



Gender Responsive Pedagogy in Higher Education: a framework

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Gender Responsive Pedagogy in Higher Education: A framework

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1 Introduction

Women's participation in higher education is a major concern in many regions of the world. Across the globe, 111 women for every 100 young men enrol in higher education. However, in Africa higher education institutions tend to be overwhelmingly male-dominated¹ with only 72 women for every 100 men enrolling.² There is also a gendered breakdown along subject lines. Across the globe, nursing, midwifery, speech, language and hearing, education, social work and librarianship are dominated by women. Male-dominated disciplines include military sciences, engineering, robotics, aeronautics and astronautics, high-energy physics, mathematics, computer science, philosophy and economics.

While much attention is focused on enrolment, women's ability to learn and progress in their studies, and their future employability, depend significantly on their classroom experiences. Too often, prevailing pedagogical practices reinforce gender inequalities in the classroom – a result of lecturers' unawareness of issues of inclusion, or teaching and learning practices which do not actively enable both women and men. A gender-responsive pedagogy addresses this by integrating gender into the fabric of teaching and learning – including the processes of curriculum design, the management and facilitation of learners in the classroom, and approaches to assessment.

Our approach to gender responsive pedagogy aims to acknowledge social norms and power imbalances by working with faculty in higher education to build an awareness of gendered stereotypes and biases in their teaching and learning, and, from there, explore new practices.

Gender Responsive Pedagogy – a definition

1. The learning needs of male and female learners are addressed in teaching and learning processes (inside and outside of the classroom).

2. Teaching staff are gender-aware and gender-responsive in their planning and facilitation of courses, and continuously reflecting and adapting.

2 Why is gender responsive pedagogy important?

Women's educational participation

The educational gender divide begins in the earliest years of education. Girls are often channelled into 'lower status' subjects and discouraged from speaking in environments in which boys absorb a disproportionate amount of teachers' energy. Education materials often reinforce low expectations of women and girls, as does a lack of female teachers in high status subjects such as maths and science, leaving students without female role models.³

Gender blind teaching practices reinforce gender inequalities in the classroom, leading to the concept of a 'hidden curriculum' in which male students are permitted to dominate discussions and classroom space. These inequalities progress into higher education.

Higher education classroom experiences

A 2006 report on gender and higher education in Uganda, Tanzania, Sri Lanka, Nigeria and South Africa, identified a number of discriminatory practices against female students and staff. These included gender-insensitive pedagogical processes, unchecked sexual harassment, violence and discrimination, biases against women's academic and intellectual abilities, poor implementation of gender policies, and widespread male domination of leadership positions and decision-making.⁴

¹ Doroba, Muhwezi, and Modungwa, 'Tackling Gender Inequality in Higher Education Institutions in Africa: From Affirmative Action to Holistic Approaches'.

² UNESCO, *Global Education Monitoring Report Gender Report*.

³ Aikman and Unterhalter, *Practising Gender Equality in Education*.

⁴ Morley, 'Gender Equity in Commonwealth Higher Education'.

In many countries, female students frequently identify teaching practices as a major impediment to their attendance and retention, especially in STEM courses, reporting that their achievements and abilities are routinely under-estimated by male teachers and fellow students.⁵ Some teaching staff may be unaware of their unconscious positive or negative biases about male and female students, unintentionally discouraging female students from taking a leadership role within the classroom, or from progressing in what may be perceived as male subjects.⁶ A lack of focus on gender within teaching methods limits the understanding and identification of female students with course content, constraining their participation and interaction in class.⁷ Moreover, course content is often outdated, further reinforcing negative gender stereotypes.

“Ongoing male domination of the higher education system will mean that female students continue to lag behind... in the competition for grades, graduation and jobs. They will continue to be a minority in high-paying and skilled professions, further perpetuating the employment gender gap... and ultimately limiting economic development”

The impact on attainment

A 2011 study looking at degree attainment by gender, socioeconomic status and age in Tanzania and Ghana found that female students’ achievements were broadly on a par with those of male students, if not better.⁸ However, female students’ achievements were often considered ill-deserved or the result of sexual transactions for good grades. The study suggested that female achievements disrupted the status quo and were therefore undermined in order to maintain male dominance within the university system.

“It is imperative that teaching and learning in higher education... pays attention to the specific learning needs of female and male students, [so that] the structures and culture within the HE system don’t add further obstacles to the achievements of female students.”

Increasing educational attainment for both women and men over the past 50 years has accounted for 50% of economic growth in OECD countries,⁹ contributing significantly to development and closing the poverty gap. But, ongoing male domination of the higher education system will mean that female students continue to lag behind their male counterparts in the competition for grades, graduation and jobs. They will continue to be a minority in higher-paying and skilled professions, perpetuating the gender gap in employment, the gender divide in STEM careers, reducing the number of women who progress into senior leadership roles – and ultimately limiting social and economic development.

It is imperative that teaching and learning in higher education focuses on including and enabling opportunities for all students, male and female. An important component of this is ensuring that teaching and learning processes pay attention to the specific learning needs of female and male students, and that structures and culture within the higher education system don’t add a further obstacle to the achievement of female students. This is where teachers and lecturers have a substantial role to play.

⁵ Morley.

⁶ Nabbuye, ‘Gender-Sensitive Pedagogy: The Bridge to Girls’ Quality Education in Uganda’.

⁷ Doroba, Muhwezi, and Modungwa, ‘Tackling Gender Inequality in Higher Education Institutions in Africa: From Affirmative Action to Holistic Approaches’.

⁸ Morley, ‘Sex, Grades and Power in Higher Education in Ghana and Tanzania’.

⁹ OECD Gender Initiative, ‘Gender Equality in Education, Employment and Entrepreneurship: Final Report to the MCM 2012’.

3 What do we mean when we talk about gender responsive pedagogy?

Pedagogy as a concept embraces virtually all teaching and learning processes. Within the context of the classroom, pedagogy is a term that includes *what* is taught (the content), *how* teaching takes place (the teaching process) and *how what* is taught is taught (the teaching methods).

Gender responsive pedagogy refers to teaching and learning processes that pay attention to the specific learning needs of female and male students.

Gender matters when looking at pedagogy because – as outlined above - it is often poor pedagogical practices that reproduce gender inequalities in the classroom. This is the result of insensitivity to issues of inclusion and a reliance on teaching and learning practices that focus on the transmission of knowledge, over students' critical engagement with ideas and concepts. When gender becomes a pivotal lens within pedagogy, it supports more inclusive and interactive teaching and learning practices that balance both women's and men's participation.

It is important to note that gender responsive pedagogy is not focused solely on addressing "women's needs". It is about being aware of the intersection between gender and learners' needs in general - with a particular and important aim of redressing the imbalances in society which includes improving outcomes for women.

Our framework builds on the Forum of African Women Educationalists (FAWE)'s¹⁰ definition which calls for teachers to take "an all-encompassing gender approach in the processes of lesson planning, teaching and learning, classroom management and performance evaluation."¹¹

We take this definition further, acknowledging the significance of both **learning needs** and **teaching practices** as equally significant, but dual, aspects within gender responsive pedagogy. Our definition is two pronged:

1. The learning needs of male and female learners are addressed in teaching and learning processes (inside and outside of the classroom)
2. Teaching staff are gender-aware and gender-responsive in their planning and facilitation of courses, and continuously reflecting and adapting.

This allows us to work with lecturers from the standpoint of their own awareness and skill-building on how to be more gender responsive in teaching and learning, what it means for their students, and how they can support their students to become more gender-aware members of society. By doing so they are improving the learning of *all* of their students.

Developing lecturer capacity in GRP is approached from:

- 1. developing instructor awareness and skill-building on how to be more gender responsive in teaching and learning, and*
 - 2. how to support students to become more gender-aware members of society.*
-

¹⁰ Outlined in Mlama et al., 'Gender Responsive Pedagogy (GRP): A Teacher's Handbook.'

¹¹ Adapted from definitions on page 7 of Mlama et al.

4 Building on existing approaches to Gender Responsive Pedagogy

A substantial amount of the research on gender responsive pedagogy is focused on either Northern education systems or on primary and secondary education. There is a dearth of research on what works in higher education and a lack of information on how to undertake gender responsive pedagogy when dealing with large class sizes and with limited facilities, and within Southern educational contexts. Our aim was to build on existing resources and gender responsive pedagogy approaches for low-resource or low-infrastructure environments, applying these to the contexts within which INASP and our partners work. We particularly drew on two specific resources in the development of our own approach:

- The Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE) has been at the forefront of this work in Africa, developing a toolkit for primary and secondary school teachers that has been used since 2005 in 13 African countries. FAWE's monitoring and evaluation of toolkit implementation points to an improvement in girls' retention and performance, greater participation of girls' in the classroom, and improved gender relations within schools.¹²
- In 2014, the Commonwealth of Learning developed the Gender Mainstreaming Toolkit for Teachers and Teacher Educators¹³ to support both teachers and teacher educators on gender mainstreaming, with a large component devoted to the impact of gender in the classroom and on curriculum.

5 How we designed our approach

Our approach to supporting gender responsive pedagogy was initially co-developed and piloted with partners from four East African Universities (Uganda Martyrs University and Gulu University in Uganda, and University of Dodoma and Mzumbe University in Tanzania) and two Kenyan organisations – the Association for Faculty Enrichment in Learning and Teaching and Ashoka East Africa, under the auspices of the Transforming Employability for Social Change in East Africa (TESCEA) project. See more in Section 7.

Gendered spaces in teaching and learning

We set out to adapt FAWE's approach for the more mature, focused and technical orientations of higher education. We examined all the spaces in which gender plays a role in the teaching and learning of university and college students, and also drew on the Commonwealth of Learning's 2014 Gender Mainstreaming Toolkit for Teachers and Teacher Educators¹⁴ which allowed a glimpse into some of the ways that existing gender responsive pedagogy approaches could be developed for a higher education audience.

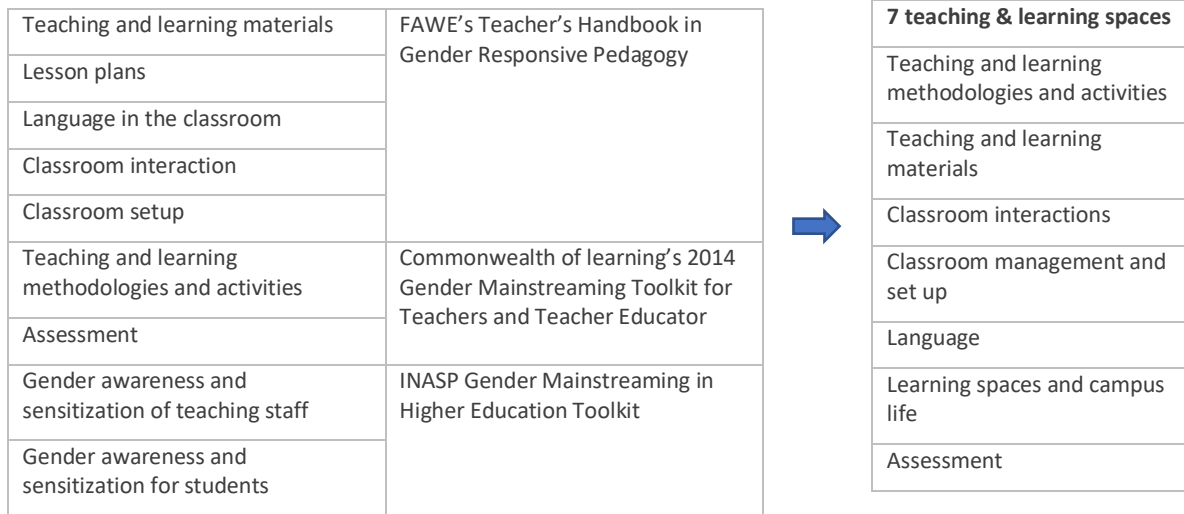
This gave us a set of 7 “gendered spaces”, and from here we pulled together a set of questions and key indicators that would allow us to work through each space in turn to identify where a gender lens can support a more gender-responsive classroom

¹² FAWE.

¹³ Leowinata and Frei, 'Gender Mainstreaming Toolkit for Teachers and Teacher Educators'.

¹⁴ Leowinata and Frei.

Identifying ‘Gendered spaces’ in higher education



Sensitisation and awareness building

INASP’s experience in gender mainstreaming and support to women researchers in Africa and Asia indicates that an inherent awareness of gender bias in everyday interactions and activities is not a given. It follows that a significant component of a gender responsive pedagogy approach needs to involve sensitization and awareness building in each of these areas, while also developing broad knowledge around key gender concepts, gender gaps in higher education and research systems, and in the world of work where students will find themselves after graduating. For this, we drew on INASP’s Gender Mainstreaming in Higher Education toolkit¹⁵ which supports groups of lecturers to critically reflect on gender gaps that may exist within their institutions.

Transformative learning and the hidden curriculum: pedagogical pillars of gender responsive pedagogy

Underpinning the components of our approach are two key theoretical pedagogies in adult learning and gender: transformative learning and the hidden curriculum.

Transformative Learning is a conceptual approach to adult learning, initially developed by Jack Mezirow.¹⁶ The central tenant of transformative learning is to support adult learners to critically assess and develop their own beliefs, values and thinking, rather than being the receivers of knowledge transmitted in one direction from an educator. The approach hinges on the development of critical thinking skills which support learners to question their underlying assumptions and beliefs about the world.¹⁷ A transformative learning approach provides an ideal foundation for gendered responsive pedagogy because of the focus on dismantling beliefs and using self-reflection to critically engage with key concepts in order to integrate new learning.

The idea of a ‘hidden curriculum’ has been around since the 1970s, and refers to the unwritten or unintended lessons, values and perspectives that learners absorb while in education - often related to biases, stereotypes, and assumptions about the world.

More recent studies¹⁸ have looked at the hidden curriculum of gender relations in higher education, showing that societal discrimination and inherent biases against women are frequently replicated in the classroom (often as a result of unconscious bias held by both lecturers and students).

¹⁵ Gollifer and Gorman, ‘Gender Mainstreaming in Higher Education Toolkit’.

¹⁶ Mezirow, *Learning as Transformation*.

¹⁷ Simsek, ‘Transformational Learning’.

¹⁸ Morley, 2006

The male domination of higher learning spaces, the feminisation of subjects and downplaying of women’s achievements are all features of this hidden curriculum.¹⁹ Morley advocates that pedagogy must explicitly acknowledge the hidden curriculum of gender relations in order for gaps and biases to be addressed within the curriculum and learning environment.

Six dimensions of gender

Working with a gender expert, Charley Nussey, we identified six dimensions of gender, that impact on the seven key teaching and learning spaces

- Gender as representation – for example, the gender balance reflected in university promotional materials
- Gender as equality/equity – the gap between the aspiration and the reality
- Gender as stereotypes and (conscious/unconscious) bias – what stereotypes need challenging about male/female learners
- Gender as internalized bias – how gender relates to grades and assessment
- Gender as interaction and space – reflecting on classroom settings, for example where students sit and who speaks more
- Gender as power/empowerment – ensuring that power and knowledge don’t just flow one way

The framework

Our framework provides a tool to consider the interaction of the six dimensions of gender across the 7 teaching and learning spaces to support the creation of a more gender responsive pedagogy. This pedagogical approach facilitates a transition from gender blindness to gender awareness, ultimately enabling both lecturers and their students to become gender-responsive professionals.



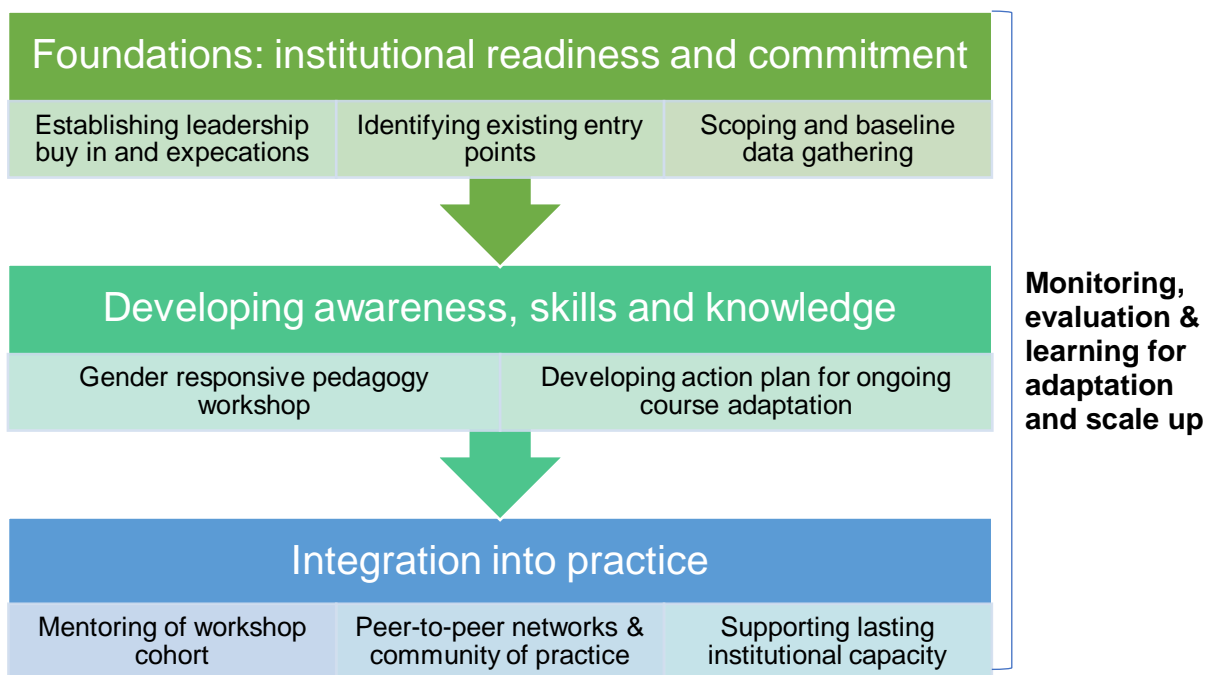
¹⁹ Morley, ‘Hidden Transcripts’.

6 Supporting the integration of Gender Responsive Pedagogy in higher education institutions

INASP has developed an approach to support institutions that wish to integrate this framework of gender responsive pedagogy into their teaching and learning practices, to ensure that the needs of both men and women are supported during – and subsequent to - their HE experience. Supporting the learning needs of both men and women will improve the employability and social impact of an institution’s graduates as they bring the knowledge of gender responsiveness developed during their studies into their future careers.

Our approach is comprised of 3 phases of work, from establishing strong foundations for a gender responsive pedagogy project to the development and scale up of gender responsive pedagogy across an institution’s programmes.

As with all of INASP’s work, we are committed to genuine collaboration with our partners. Within the 3 phases of our approach, we work together with our partners to define the problem and identify the most appropriate solutions for this context. Our goal is to support institutions in developing the capacity to independently and sustainably continue to evolve and implement their desired changes in gender responsive pedagogy, beyond the life of our particular project.



Details of our approach are described within our companion paper - *Integrating Gender Responsive Pedagogy into Higher Education: the INASP approach*.

7 Evidence of impact – An East African case study

Our framework and approach to supporting gender responsive pedagogy were initially developed under Transforming Employability for Social Change in East Africa (TESCEA) - a three-and-a-half year project to support four East African universities to strengthen their pedagogy and curricula, and from this to develop a model for scalability to other East African universities.

The learning from the TESCEA project has evolved into the wider approach to gender responsive pedagogy, described here and in a companion paper,²⁰ that can be implemented independently of a broader curriculum redesign process.

Our support to introduce gender responsive pedagogy within the four TESCEA universities has now been running for 18 months. Feedback and analysis indicate a positive impact on lecturers and students, as well as within wider project and university structures.

Change in teaching and learning

Lecturers who have incorporated gender responsive pedagogy into their courses and lesson plans have developed knowledge and self-awareness about the impact of gender in teaching and learning. Within all four universities, faculty that had not previously considered gender within their teaching have now incorporated it into

"We normally do it unknowingly, but since we know now, we will do more to make sure that gender is well represented."

Lecturer at University of Dodoma, Tanzania

lesson plans, also pledging to adapt their teaching and learning examples to be more gender-responsive (for example, by using case studies subverting traditional gender roles and careers), and to become more active in promoting positive and equal gender roles in course content. Many have adapted their classroom management strategies so that all students have an equal opportunity to lead -- considering where students sit within the classroom, and techniques such as group work and assigned group roles.

Improved student experiences

Students taking redesigned courses have noticed and appreciated the emphasis on gender awareness. One student from the University of Dodoma in Tanzania noted: "I now have a new life experience in academics. As a female student, I did not play any leadership role in my class. I was taught to respect and obey what my teacher taught me whether correct or wrong. I now have learned how to say no, discuss, disagree and to compromise on issues that affect society in general. I think I have gained some form of personal freedom and the willingness to lead. I can now speak freely without any fear of being a female. I have experienced personal change as a result of the learning and teaching from this lecturer. The learning opportunities from this lecturer changed my values and thinking. I would say that I have experienced self-transformation as a learner."

"I have gained some form of personal freedom and the willingness to lead. I can now speak freely without any fear of being a female. ...I would say that I have experienced self-transformation as a learner."

Female student at University of Dodoma, Tanzania

Transforming Employability for Social Change in East Africa (TESCEA)

Due to end in September 2021, TESCEA is supported by the FCDO-funded SPHEIR programme, and brings together four universities – Uganda Martyrs University, Gulu University, University of Dodoma and Mzambe University – two supporting organisations in Kenya – Ashoka East Africa and the Association for Faculty Enrichment in Learning and Teaching (AFELT), and INASP in the UK.

TESCEA uses a rigorous methodology of curriculum redesign to strengthen the ability and motivation of lecturers to deliver student-focused teaching – helping students learn *how* to think, not what to think. The TESCEA model focuses on critical thinking, problem solving, negotiation and relationship development – and ensuring that gender-responsiveness is woven through each curriculum redesign component.

²⁰ See Chapin, Skovgaard, and Warne, 'Integrating Gender Responsive Pedagogy into Higher Education: Our Approach'.

A catalyst for change

Above and beyond this, the biggest achievement of the integration of gender responsive pedagogy in the TESCEA partnership is its contribution to the evolution of gender within the wider project. Gender responsive pedagogy sessions have catalysed the university teams in prioritising gender more widely within the project. The Gender Leads within each university, are delivering both gender responsive pedagogy and gender awareness sessions, and supporting sustainable gender knowledge beyond the life of the project.

Based on demand stemming from TESCEA gender responsive pedagogy sessions, university partners have hosted further awareness events on their own initiative, leading to the creation of a cross-partner Gender Working Group (with participation from all four TESCEA universities and the three support partners) and the development of further resources to facilitate gender sessions. Gender student clubs have been formed or are in the planning stage. One university has flagged its lack of a resource for students experiencing sexual harassment and is taking steps to address this, while also establishing a gender mainstreaming unit with a dedicated office on campus.

A more equitable future

Young people have a vital role to play in development, as change makers and future leaders in the public sector, in business, in NGOs and in communities. Universities are important sites to nurture their skills and to harness that energy for social change. But, for university education to fulfil that potential, it must be inclusive for all students.

Our approach enables HE teachers to lead this, supporting them to make their practices, and their classrooms, gender-responsive, and encouraging them to acknowledge, and where appropriate, to challenge social norms and power imbalances. Our ultimate goal is to help higher education institutions produce students who go on to become gender responsive professionals, leaders and citizens. In doing so they have a critical role to play in addressing inequalities and building a more equitable future.

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