

Gender equality in higher education systems in Brazil



Summary

In 2023, the British Council Brazil, in partnership with People 1st International, initiated a project aimed at advancing gender equality in higher education through the application of the British Council's existing Gender Equality Framework (GEF). This project focused on addressing gender disparities particularly in STEM fields where women remain underrepresented. Through stakeholder engagement and a comparative analysis of global gender equality frameworks, the project sought to identify challenges and provide recommendations for embedding the GEF in collaboration with institutions such as CAPES, CNPq and CONFAP.

Background

Despite significant growth in Brazil's higher education sector, particularly in STEM disciplines, gender disparities persist. Women are notably underrepresented in leadership roles and postgraduate STEM programmes, with only 28.8% of STEM students being female. Additionally, there is a scarcity of initiatives targeting gender equity within these fields. The opportunity in Brazil was to adopt international models for gender equality - such as the Athena Swan model from the UK - and use their insights to inform the implementation of the British Council's GEF within the Brazilian higher education landscape, addressing these systemic gaps. The project also aimed to align national policy frameworks with gender equality goals and foster institutional commitment to address the issue at scale.

Our solutions

Our consultancy involved a comprehensive comparative analysis of global gender equality frameworks, such as the Athena Swan model (UK, Ireland, Australia), the Dimensions Programme (Canada) and the GATI initiative (India). Desk-based research and stakeholder engagement activities were carried out to inform the adoption of the British Council's GEF within Brazilian HEIs.

The consultancy engaged with key stakeholders including CAPES, CNPq and CONFAP, as well as universities across Brazil and the UK, to gather insights and develop tailored recommendations. A detailed governance structure was proposed to support the sustainable adoption of the British Council's GEF with specific strategies for incentivising HEIs to prioritise gender equality initiatives particularly in STEM fields. The project also involved mapping governance structures and operational models that support or hinder the implementation of the GEF.

Outcome / impact:

Governance framework and stakeholder engagement: The consultancy developed a proposed governance structure in collaboration with key stakeholders such as CAPES, CNPq and CONFAP. This structure aimed to build awareness and best practices for the GEF and ensure long-term sustainability and institutional alignment with gender equality goals across Brazilian higher education institutions.

Leveraging global best practices for Brazil: The project successfully identified relevant aspects of international gender equality frameworks, such as Athena Swan and GATI, to inform the adoption of the British Council's GEF within Brazil. These insights provided Brazilian institutions with actionable steps towards improving gender equality in STEM fields. A pilot phase was recommended to gradually scale the GEF's implementation across the country, ensuring that lessons learned from initial efforts would inform national policy.

Sustainability of gender equality initiatives: The consultancy emphasised the importance of aligning the GEF with national funding initiatives through CAPES and other funding bodies. The creation of a certification or awards process similar to the Athena Swan model was proposed to incentivise HEIs to adopt the GEF. This approach aims to embed gender equality into the core of Brazil's higher education policies and funding mechanisms, ensuring long-term sustainability.

Improved participation of women in STEM: The consultancy directly addressed the gender disparity in STEM fields by focusing on interventions to boost the participation of women in postgraduate STEM programmes. Recommendations were made to increase leadership opportunities for women in STEM academia and research aligning with Brazil's strategic priorities for gender equality.