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Sweden Orders Universities to Develop Plans to Recruit Female Professors

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SWEDEN'S six state universities have until spring to develop comprehensive plans for increasing the number of female academics and researchers on their staffs.

Despite disagreements and uncertainty about how best to proceed, the Swedish government is pushing ahead with this and other measures aimed at hiring more women to work in the higher-education system.

"The academic world is still very much dominated by males," the Ministry of Education and Science said in a statement. "It is high time that this was changed."

While women account for 65 per cent of university graduates in Sweden, they hold a disproportionately small share of academic posts. Only 24 per cent of research assistants, 21 per cent of senior lecturers, and 7 per cent of full professors are female.

Pressure for action to correct the imbalance has come mainly from the Minister of Education and Science, Carl Tham. "The driving force is the minister himself," says Lucie Mandaus, the official in charge of "equal-opportunities policy" at the ministry. "He feels it's not just a question of fairness, but of quality: With only one group represented, you don't get the diversity in research and teaching."

Legislation proposed by the minister and passed by the parliament last year established 100 new academic positions at

the six universities, including 30 full professorships, that are reserved for candidates "whose gender is underrepresented" in specific disciplines—women, in most cases. The move is considered only a starting point and will have no more than a tiny impact on the overall gender imbalance. The 30 professorships represent only 1.4 per cent of the 2,200 professors now employed at Sweden's state universities and other higher-education institutions.

The universities are in the process of filling the new posts even as they develop other ways to increase female representation on their faculties.

STRONG, NEGATIVE REACTION

The creation of the positions for women sparked controversy and, at first, met with fierce opposition. "Many people feel it is demeaning to women to reserve what some view as second-class professorships for them," says Ms. Mandaus, a strong supporter of the measure. The National Students Association was the only major university-based group to back the proposal.

Ms. Mandaus was not prepared for the strong, negative reaction to the legislation and the many newspaper editorials critical of the idea. "Everyone agrees we need more women professors, but anything you do causes controversy," she says.

The opposition subsided after people

saw the criteria for establishing the new professorships, says Gunnel Engwall, vice-rector of the University of Stockholm. Sweden's National Research Council, which was given responsibility for creating the posts, surveyed the universities about disciplines with both a shortage of

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female professors and ample numbers of qualified women candidates.

"We've chosen areas where there are really competent women," says Dr. Engwall.

The controversy could be reignited, however. After the education ministry receives the universities' proposals for expanding recruitment of women, it plans to submit legislation to parliament with goals for the overall number of women to be employed in academe. The proposed legislation may also include provisions for a

broader reform of the faculty-recruiting system, aimed at increasing the number of academic positions.

The notion of numerical targets indicates the ministry's impatience with the universities' efforts thus far. A 1990 law gave all state agencies, including universities, the right to use "positive discrimination" to give female candidates preference in hiring. But officials say the measure has rarely been used in higher education.

While women's participation in academe is increasing too slowly for some, it is on the rise. Last year, 31 per cent of all doctorates awarded in Sweden went to women, up from 21 per cent in 1985.

Anncharlott Östblom, who is in charge of recruiting junior lecturers—academics below the rank of professor—for the University of Stockholm's Faculty of Science, anticipates a snowball effect. "It's my impression that more women are applying these days," she says. "Committees are evaluating women more seriously. And if you get more women on the faculty as professors and lecturers, more students will see them as models."

The university's vice-rector, Dr. Engwall, thinks Scandinavian goodwill and common sense will help solve the problem.

"If we give this some time," she says, "there will be very good women teaching at the Swedish universities."