception of excellent achievements by women are a crucial requirement for the retention of women in academia - according to the thesis of Klammer et al. (2020), which builds on earlier research. Many women have already been lost in the "leaky pipeline" (Forest & Bohne 2016, p. 43; European Commission, 2019) before they attain a lifetime professorship, and with them their potential and ability to innovate. The question arising from this is: What must women in science, research and innovation do early on in their careers to become visible as scientists and innovators? The group of female professors was also important here, as they have already reached top positions at universities and possess experience and knowledge of academic culture in terms of the levers and pitfalls in academic careers. We regard this group of actors as potential 'empowerment agents' for postdocs and assistant professors.

Universities have become "important communicators" in the public sphere, as they actively engage in societal discourse, particularly on scientific topics, thereby influencing not only the perception of scientific results but also of people working in science (Fähnrich et al., 2019, p. 2). Actors in university communication have played a subordinate role in the promotion of gender equality and gender research to date, even though they are important communicators of scientific achievements to the general public. Their tasks at universities are diverse and strategically significant for university management. They play a major role in deciding what is communicated about their university both internally and externally to society, which scientists are recommended as experts for press inquiries, how the university's website is designed, and much more. Therefore, their understanding of performance, innovation and excellence, in relation to gender and prevailing gender relations, is also significant. However, as our research in the nationwide GESIS database StaRQ in the lead-up to the

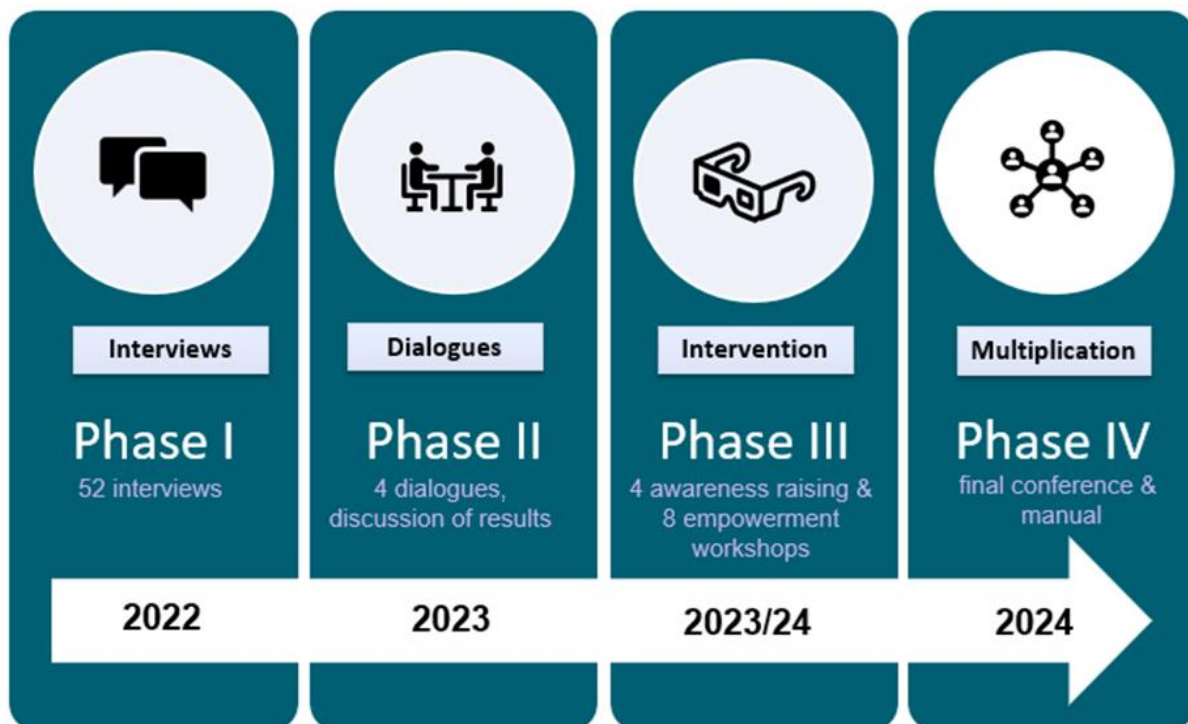
project showed, the role of university communicators has not been systematically researched in this context in German-speaking countries. Actors in university communication, as mediators of science, should therefore be enabled to reflect on their own concept of performance and excellence with regard to the visibility of female scientists and to develop approaches with them on how they can increase their visibility and recognition as researchers and experts in their field.

Two central fields of action were identified:

1. **Personnel development at the level of young female academics:** Early in their careers, they should engage with their own understanding of excellence and performance and be encouraged to acknowledge and confidently communicate their potential.
2. **Organisational development at the level of university public relations and communications:** While scientists themselves communicate their research within the respective scientific communities (e.g. in journals or at conferences), university communicators are central to the transfer of scientific findings to the public. Through this group, scientific research processes and results are communicated to the general public, making a decisive contribution to increase female scientists' visibility in society.

The research and implementation project consisted of five modules (M1–M5) which were divided into various work units. In order to explore potential institution-specific differences between different (types of) universities, the research module (M1) and the later implementation modules (M2–3) as 'pilots' were carried out at four universities in North Rhine-Westphalia. The sample included two early founded universities that are or were awarded the title of University of Excellence (cf. RWTH Aachen University, University of Cologne), a university founded in the 2000s as the university of the project team (University of Duisburg-Essen), and a university of applied sciences, also founded in the 2000s, with a strong focus on STEM subjects (Ruhr West University of Applied Sciences), where women are still particularly underrepresented. This selection of different universities for the EXENKO research and development project was closely linked to the objective and expectation that its findings and recommendations could be transferred to a large number of other universities in Germany.

The different research modules as seen in the figure below are summarised as follows:



Module 1 of the EXENKO project focused on a scientific interview survey. Therefore, the current state of research and the theoretical foundations of ‘excellence’ in science was analysed first. It was elaborated how the concept of ‘excellence’ remains ambiguous and controversial in the scientific debate, which leads to inequalities in the perception and recognition of scientific achievements, especially for women. Based on this, 52 semi-structured interviews were conducted with postdocs of two different scientific fields and public relations staff, complemented by female professors and equal opportunities representatives. The analysis carved out that inclusion and exclusion mechanisms based on gender negatively affect the visibility of female researchers, requiring critical reflection on the concept of ‘excellence’.

Module 2 focused on enabling the dialogue between scientists at an early stage of career (postdocs, assistant professors), representatives of university communication and equal opportunities representatives. Therefore, a workshop was organized at each participating university (four in total). This fruitful exchange of perspectives aimed at both, a joint and constructive assessment of the concept of ‘excellence’, taking into account the role of gender and the creation of new scope for action. The aim was, on the one hand, for female postdocs and assistant professors to gain useful insights in university communication by the corresponding representatives, and on how to communicate their academic achievements and potential within their scientific community and in the public press. On the other hand, the representatives of university communication got the chance to know innovative young talents whose potential can be better utilized for future university communication.

Module 3 focused on concrete measures of intervention to raise awareness for the visibility of women in science. Two different concepts for awareness raising trainings were developed for the group of female postdocs and assistant professors as well as representatives of university communications. Female scientists worked on acknowledging, precisely defining and developing strategies to

confidently communicate their own research in order to enhance their visibility. The workshops for the university communications staff primarily dealt with questioning their own biases and position with regard to unconscious gender stereotypes in order to reflect on and potentially change behavioural patterns and enlarge their field of action accordingly. A key result the workshops exposed was that to this point the communication between female scientists and representatives of university communication is still poorly developed. There is not only great potential to extend knowledge about the respective other group, but also roles still have to be defined.

Module 4 focused on the multiplication and dissemination of the findings from the research, dialogue and intervention phases. A final workshop was held in August 2024, where the results were presented to more than 70 participants, including scholars, science communicators and gender equality experts, and a manual as a practical guide developed as part of the EXENKO project was introduced to stakeholders in higher education. The manual aims at providing strategies to increase the visibility of female researchers, such as science pitches and visibility consultations, and promotes a collaborative approach to foster a cultural shift toward cooperation over competition in academic environments. The manual (in German language) can be accessed and downloaded here: [Handreichung 2024 | EXENKO - Exzellenz entdecken und kommunizieren](#)



Module 5 focused on organization, public relations and knowledge transfer. An external service provider developed a logo, corporate design for flyers, and a website (<https://www.exzellenz-entdecken.de/>), which was later translated into English for an international audience. The website (www.exzellenz-entdecken.de – in German language) also includes links to publications, lectures and a documentation of the multiplication event. In addition, a [LinkedIn](#) profile was created.

The results of the EXENKO project show that the visibility of women in science is closely linked to the understanding of 'excellence', and that visibility plays a crucial role when it comes to successful careers in science and academia. It has become evident that the existing selection criteria for excellence often reinforce gender-specific inequalities. In addition, a targeted approach and an increased level of awareness of university communicators is necessary to promote the perception and recognition of female researchers, both in the respective scientific community and the general public. The project has thus made an important contribution to the discussion on gender equality in science and academia, and developed recommendations to make female researchers and their scientific achievements more visible.