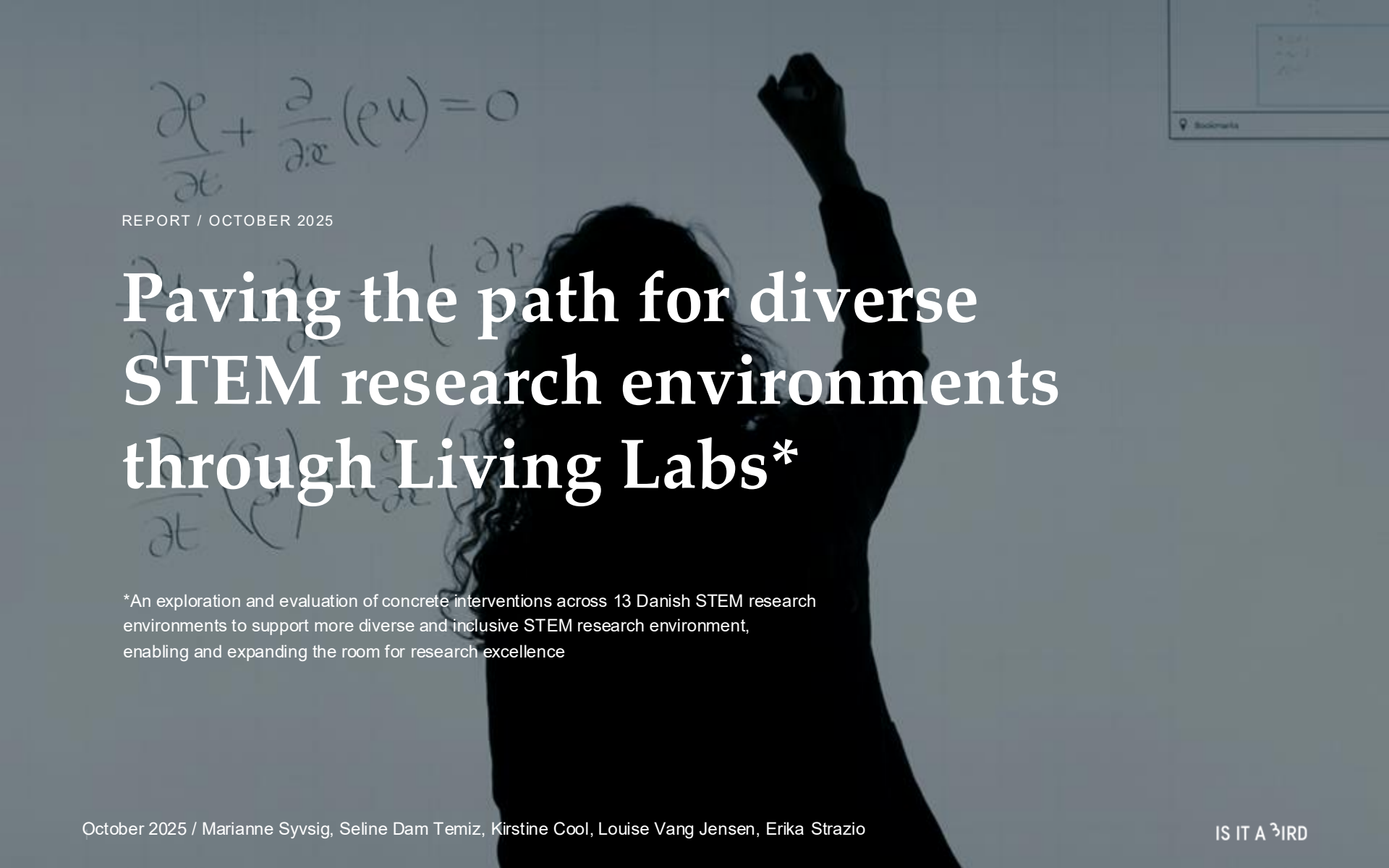


A person with long, curly hair is seen from behind, writing on a whiteboard. The whiteboard is covered in mathematical equations, including $\frac{\partial \rho}{\partial t} + \frac{\partial}{\partial x}(\rho u) = 0$ and $\frac{\partial \rho}{\partial t} + \frac{\partial}{\partial x}(\rho u) = 0$. The person's right arm is raised, holding a marker. In the top right corner, there is a small inset image of a computer screen showing a list of bookmarks.

REPORT / OCTOBER 2025

Paving the path for diverse STEM research environments through Living Labs*

*An exploration and evaluation of concrete interventions across 13 Danish STEM research environments to support more diverse and inclusive STEM research environment, enabling and expanding the room for research excellence



VILLUM FONDEN

In a partnership with 13
research environments
across five Danish
Universities:



AALBORG
UNIVERSITY



UNIVERSITY OF
COPENHAGEN



AARHUS UNIVERSITY

Preface

Paving the path for a diverse STEM-research environment is key to position Denmark as a world leading STEM-nation. Diverse perspectives, experiences, and skills are fundamental to innovation and the development of groundbreaking new ideas.

The Danish STEM research environment is highly cited. However, there is an unfulfilled potential for Denmark to increase diversity and inclusion in research environments, to ensure a future position as a world leading STEM nation. Only 16% of professors in STEM research in Denmark are female and we are lacking behind other Nordic countries as well as the EU average¹. Denmark is not harvesting the fruits of a diverse talent pool when women are underrepresented to the current extent.

To address the problem, in the autumn of 2023, a partnership between the Villum Foundation, the Novo Nordisk Foundation and the strategic innovation agency IS IT A BIRD called for research environments wanting to take part in driving a change in the shape of 'Living Labs'. The result was a broad collaboration with a total of 13 university environments across the country, all setting out to address diversity in STEM research through locally tailored interventions. Since then, the Living Labs have been working creatively and tirelessly towards more diverse research environments through their work.

The interest in taking part went far beyond our anticipation, and we want to thank all the people who put in an effort in the Living Labs over the past two years. You have made an investment of your time and effort to the benefit of all and have started a movement that will continuously make a difference.

If Denmark is to remain competitive in research and education, we need to attract and retain the brightest minds and support an open, creative and innovative research environment. Everyone working towards this goal, is paving the path for others.

This report unfolds the work and learnings of the 13 university environments until now. We hope this report provides inspiration for readers to get started on or continue the work towards diverse and inclusive STEM research environments.

Enjoy the read.

Why diversity and inclusion is a winning formula in STEM research



Diverse teams perform better. In highly competitive elite environments, increasing diversity is a winning formula.

For many years, organisations across industries have engaged with and addressed the benefits of diversity and inclusion and the results are clear: **diversity and inclusion improve business performance and attract new talent**.

Studies conclude that diverse groups are **significantly more effective at solving complicated problems**².

Employees desire to work in diverse companies – **from which we can conclude that diversity attracts talent**.



The benefit of diversity is that you have different minds, and the different minds are shaped by different experiences, different cultural origins, different everything. For me it's so obvious that if people don't think the same way, well, collectively you have many more options. That's the benefit of diversity.

Gisou van der Goot,
VP of Responsible Transformation, EPFL



In **science** diversity is a determining factor for innovation and **ground-breaking research**.

Just as numbers show that diverse teams perform better than monocultural teams in organisational settings broadly, it is also the case in scientific areas. Having diverse perspectives, experiences and skills at the table is key to innovation and developing groundbreaking new ideas in STEM.

Studies focusing on academic research groups have found that **gender diverse research groups receive 87% more citations** than research groups with low gender diversity³.

Research talents time and time again point out that well-functioning diverse research groups tend to experiment to a larger degree, increasing the ability to solve complex problems together and boosting the quality of their research.



We also find that the larger collective writes better applications and produces better research. We gain much more experience and knowledge exchange by being open.

Professor



Research talents experience the positive effects of diversity and inclusion. **Diverse environments attract talent**.

Research talents point out that better ideas come from research environments where diversity and inclusion is cherished as a strength, as it **makes individuals feel safer when sharing their ideas with fellow scientists**.

Scientists highlight that attractive environments are the ones where the group is prompted to both collaborate and offer **help and support to each individual project and task**. Talents seek out environments offering aspects like a shared sense of values and purpose, multiple mentors and strong, horizontal networks.



I feel when people are included in the group, we come up with better ideas. People feel safer sharing ideas in groups because they are not afraid of being ridiculed or that a bad idea will affect how we see them.

PhD student

Paving the path for a diverse STEM research environment aiming at research excellence through Living Labs

There is a critical challenge of gender diversity within Danish STEM research environments. Across career levels in academia, the 'leaky pipeline' of female research talents shows an unfulfilled opportunity for Denmark to ensure optimal conditions for groundbreaking research.

Changing the status quo calls for **a sensitive approach to the particular context of academia**. Research environments are home to creativity and curiosity. Research talents share the aspiration of seek original answers and general wonder. Excellent individuals and groups look for new territories, ask new questions and break new ground.

Paving the path for diversity and inclusion in academia calls for a manifold approach, rather than a uniform one. **Expanding the room for excellence to thrive, as well as the perception of what research excellence looks like.**

13 Danish STEM research environments form the 'Living Labs'. Together with them, we have co-created and tested interventions during a 2-year period, to establish and qualify a path forward for improving diversity and creating a positive impact on the path to better education and research in Denmark.



“

That Novo Nordisk Foundation and Villum Foundation have initiated this has demonstrated to the organisation that it doesn't help to just sit down and close your eyes. Others are watching you and keeping track, and those are some of the ones who distribute funds.

Living Lab participant

IS IT A 3IRD



*Every project has big hurdles, and everyone has blind spots, and everyone has expertise. **When you bring people together from lots of diverse backgrounds, you have more opportunities for advancements to be made throughout the research process.***

*Whenever you're bringing people from different backgrounds together, **there's always going to be challenges**, particularly because everyone is coming from some environment or some culture themselves.*

*It does require some level of serendipity of just the right person with the right expertise at the right time. But it's more than that: **The question about culture is key** because if people don't feel like their perspective is valued, if they don't feel like anybody wants to hear their ideas, they keep them to themselves and nobody else benefits.*

You have to have individuals there and you have to have fertile ground for their ideas to be able to come out, take root and grow.

**Eric A. Appel, Associate Professor
Stanford University**

KEY QUESTION

What are the barriers to attracting and retaining female STEM talent in research careers, *and what initiatives can universities undertake to increase diversity and thereby promote better research?*

Three key insights and 12 solution themes to pave the path towards a more diverse STEM-research environment

1.

ANCHORING THE ASPIRATION

Working towards diversity is working with complex systemic change in a highly fragmented and individualised environment. It requires solid anchoring of the ambition across all levels.

2.

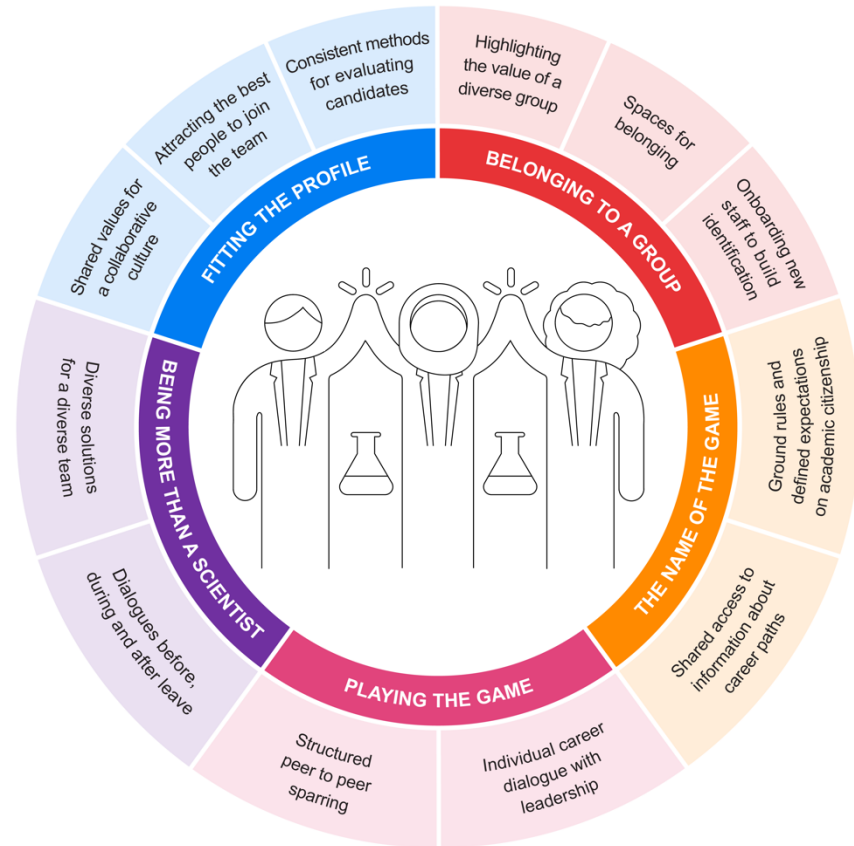
PROFESSIONALISING THE ORGANISATION

Replacing informal power with transparency and formal structures allows for a more diverse team. It requires new tools and practises, but once the new structure is in place, it can more easily be implemented across departments and universities.

3.

TAKING ACTION TO INITIATE CHANGE

Action truly speaks louder than words and doing something is better than doing the perfect thing. Prioritising any efforts to change a biased environment communicates importance, inspires others to get started and sets new standards.



Content and reading instructions

This report communicates **the experiences and perceived valued** from the perspectives of both the people working to drive change, and the targeted people or 'users' experiencing the change.

The report is structured around four main chapters:

1. Introducing the Living Labs method, concept and process
2. Insights across the Living Labs on what it takes to drive change towards a more diverse STEM research environment in Denmark
3. Concrete approaches and initiatives developed and tested by the Living Labs throughout the process
4. Relevant background materials and context

09

Introducing the Living Labs

The concept and method of Living Labs
Data and knowledge gathered through close collaboration
Meet the 13 Living Labs

16

Key Insights across the 13 Living Labs

Insight #1: Anchoring the aspiration
Insight #2: Professionalising the organisation
Insight #3: Taking action to initiate change

24

Unfolding the actions of the Living Labs

Fitting the profile
Belonging to a group
The name of the game
Playing the game
Being more than a scientist

1

Introducing the Living Labs

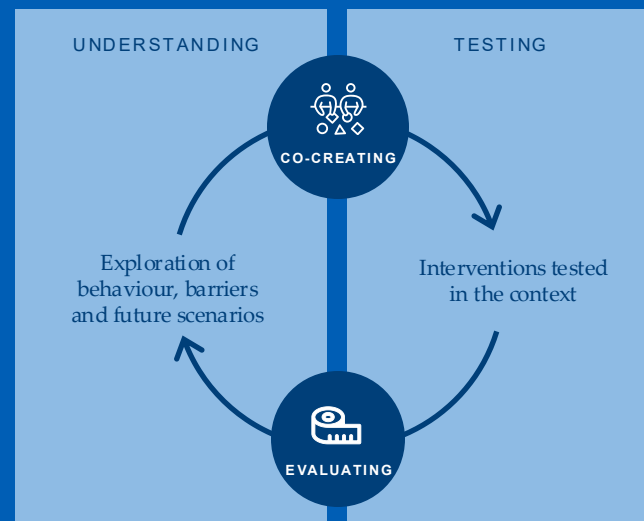
The concept and method of Living Labs

In this project, 13 'Living Labs' in the shape of STEM research environments have each developed and implemented various real-life experiments with the aim of attracting and retaining female talent within STEM academia.

A Living Lab is an open innovation ecosystem that focuses on user-centered research and development, involving end users in the co-creation and testing of new products, services, or processes in real-life settings.

Over the past 2,5 years, the 13 Living Labs have carried out interventions in their own research environments, experimenting with and testing concrete changes within their specific context. The interventions have continuously been monitored, evaluated and adjusted along the way through dialogue and feedback between each research environment and IS IT A BIRD.

This iterative process allows each Living Lab to continually refine strategies to better support female talents in their own research environment, creating concrete and tangible changes that make a difference here and now. At the same time, looking across the 13 Living Labs, we can draw general learnings that can benefit others wanting to take action.



“

Experiri means to “to try,” “to test,” or “to prove.” It is the origin of two wonderful words in English: experiment and experience. Think of how people typically learn: We tinker. We try this. We try that. We see what works and what doesn’t. We iterate. We learn. This is experimentation creating experience. Or, to use the phrase of theorists, it is “experimental learning.”

Bent Flyvbjerg and Dan Gardner,
How big things get done (2023)

Meet the 13 Living Labs participants who are paving the path towards a more diverse STEM research environment



AALBORG
UNIVERSITY



UNIVERSITY OF
COPENHAGEN



AARHUS UNIVERSITY

AALBORG UNIVERSITY (AAU)

Department of Computer Science

AARHUS UNIVERSITY (AU)

Faculty of Natural Sciences and Department of Physics and Astronomy

Department of Agroecology and Department of Animal and Veterinary Sciences

TECHNICAL UNIVERSITY OF DENMARK (DTU)

DTU Bioengineering

DTU Physics - Quantum physics and Information Technology

DTU Compute

UNIVERSITY OF COPENHAGEN (KU)

Globe Institute

Department of Biology

Department of Computer Science

Department of Chemistry

Department of Mathematical Sciences

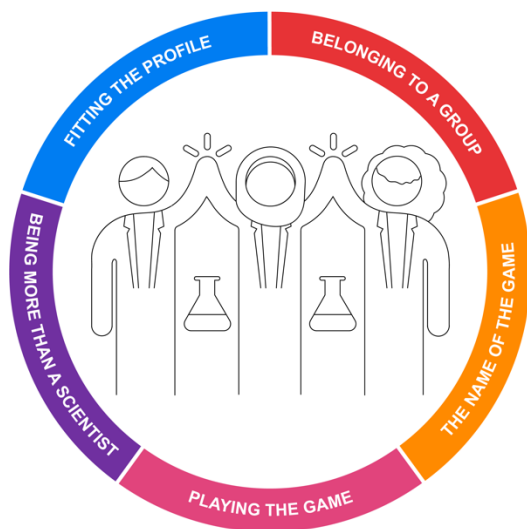
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN DENMARK (SDU)

Department of Green Technology

PIONEER CENTER (AAU, AU, DTU, KU, SDU)

CAPeX

The work in the Living Labs builds on top of the five identified *arenas for change*



This report builds on IS IT A BIRD's deep dive into the everyday lived experience of research talents⁴. The study identified five key barriers and potentials to attracting and retaining female talents in Danish STEM research, believed to also be applicable to other minority groups. The Living Labs address problems to solve across these five identified arenas for change.

FROM BARRIERS TO ARENAS FOR CHANGE

Fitting the profile

Female talents experience not fitting the profile of a scientist. The recruitment process poses a big potential to encourage female talents, as does transparently showcasing the diverse paths of an academic career.

Belonging to a group

Female talents experience not belonging to a group and being treated differently because of who they are rather than the work they do. There is potential nurturing the working environment within the research group, thereby influencing the overall experience of being a scientist.

The name of the game

Female scientists experience that it takes specific traits to play the game of academia to succeed; there is a potential in being mindful of who is positioned with the 'academic housekeeping' and how to acknowledge different ways of thriving in academia.

Playing the game

Female scientists lack access to informal networks to build understanding of 'the name of the game'. Opening the knowledge living in informal networks increases the access to strategic guidance, as well as the chances of being 'in the right place at the right time'.

Being more than a scientist

Female scientists experience a conflict between their academic ambition and their ambition of being more than just a scientist. There is a potential in supporting scientists in striking this balance to retain them in academia.

⁴: The previous report can be downloaded here: https://vilumfonden.dk/sites/default/files/paragraph/fiikld_download/diversity_in_stem_iiab_report.pdf

A complex problem calls for a curious and collaborative approach

The problem as well as possible solutions to diversity in STEM academia are **complex and systemic in character** and no one explanation or solution will hold the entire truth.

Through an ethnographic approach we add **thick data to big data**. It is a deep dive into the everyday lives of people we want to learn more about, revealing why people act, think, feel, and say the things they do.

This method has enabled us to gain a **contextual understanding** of how the Living Lab interventions are changing culture, values and practices in the research environments engaged in the process.

Through qualitative methods we can explore both; what is required to assume **responsibility for driving change in STEM research** and, at the same time gather perspectives from the affected research talents, experiencing how the interventions of the Living Lab **affect everyday life in academia**.

By being **genuinely curious about both perspectives**, we have gained a thorough understanding of what is at play when working to pave the path for a more diverse STEM research environment.

“

*Anthropological knowledge is based on the researcher **sharing time and space** with the people he or she wants to understand, establishing relationships with them and thereby **experiencing life from their perspective**.*

*The anthropologist follows people, **reflects upon what is being told**, returns with new questions and adjusts the insights accordingly. The method is **open, flexible and grasps the unexpected**.*

Tine Tjørnhøj-Thomsen,
Ind I Verden (2003)

Data and learnings gathered through collaboration and qualitative methods

The Living Labs have each done the work of changing how everyday processes work. They have designed specific interventions and carried them out, each in their own research environment. This has happened in close collaboration with IS IT A BIRD, who has been a sparring partner along the way and systematically gathered data through qualitative methods.

THE LIVING LAB COLLABORATIONS

The Villum Foundation, the Novo Nordisk Foundation and IS IT A BIRD openly invited Danish STEM universities to take on concrete initiatives with an idea pitch of what they wanted to change and how they wanted to approach the challenge.

In total a collaboration with 13 university environments across 5 Danish universities was initiated in autumn 2023 and the Living Labs have been working with their interventions in the collaboration until June 2025.

The 13 Living Labs were divided into two tracks; seven individual Living Labs and six Living Labs gathered into a group who met for a series of workshops.

IS IT A BIRD has been a sparring partner and has on an ongoing basis facilitated, monitored and evaluated the interventions of the Living Labs in close dialogue with the local contact people.

DATA FROM INTERVENTIONS

IS IT A BIRD has followed the Living Lab interventions closely over two years through qualitative methods and in close dialogue with each Living Lab. Methods:

- **Individual ethnographic in-depth interviews** with people involved in the interventions as owners of the Living Lab or as 'end users' of interventions.
- **Participant observation** at events, meetings etc.
- **Focus groups** with scientists, students etc.
- Short individual **participatory interviews** at events or meetings.
- **Workshops** and peer to peer sparring individually and across the Living Labs.
- **Data and documents/materials** developed by and received from the Living Labs.
- Quarterly online **check-ins** with status and sparring.
- **Roundtable discussions** with young researchers, university leadership representatives and foundations.

2

Key insights across the 13 Living Labs

Three key insights on how to pave the path for a more diverse STEM research environment

1.

ANCHORING THE ASPIRATION

Working towards diversity is working with complex systemic change in a highly fragmented and individualised environment. It requires solid anchoring of the ambition across all levels.

2.

PROFESSIONALISING THE ORGANISATION

Replacing informal power with transparency and formal structures allows for a more diverse team. It requires new tools and practises, but once the new structure is in place, it can be more easily implemented across departments and universities.

3.

TAKING ACTION TO INITIATE CHANGE

Action truly speaks louder than words and doing something is better than doing the perfect thing. Prioritising any efforts to change a biased environment communicates importance, inspires others to get started and sets new standards.

When driving systemic change in a *complex* university environment...

The systemic nature of the challenge and the complexity of launching initiatives in a highly hierarchical, regulated university system make it essential to build broad awareness and agency across the organization.

Decision-making at the departmental level can be affected by hidden hierarchies - for example, the influence of a 'research rockstar' or other key individuals - that overshadow formal structures and hinder effective buy-in.

Moreover, successful senior academics may not perceive a lack of diversity as problematic and therefore may not support the proposed changes.



We all operate as small independent businesses. There are some who have a bigger 'shop' than others, who can hire a cashier and have beautiful windows. And then there are the rest of us on the back roads who not many people see.

Living Lab participant

...involving central stakeholders *across* the organisation is key

University leadership and the people in power need to own, accept and address the challenge as well as the concrete initiatives to support diversity. Administrative actors should have available resources to support and 'pave the path' for new ways of doing things and navigating the formal systems framework to help promote the desired change. And finally, key academic researchers are crucial to onboard as both change agents and ambassadors through formal as well as informal networks. The key to change is to activate all layers of the university system: Both the structural, the cultural, the social and the individual.



Identifying and involving a broad group of stakeholders – both in leadership, VIP, PI, employees on all levels, TAP, students etc. It takes time and a persistent effort but pays off in terms of anchoring ambitions.

Living Lab participant

The aspiration for change needs to be anchored on all levels

STRUCTURAL

The faculty and ultimately the university create frameworks and motivations that can support or counteract initiatives towards diversity.

CULTURAL

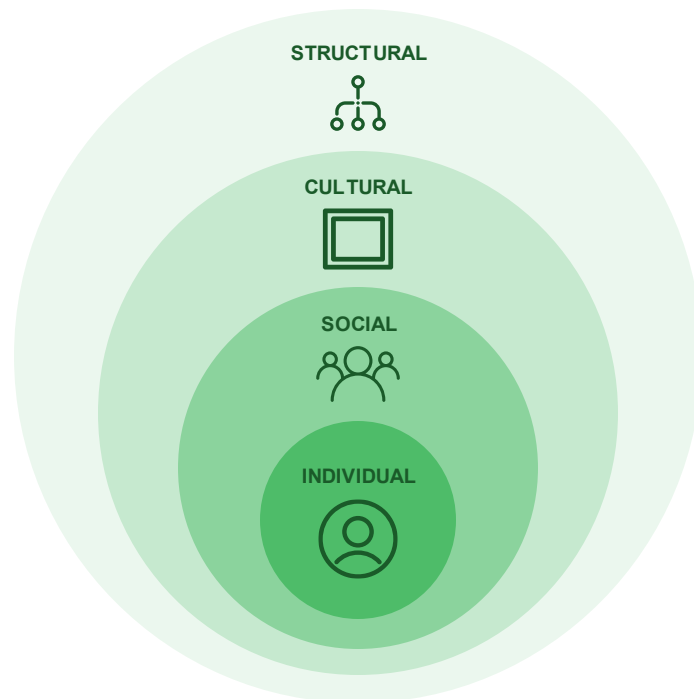
The institute is where you build a sense of belonging and identification, but also where the money and decision power to drive change is anchored.

SOCIAL

The sections, projects, labs and research environments are home to social networks and community.

INDIVIDUAL

Individual 'research rockstars' can shape local culture and practices.



“

Anchoring the initiative in department leadership creates a mandate for change and the necessary support for the project organization. And it is important to have competent staff/people/TAP/VIP to execute and drive the initiatives forward.

Living Lab participant

“

There is a need for someone to drive processes and advance initiatives into the faculty leadership, where the power lies.

The head of department is the one who hires and controls the budget. That's how it is in all departments. If the initiative is not driven by those in power, nothing will happen.

There needs to be a certain level of presence, so if it moves too high up, it becomes too distant.

Certain strong voices define what holds value. And they do not necessarily believe that diversity is something that can or should be addressed.

Living Lab participants

In an organisational culture carried by strong *individuals...*

University environments are characterised by decentralised and fragmented units led by brilliant scientists, each with their names, networks and grant fundings.

These individual 'research rockstars' become important leaders of their own research units and role models for aspiring researchers, but not necessarily with leadership training.

That leaves room for very personal leadership styles, informal structures or 'hidden curriculums' that leave a lot of room for individual interpretations and unequal access to information or status.



It means a lot whether or not you have someone who sees you and who makes an effort to support you. So, there is some unfairness in the system as it is now.

Living Lab Participant

...there is a need for transparent structures and *professionalisation*

Providing clear communication and expectations is a compassionate and respectful act that holds potential to support equal access for all. Professionalization is about formalising the informal, making the implicit explicit and establishing a transparent dialogue about what 'good' looks like.

Professionalization is about lifting the responsibility - and thus, to some degree, power - away from the individual and placing it with a robust structure that guides culture and behaviour. Through professionalization, individual norms are replaced with a collective framework to guide action.



We need clear frameworks: These are the demands, and when you live up to them, you have delivered. Then, it is no longer dependent on who you can convince that your idea is brilliant. Today, it can be very unclear to researchers early in their career. They don't know what it takes.

Living Lab Participant

INSIGHT #2 – PROFESSIONALISING THE ORGANISATION

Cultural change requires working *with* the system and changing it too

Enabling diversity requires a change of core values and practices. To do so, a double strategy serves as a way forward:

- **Working with existing logics and building status around the agenda** by building research projects and receiving grants on the diversity agenda
- **Adding new logics by building (new) systems that create institutional memory** by improving existing structures or building new structures and procedures to support professionalisation



People think that diversity and inclusion are important, but every time we try to do things in new ways, it involves more bureaucracy and takes more time. We might agree to do something, but when time is limited, we have to prioritise, and it often doesn't get chosen. That's why it's so important for me to initiate a research project, so it becomes the primary focus with dedicated resources. It's my way of changing the agenda.

Living Lab Participant



It requires more bureaucracy, and it entails a lot of extra tasks, but we need to do it to create institutional memory.

- Living Lab participant

Adding new systems may seem counterintuitive. But it is an important tool for changing behaviours – both with the individual but ultimately on an institutional level.

BUILDING STATUS
AROUND THE
AGENDA THROUGH
PROJECT FUNDING

BUILDING (NEW)
SYSTEMS THAT
CREATE
INSTITUTIONAL
MEMORY

When applying for, and receiving grants for, research projects that address the diversity agenda, it builds status around the topic and gives merit to the researchers involved. Working within existing logics of the academic world where grants build status, a focus on diversity becomes attractive and career enhancing.

IS IT A 3IRD

When initiating change, it is more important to start doing *something*...

Some of the participants in the living labs found it daunting to address the difficult subject of diversity.

The subject itself can be controversial and may spark dramatic emotions, both with the people having the experience of being a minority, but also with the people who are now asked to change their ways and worldview.

In a STEM research environment guided by hard facts and data, addressing a people-problem can feel as though it's outside of people's main competence areas. And all of this on top of an everyday that is already demanding of both time and mental energy.

“

Just the fact that the institute sent out a survey communicates a lot. This is a big step for them. And even though they are still exploring the problem, that in itself is part of the solution.

Living Lab Participant

...than to be certain that what is done is the *perfect thing*

In an academic environment where thinking is at the core, action may not be the go-to mode, and it can be tempting to try to figure it all out before doing anything. However, participants of the Living Labs found it effective to simply just get started and see where it goes.

It is not about waiting for the right moment, the perfect academic argument or developing a flawless or innovative solution; it is about daring to experiment and learn along the way. The result may not be an overnight revolution, but to initiate a change and communicate the ambition through interventions, lowering the barrier to get started.

“

The success is that we even have a process for search committees. That's probably because it was the biggest challenge at the start, and I believe that when we begin doing it in the next round, it will be embedded in a way that allows us to start focusing further within the framework of that process.

Living Lab Participant

Initiating action matters more than you think: Small changes here and now make a big difference over time and space

Investing effort and time in driving change can be difficult alongside busy daily work, and when the outcome is not immediately measurable. However, the contributions often extend beyond the changes visible here and now. Subtle shifts in conversations and dynamics during everyday interactions may not seem like significant change, but Living Labs experience that enduring investments hold a potential for improving diversity.

LONG TERM INVESTMENTS FOR THE BENEFIT OF ALL



It is difficult to invest when you don't know what the return will be. The return isn't particularly measurable. I have a 50/50 gender balance in my team, but I can't sense the bigger change. I am making a long-term investment that all my colleagues are benefitting from. Everyone is capitalising on the investment we're making.

Living Lab participant

The impact of personal contributions often extends well beyond the immediate circle of influence, leading to broader changes across faculties and departments. As experiences and systems gain recognition, others can build upon them with less effort. The pioneering initiatives of the Living Labs pave the path for others to follow, underscoring the importance of individual actions in driving systemic change: You matter more than you might think!

THE VALUE GOES BEYOND THE RESEARCH ENVIRONMENT



The value creation goes beyond the research environment. They will set it in motion because now they want to try to establish a search committee, somewhat inspired by our way of doing things. So, every time someone has more systematised experience, there are almost always others who find it easier to accomplish something because they don't have to reinvent the wheel.

Living Lab participant

3

Unfolding the Solution Themes of the Living Labs

– and what we can learn from
them

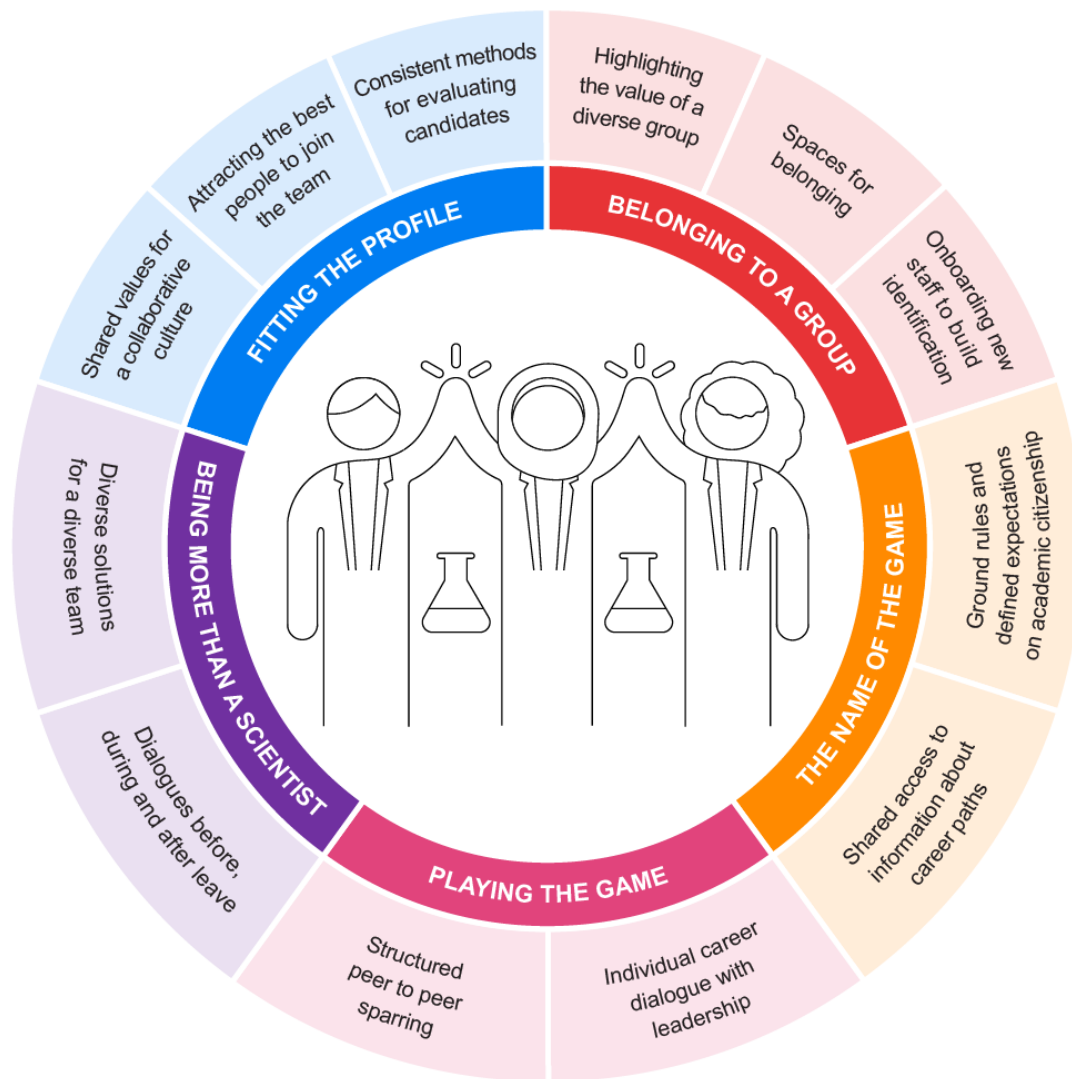
Five arenas for change: Solution Themes from the Living Labs

The Living Labs have addressed the five barriers identified in the study with new solutions.

The following chapter will introduce concrete solutions for each of the five barriers and go through examples and perspectives on each solution, based on the work of the university environments taking part as Living Labs.

The aim is to help anyone interested in making a change towards a more diverse research environment to find inspiration and concrete next steps for how to approach the issue. For each solution, we will introduce why it is important, who to involve and what steps to take.

The solutions can be read and applied one by one, or you can initiate more solutions at the same time, positioning your research environment for both deep and broad cultural change.

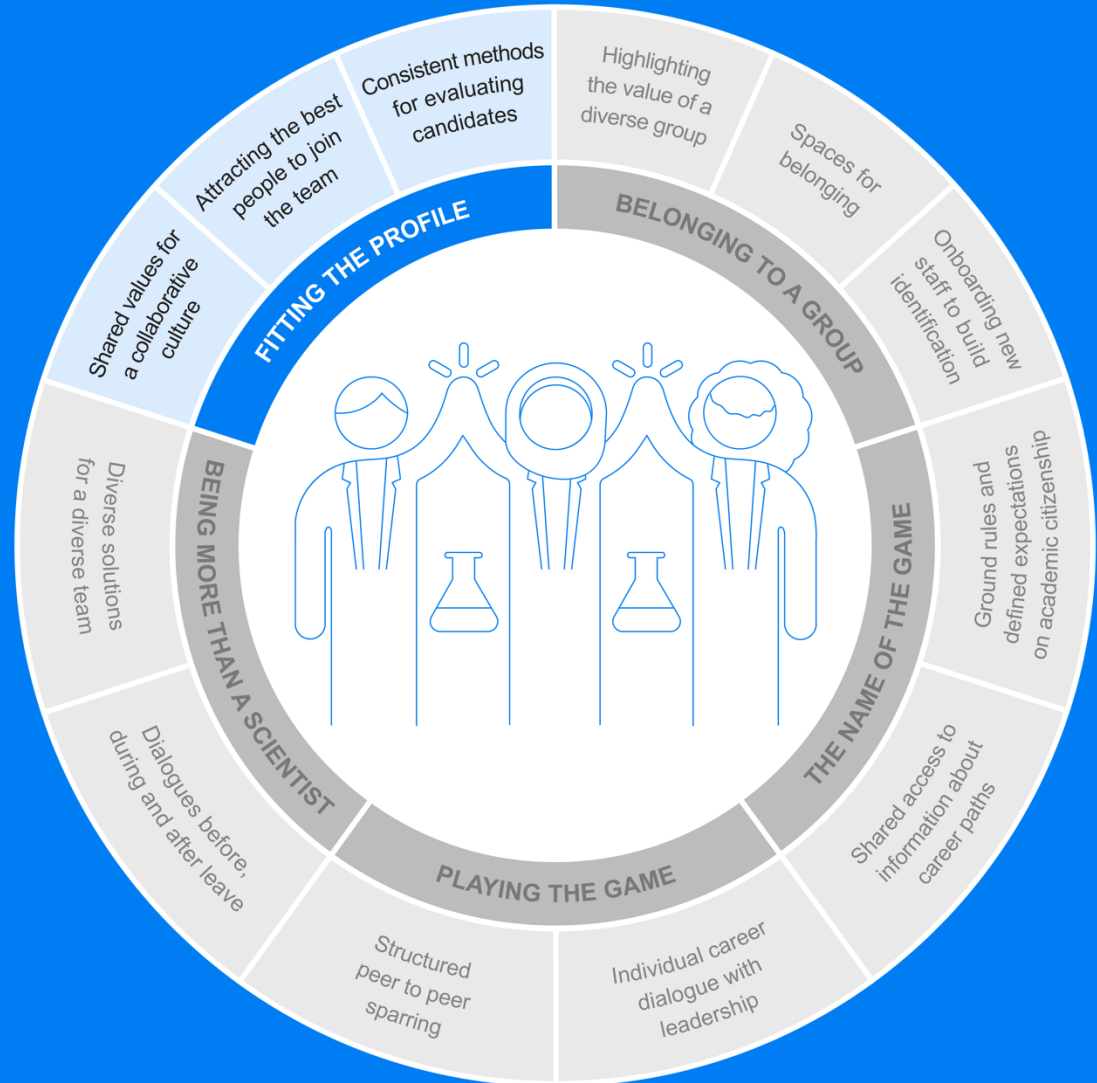


Fitting the profile

Female talents experience not fitting the profile of a scientist. The recruitment process holds the potential to encourage female talents, as well as transparently showcasing the diverse paths of an academic career.

Approaches from the Living Labs:

- Shared values for a collaborative culture
- Attracting the best people to join the team
- Consistent methods for evaluating candidates



Define values of a new pioneer centre - CAPeX

At CAPeX, they have explored and defined the values of their rather newly established pioneer centre. The staff had different ideas and perceptions of the work/research environment of which many of them were implicit. When collectively putting words on how the centre is perceived, it creates a shared understanding of the centre, supports identity building and group culture and helps communicate this to the outside world.

The values are reflected in job postings and have been integral in developing a template for interviewing potential candidates.

“

It sets thought processes into motion. The people who have not been close to the process also have got their thinking going about their own and the Departments' values.

Living Lab participant

Shared values for a collaborative culture



WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

When building a highly skilled research team, not only the academic capabilities matter. Social and cultural skills are also valued. Therefore, when looking for new profiles or when working with the culture of an existing team, it is valuable to engage in a conversation across the research group to create a shared idea of the values that are important to build the desired culture. Values would be individual to each research environment, but examples could include; a collaborative approach, not being afraid to bring early ideas forward or caring for the group and others' success as well as ones' own.



KEY PEOPLE TO INVOLVE

Working on shared values call for a very broad involvement.

- Key leadership profiles must front the work
- Involvement of high-profile scientists for buy-in and ownership as well as young scientists who shape the future
- Involvement of administrative personnel to make sure the values are implemented in central documents and procedures.



ACTIONS TO TAKE/GOOD PRACTICE

- Invite broadly in the department to have a conversation about how various people consider and define e.g. the work environment, the qualifications of a good colleague, a collaborative culture etc.
- Write down the input gathered from various voices across all levels
- Formulate the values clearly and collect feedback to iterate the process
- Share the values with the department, leadership etc. for alignment and invite for feedback

Attracting the best people to join the team



WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Attracting the right candidates to join a team is crucial for fostering innovation and maintaining competitive advantage. This process requires a strategic and neutral approach, recognising that identifying individuals with the right qualifications and potential is not just about listing credentials, but about reaching out to a diverse pool of candidates with both talent and personalities to add to the team.



KEY PEOPLE TO INVOLVE

- Leading researchers with hiring responsibility are key to the hiring processes. They hold experience to be shared and power to shape the teams.
- Administrative personnel can facilitate processes of rethinking job-postings or 'user journeys' for applicants.
- The local DEI team can give feedback on job postings. They are the team of experts who can detect exclusive language and suggest what to add and remove.



ACTIONS TO TAKE/GOOD PRACTICE

- Invite leading researchers for joint sessions or conversations about how to attract the best people and share good practice.
- To understand the hiring process of the department, try mapping the elements of what it consists of now and consider the user journey of the applicant: How can you make it more attractive or simple?
- Structure the early search for candidates by letting key people from the research group reach out.
- Consider what and how you communicate, not only about the position, but also the context of work environment, values, cultural context of country, city, welfare structure etc.

CASE FROM LIVING LAB

Rewriting job positing with DEI team Department of Green Technology - SDU

SDU has sharpened the external communication in the job postings with success in attracting a broader applicant pool. In collaboration with the local DEI knowledge hub, they focused on awareness of the language and not only wrote what kind of talent they were looking for but also added a section describing what the potential candidates can expect from the research and work environment at SDU.

Structuring the search committees Department of Computer Science - AAU

As their focus in the Living Lab, AAU has mapped the journey of the search committees' tasks to better understand *the why* and *the how* of the search committees. They have changed the internal and external communication of the search committee e.g. from collecting little information about the candidate profile to filling out a comprehensive profile to qualify the candidate; letting the group leader, who will work closely with the candidate, encourage a potential candidate instead of the institute leader; and sending an *information package* to the candidates, describing the work environment and culture of the department and broadly about what a life in Denmark with welfare benefits might look like.

Template to guide job interviews CAPeX

"Everyone runs interviews differently" (CAPeX). When practice around interviews vary, it challenges the basis of comparison between potential candidates. CAPeX is in the process of building a new research centre and have developed a template to guide job interviews when setting the team. The template provides a systematic and more aligned approach. The document consists of fixed questions that must be asked, and flexible questions that are optional and can guide the conversation. It has proven consistency and basis of comparison when teams evaluate potential candidates.

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I think it changes the way the conversation unfolds. Whether it provides a better or different flow, it certainly creates a more unbiased flow. Without a structured format, the conversation is more fluid, but not everything gets asked. Overall, it gives a better and more comparable picture of the candidates, and everyone is assessed more objectively.

Living Lab participant

Consistent methods for evaluating candidates



WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

There are unconscious biases to consider when recruiting talent, such as affinity bias, meaning one gravitates towards people like themselves. Introducing a clear, shared and transparent structure in the job interview supports a more professional and fair hiring process that can potentially reduce bias and personal preference.



KEY PEOPLE TO INVOLVE

- The leadership team needs to set direction for the content. What are the important questions to ask to assess potential team members?
- Hiring PIs are the users of the interview template and should be invited to give input and feedback to the questions.
- Administrative personnel will be key in distributing the guide across research units.



ACTIONS TO TAKE/GOOD PRACTICE

- Facilitate a dialogue between anyone involved in hiring processes to define the future aspirations and concrete need for new methods for evaluating candidates.
- Identify what qualifications or values the department is looking for, also beyond the professional skills e.g. explore and define what personal qualities are necessary to drive an excellent research environment.
- Develop concrete tools, e.g. merit criteria, process playbook or an interview guide that includes input from different perspectives: Newly hired, experienced researchers, administrative personnel etc.
- It is important not only to distribute new tools for hiring, but also that leadership profiles motivate why it is important and create room to discuss it and take feedback from people who play a key role in hiring processes.



FITTING THE PROFILE

Advice from Living Labs

- *Shared values for a collaborative culture*
- *Attracting the best people to join the team*
- *Consistent methods for evaluating candidates*



Involve broadly and thoroughly when identifying values. The values will only be of consequence if they are owned by key people involved in the hiring processes.



Enter a close collaboration with administrative colleagues who can help translate values and aspirations into concrete hiring frameworks.

Administrative colleagues can help facilitate processes and translate the results into documents and procedures related to hiring processes to be shared across the research environment or across departments.



Make sure to anchor new hiring frameworks with anyone who plays a key role in shaping the team. If the people in front of the hiring processes do not feel ownership, the tools will not be used properly or not at all.



Communicate the purpose and task of diverse hires repeatedly.

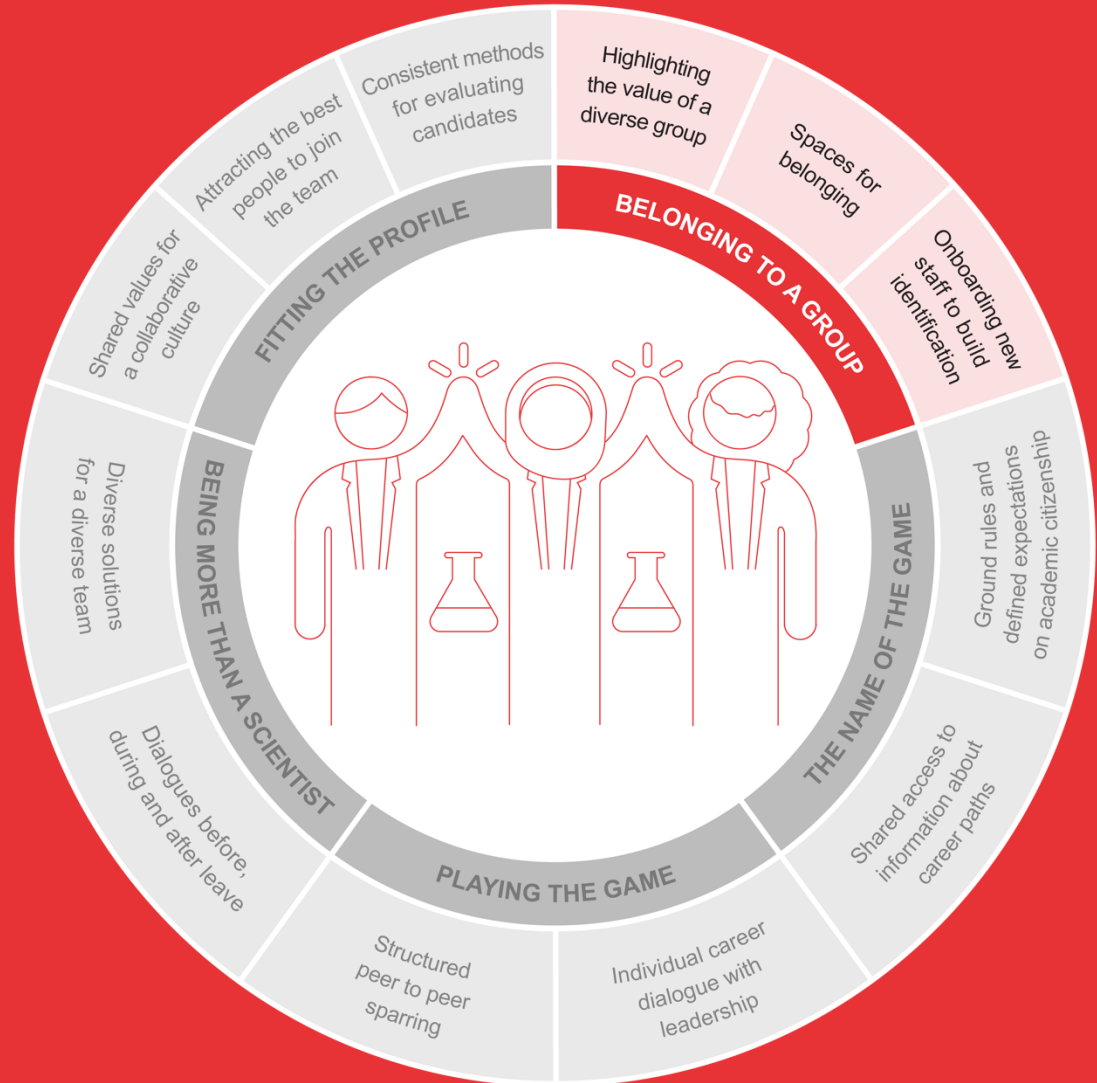
Communication is key and the motivation lies in the purpose of shaping the team best prepared for groundbreaking research. Everybody has a lot on their desk and *the why* of a task can easily be forgotten in other loads of information.

Belonging to a group

Female talents experience not belonging to a group and being treated differently because of who they are rather than the work they do. A potential lies in nurturing the working environment within the research group, influencing the overall experience of being a scientist.

Approaches from the Living Labs:

- Highlighting the value of a diverse group
- Spaces for belonging and psychological safety
- Onboarding new staff to build identification



Introducing a Guest Speaker Series Quantum Physics and Information Technology - DTU

"With this we are trying to grow awareness. To have a people perspective, not just science" (QPIT). The Guest Speaker Series is an initiative focused on connecting individuals across varied backgrounds and disciplines, providing access to role models beyond stereotypical researchers. The series offers insights into diverse research fields and career paths, aiming to promote understanding across academia and industry. Featuring monthly talks, with at least 20% female speakers, the series aims to cultivate a more balanced representation, offering new role models and encouraging engagement across different career stages and areas of work.

“

I think the challenge is always that in the group we have so many subgroups with very different specializations. For example, in my group, we work with sensing. It's not very similar to what the others do. I feel like it's difficult sometimes to understand the other subjects. This guest series is an opportunity to understand a bit more about the other group, what they are doing on a more general level. Here we can ask the stupid questions.

Living Lab participant

Highlighting the value of a diverse group



WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Having diverse perspectives that challenge individual viewpoints can often lead to epistemic friction. Epistemic friction is a state that can be uncomfortable to be in, but worth it, since diversity enriches the research process by enabling the exchange of ideas that may not emerge in more homogenous groups, fostering creativity and breakthroughs that lead to outstanding research. This requires an environment that values the diverse group, but also concrete structures that support and invite different perspectives to the table.



KEY PEOPLE TO INVOLVE

- The leadership team to show in words and action that diverse perspectives are valued. And also, setting up structural incentives for cross practise collaborations and inclusion of diverse perspectives.
- Senior researchers fronting large projects are very important ambassadors in nurturing a curious environment where every voice is heard and valued



ACTIONS TO TAKE/GOOD PRACTICE

- Embrace epistemic friction, knowing that critique is key to solid knowledge
- Voice the value of a diverse group in different communication occasions. Coming from the leadership team, it holds value and weight.
- Conduct surveys or other efforts that show interest in taking the topic of diversity and inclusion seriously.
- Set up structures that allow all voices to be heard, eg. making sure that everyone gets to speak during a meeting
- Frame a discussion on what a good team looks like and what different professional and personal perspectives hold value, and use this as basis of hiring, shaping research teams in individual conversations etc.
- Identify and reward high-functioning, diverse and creative teams
- Identify diverse role models and provide a 'stage' for them to shine, either literally at official events, or in writing, on websites etc.

Spaces for belonging and psychological safety



WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Feeling included significantly impacts psychological well-being, boosting motivation, confidence, and engagement while reducing stress and anxiety. Strong spaces for belonging and psychological safety plays a key role in allowing individuals to express questions and opinions without fear, which enriches discussions and is ultimately a critical foundation for excellent research.

As a minority in the group, your sense of belonging can be challenged and some express how a lack of belonging leads to insecurity and hesitancy to ask questions or speak up.



KEY PEOPLE TO INVOLVE

- If the target group is women at a department, the first thing to do is to get a dialogue started with them about current priorities and needs. The target group needs to own and influence the idea, and it needs to fit into their everyday.
- Leadership at department level is key to back and/or initiate spaces of belonging
- Administrative people can help arrange the frameworks around concrete initiatives.



ACTIONS TO TAKE/GOOD PRACTICE

- Build community through concrete activities: networks, mentorship programmes, informative talks, etc. that cater to different needs and identities.
- Ensure a diverse range of featured role models when giving the microphone to researchers, e.g. ensure access to female role model.
- Explore through surveys, interviews or informal conversations, the topic of “feeling of belonging” at the university, institute or faculty. Act upon those data, to initiate initiatives that foster belonging.
- Access to strong role models further enhances this sense of belonging, offering inspiration and guidance to those who might not identify with the stereotypical “research rockstar” or struggle to fit into existing norms.

CASE FROM LIVING LAB

Rethinking “Women in CAPeX” - CAPeX

The network Woman in CAPeX focuses on networking across female researchers. CAPeX discovered that there were already existing for targeted women, making it important to rethink the setup and explore possible collaborations to make it both relevant and sustainable to run.



What we see with networks is that they're easy to start but hard to keep going. Identification shifts over time—from your study program, then your department, and finally the faculty—yet the faculty level can make things harder. Your professional identity sits in the research environment or institute, not the faculty. Placement and organization can be difficult.

Living Lab participant



Don't be afraid to ask questions, don't be afraid to stand out, don't be afraid to be ambitious.

Advice to younger female researchers
from a more senior female researcher

A standardised onboarding procedure for new employees Department of Green Technology - SDU

Facilitating a smooth transition for new hires is vital to a successful integration, which is why SDU has implemented a simple but structured onboarding procedure. This program clearly outlines responsibilities for each onboarding step, includes the appointment of a buddy and features a welcome breakfast. It also provides essential information on logistics, such as where to meet the employee and pick up IT equipment, ensuring new staff feel supported and welcomed from day one.

“

We are working on implementing buddy programs and mentorship networks, but it is not that easy. It requires careful planning, commitment from both mentors and mentees, and ongoing support from the university administration.

Living Lab participant

Onboarding new staff to build identification



WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

In research environments, a hidden curriculum often shapes the norms and expectations and navigating this takes up time away from the actual task of doing groundbreaking research. To improve retention and foster a sense of belonging, it is essential to support new staff in their onboarding process, helping them connect with the people, the procedures, and the culture. Effective onboarding enables researchers to navigate academic surroundings confidently, facilitating identification with the group and demystifying academic expectations.



KEY PEOPLE TO INVOLVE

- The leadership team is to set direction for the onboarding procedure and to own the continuous communication of the existence and importance of the onboarding procedures.
- University administration provides support by developing and updating the onboarding materials and procedures.
- (Senior) researchers hold the responsibility of onboarding new employees to the project work.



ACTIONS TO TAKE/GOOD PRACTICE

- Standardise onboarding procedures, including written onboarding material and a good personal welcome.
- Make onboarding material accessible for all, e.g. on intranet, through collective meetings or peer-sparring and reiterate the importance of bringing the material into use.
- Onboard to 'the Danish system' for international employees both inside the academic world but also acknowledging the need to make a whole life work both inside and outside of work e.g., regarding childcare.
- Initiate buddy- or mentorship programmes: These programs aim to pair new hires or younger researchers with more experienced colleagues who can provide guidance, support, and help them integrate into the university's culture and work environment.



BELONGING TO A GROUP

Advice from Living Labs

- *Highlighting the value of a diverse group*
- *Establishing spaces for belonging*
- *Onboarding new staff to build identification*



Cater for different needs and ensure psychological safety through spaces where members feel safe to ask any question, including those they fear might seem trivial. Consider formats that facilitate discussion, such as having attendees talk with a partner before opening questions to the group. This helps build confidence and fosters a culture where all contributions are valued.



Consider carefully who you invite to the stage, as they are a big part in painting the picture of what defines excellent researchers. Choose a diverse range of speakers who can serve as relatable role models.



Integrate new initiatives into existing systems by leveraging current structures, such as networks, platforms and meetings, ensuring initiatives provide direct value and are not merely symbolic. Collaborating with existing initiatives can strengthen efforts without overburdening participants and ensure a sustainable model for ownership.



Seek out solutions where what is good for diversity also supports career progression: When initiating new initiatives strive for a dual purpose, to both strengthen diversity and belonging while also being career-enhancing. When this is the case, it is much easier for the individual scientist to prioritise time and effort.



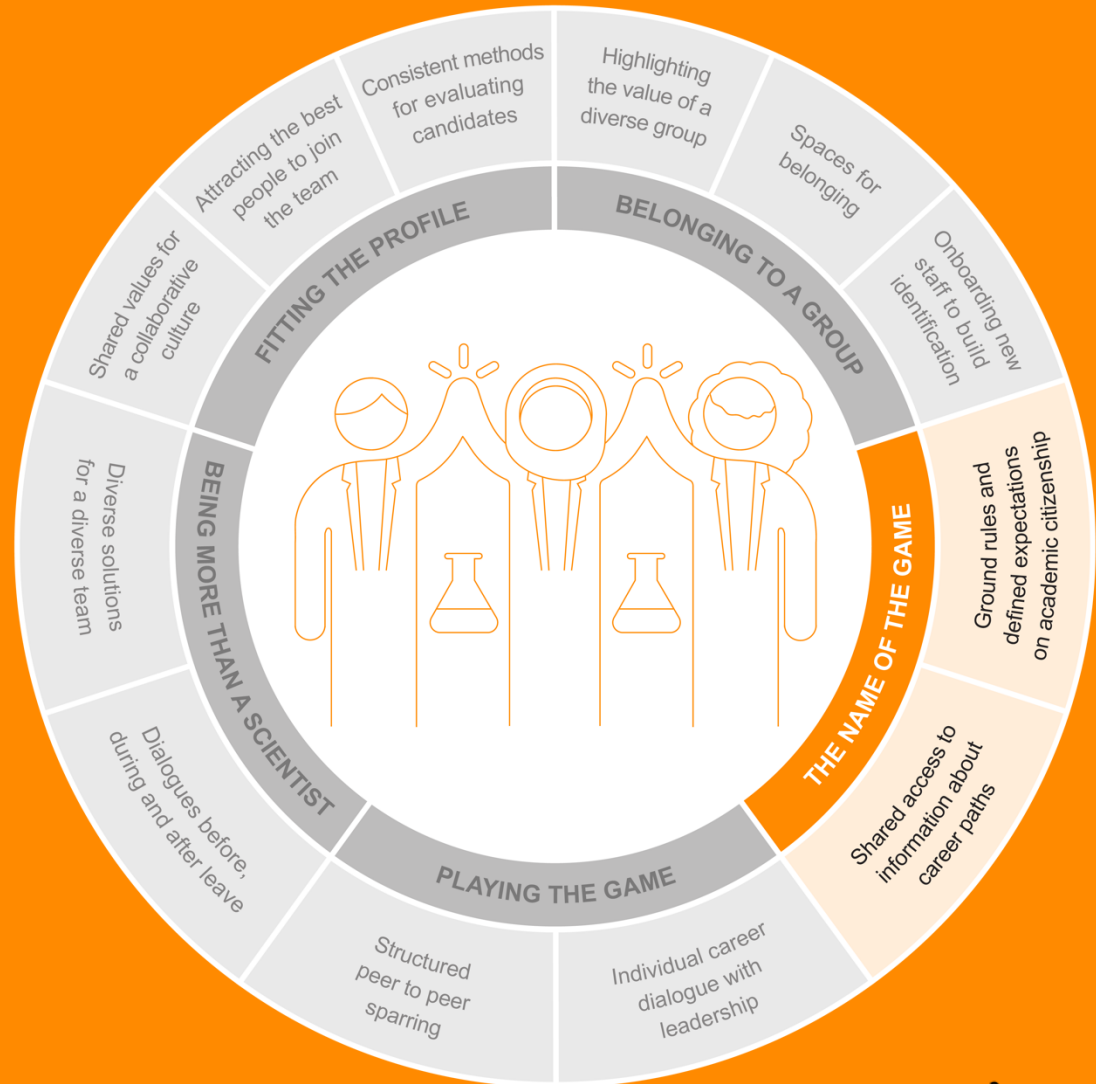
Culture is key. Cultivating the ability to see things from various perspectives and minimise biases requires ongoing effort—it is a skill that needs continual practice and reinforcement but is needed to make everyone feel welcomed and included into the workplace.

The name of the game

In academia, merit systems and unspoken rules shape how scientists manage their careers. To level the field, institutions must be explicit about what is recognised and rewarded—and shed light on who carries the load of “academic housekeeping.” Opening up knowledge about “the game” gives all researchers clearer navigation points and increases the chance of being in the right place at the right time.

Approaches from the Living Labs:

- Ground rules and defined expectations on academic citizenship
- Shared access to information about career paths



Facilitating a panel debate on merits and Academic Citizenship GLOBE Institute - KU

At GLOBE, a panel debate turned out to be an effective strategic tool to create a shared focus on discussing merits and a shared understanding of "academic citizenship". The panel debate gave a platform to act upon and as a result, GLOBE Institute developed a framework with building blocks outlining the expectations for academic citizenship, expanding the focus beyond traditional metrics of excellence. After the debate, there is a shared understanding of an important focus going forward.

“

There's recognition that we must address these issues. We can now begin shaping how we work together, how we value contributions, and how we organise ourselves to attract the next generation and retain current talent. The panel debate was a disruption that made it clear that this can't be ignored, creating an obligation to continue moving forward.

Living Lab participant

Ground rules and defined expectations on academic citizenship



WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Academic citizenship is the set of responsibilities and behaviours through which members of a scholarly community contribute to its collective well-being - beyond their own research and teaching. These tasks are referred to as "Academic housework" and are often unevenly distributed, with women taking more responsibility for tasks that do not directly advance their career³.

By broadening expectations and understandings of merit and value into 'academic citizenship', universities highlight the value of contributions beyond traditional metrics.

This serves to encourage diverse forms of achievement and establishes status around important and necessary tasks, that are crucial to scientific success but have not traditionally carried merit.



ACTIONS TO TAKE/GOOD PRACTICE

- Facilitate open discussions among faculty, staff, and students to collaboratively shape the understanding of what brings value and what good academic citizenship looks like.
- Shift focus from traditional metrics of individual success to an understanding of societal impact.
- Recognise and reward individuals and teams who demonstrate outstanding academic citizenship.



KEY PEOPLE TO INVOLVE

- When working with fundamental aspects of academia such as what defines success and what merits should look like, leadership support is crucial.
- Key researchers who serve as role models are important to have onboard: They are ambassadors for cultural shifts in perception of merit and how to measure talent.

3: Järvinen, M. & Meier, N. (2025): Giving and receiving: Gendered Service work in Academia. *Current Sociology*, 73(3), 302-320. CBS Copenhagen Business School.

Shared access to information about career paths



WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

In academia, the concept of 'being in the right place at the right time' often hinges on access to timely information about career paths.

By establishing transparent and accessible channels, institutions foster a culture where individuals can make informed decisions about their careers. This approach helps dismantle barriers that often prevent diverse talent from thriving and developing, ensuring all researchers have equal opportunities to understand and pursue various career paths.



KEY PEOPLE TO INVOLVE

- Administrative staff have an important role to play in making knowledge about career paths accessible through existing channels, e.g. websites, onboarding materials etc.
- Leadership holds the responsibility of identifying and formulating possible career paths and supporting the transparent communication on career paths in collaboration with administrative staff.



ACTIONS TO TAKE/GOOD PRACTICE

- Communicate updates on study program regulations broadly, making them accessible to everyone.
- Utilise centralised platforms for career information: Develop or leverage existing platforms where members can consistently find information about career paths and development opportunities.
- Ensure that supervisors and mentors are onboarded to give good supervision, so they can play an active role in discussions about career options to support ongoing development.

CASE FROM LIVING LAB

PhD Lunches

Department of Computer Science - KU

Department of Computer Science, KU, has initiated "PhD Lunches" that aims to align information across all PhD students for equal access, reducing dependency on individual supervisors for knowledge sharing. During these lunches, which take place several times per semester, various topics are discussed to ensure that PhD students have the necessary information about their program, curriculum, career opportunities etc.



I've found that the relationship between PhD-students and their supervisors is crucial, yet there can be significant variation in the provided information and support.

Living Lab participant



The framework for promotions is so unclear. There is not really anyone who dares to say, 'do this and that'. It's like it's a secret.

Living Lab participant



THE NAME OF THE GAME

Advice from Living Labs

- *Ground rules and defined expectations on academic citizenship*
- *Shared access to information about career paths*



Define clear frameworks for promotions by clearly outlining the criteria and expectations, ensuring researchers understand the pathways to advancement and can strategically plan their career progression.



Allocate time for clarification and discussion. Schedule dedicated sessions with employees and students to interpret requirements and address any questions.



Periodically review and update the standards of academic citizenship, maintaining relevance and addressing emerging challenges in the academic environment.



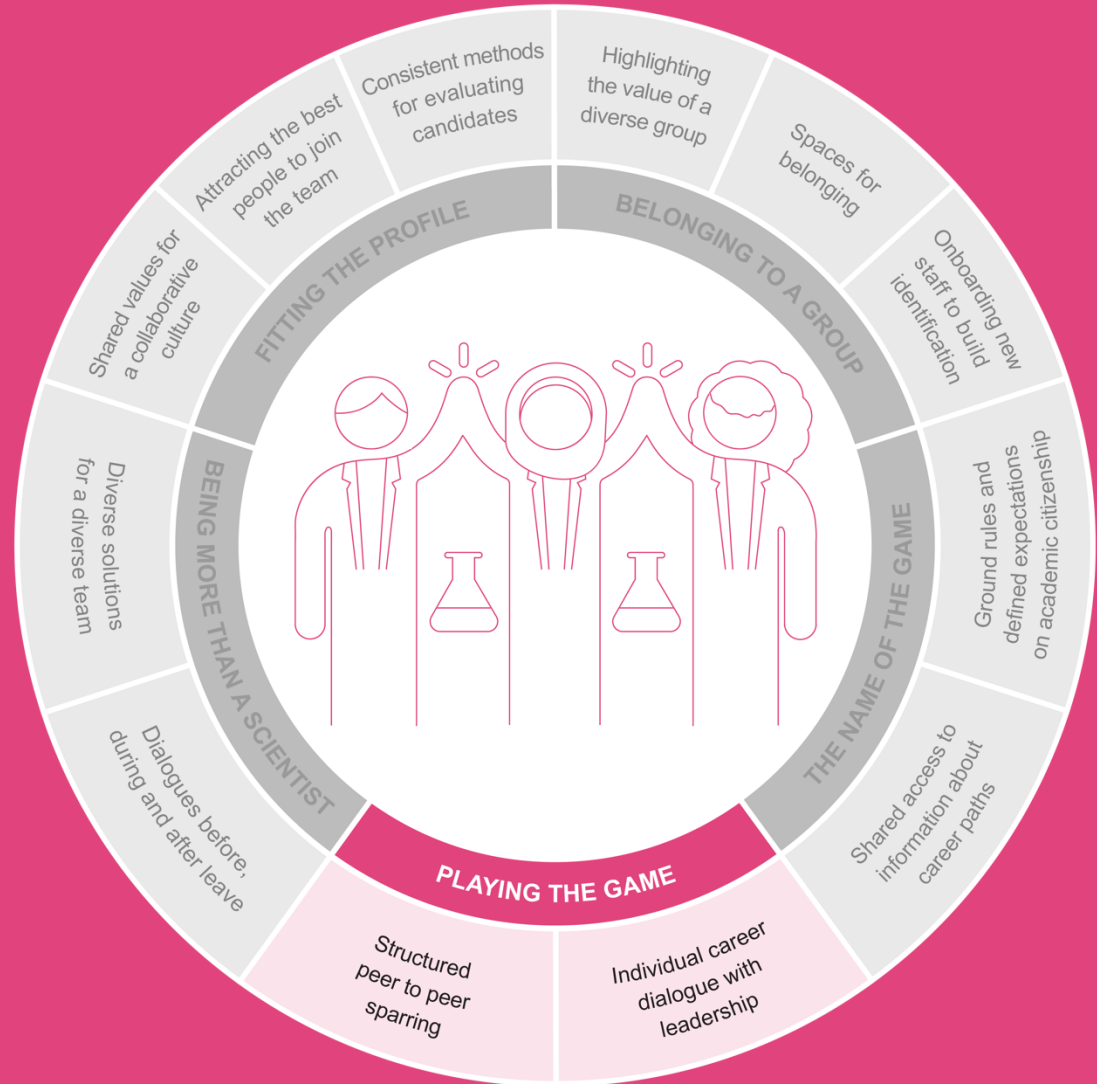
Identify both formal and informal arenas where information about career paths is shared, to increase equal access.

Playing the game

Female scientists experience that it takes specific traits to play the game of academia in order to succeed; there is a potential in helping researchers “play the game” more effectively, by providing access to informal networks, targeted sparring and individual career guidance to demystify expectations and accelerate advancement.

Approaches from the Living Labs:

- Individual career dialogue with leadership
- Structured peer to peer sparring



Implementing a second 'MUS' (employee development conversation) Department of Green Technology - SDU

The Department of Green Technology has introduced of a second employee development conversation for postdocs and assistant professors to supplement the yearly obligatory conversation that is already happening. The focus is to discuss future aspirations and career paths and has been an effective step towards structured career dialogues with leadership, enabling a deeper discussion of personal career objectives and pathways.



The second MUS conversation is appreciated on both sides—it's an opportunity to target specific career-related topics and strategies for future development.



Living Lab participant

The second MUS helps internationals to know more about our future plans. We need it a bit earlier than the natives. Sometimes this can be worrying if you are not confident enough to raise the issue yourself.

International postdoc at SDU

Individual career dialogue with leadership



WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Having structured conversations with leadership about one's career goals and -paths is essential for alignment on potentials across leadership and team. Career potentials are both dependent on the ambition and capabilities of the researcher as well as the capacity of the organization. A transparent dialogue helps uncover if and how individual aspirations and organizational needs can meet and helps clarify promotional potentials, uncover personal strengths, and prioritise high-impact tasks, empowering researchers to manage their careers effectively and set clear paths to reach their personal ambitions.

By reducing ambiguity and aligning individual aspirations with institutional goals, these conversations enable strategic decision-making and personal growth to the benefit of the individual as well as the research environment.

For internationals, navigating a local career system can be especially challenging and you need certainty about your potential future career steps well in advance to plan for potential movements of yourself and potentially your family across countries.



ACTIONS TO TAKE/GOOD PRACTICE

- Schedule structured employee development conversations that focus on career progression, personal strengths, and task prioritization to facilitate open dialogue between researchers and leadership.
- Create a brief pre-meeting employee development conversation template that can be filled out before the conversation to ensure a focus on well-being and career development.
- Encourage transparent dialogue about career uncertainties to alleviate stress and provide clear guidance on promotion and advancement.



KEY PEOPLE TO INVOLVE

- The individual structured touch points for career dialogue is to be anchored with the leadership who need to prioritise the time and resources.
- Administrative staff can help developing and distributing frameworks for discussion, inviting for meetings etc.

Structured peer to peer sparring



WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

To foster fair advancement, it is vital to help researchers “play the game” more effectively by opening doors to relevant peer-to-peer sparring.

Structured peer-to-peer sparring creates equal and reliable pathways for knowledge sharing, moving support from chance encounters to deliberate, transparent and equal practices.

When paired with structured engagement in wider networks of peers, researchers can gain broader perspectives from peers who are relatable and can mirror ones' own situation, struggles and aspirations.

Embedding peer to peer efforts within DEI-driven infrastructures - through manager and mentor training, inclusive recruitment protocols, and administrative alignment – peer-to-peer support is not a one-off initiative but a sustained foundation for diverse talent development.



ACTIONS TO TAKE/GOOD PRACTICE

- Define one or more “problem areas” for knowledge gaps for researchers that mentors should focus on.
- Set a clear scene of the sparring e.g., by identifying and describing the roles of the participating peers and creating clear frameworks for how and when to meet and what to discuss.
- Kick-off the sparring through facilitated informal events, where interested researchers can take part, influence the setup and start the conversation and build relations.
- Give training to management and mentors to being able to provide better support.



KEY PEOPLE TO INVOLVE

- Leadership holds the responsibility of initiating the peer-to-peer conversation e.g., by facilitating events voicing the importance of taking part.
- Administrative staff can help setting the scene and providing clear frameworks

CASE FROM LIVING LAB

Formalising peer-to-peer sparring and giving access to networks

Department of Computer Science - KU

DIKU is formalising peer-to-peer sparring to strengthen researcher development and collaboration. They are doing so by establishing a Tenure track network including training for tenure track mentors that equips mentors to give qualified sparring on 5 identified problem areas. DIKU has also integrated DIKU postdoctoral fellows into a well-established UCPH-wide postdoc network, expanding interdisciplinary connections and access to structured sparring.

Mentoring programme for new hires

Department of Green Technology - SDU

When onboarding varies it hinders integration and early career development. Green Technology at SDU pairs each new assistant, associate, or full professor with an experienced mentor. The programme sets clear expectations for regular check-ins and offers flexible formats—one-to-one, group, or virtual—over at least one academic year, focusing on research trajectory, grant applications, work-life balance, and career perspectives. The structure enhances consistent onboarding and provides a strong basis for professional growth and departmental cohesion.



PLAYING THE GAME

Advice from Living Labs

- *Individual career dialogue with leadership*
- *Structured peer-to-peer sparring*



Keep career conversations tightly focused on objectives—avoid drifting into general chit-chat or facilities issues (e.g., “sofa” topics) that can be handled elsewhere.



Strengthen retention by showcasing career development support - particularly for assistant professors - recognising that salaries are not highly competitive and proactive guidance is essential to keep talent.



Be transparent when giving career guidance. Not all assistant professors will get tenure. Be honest with your employees. Their future career may lay outside the organization and in this case the best help is to ensure they are employable.



Plan ahead. Consider establishing a scheduled plan for future contracts at least six months prior to the end of current ones to enhance security for those in temporary positions.



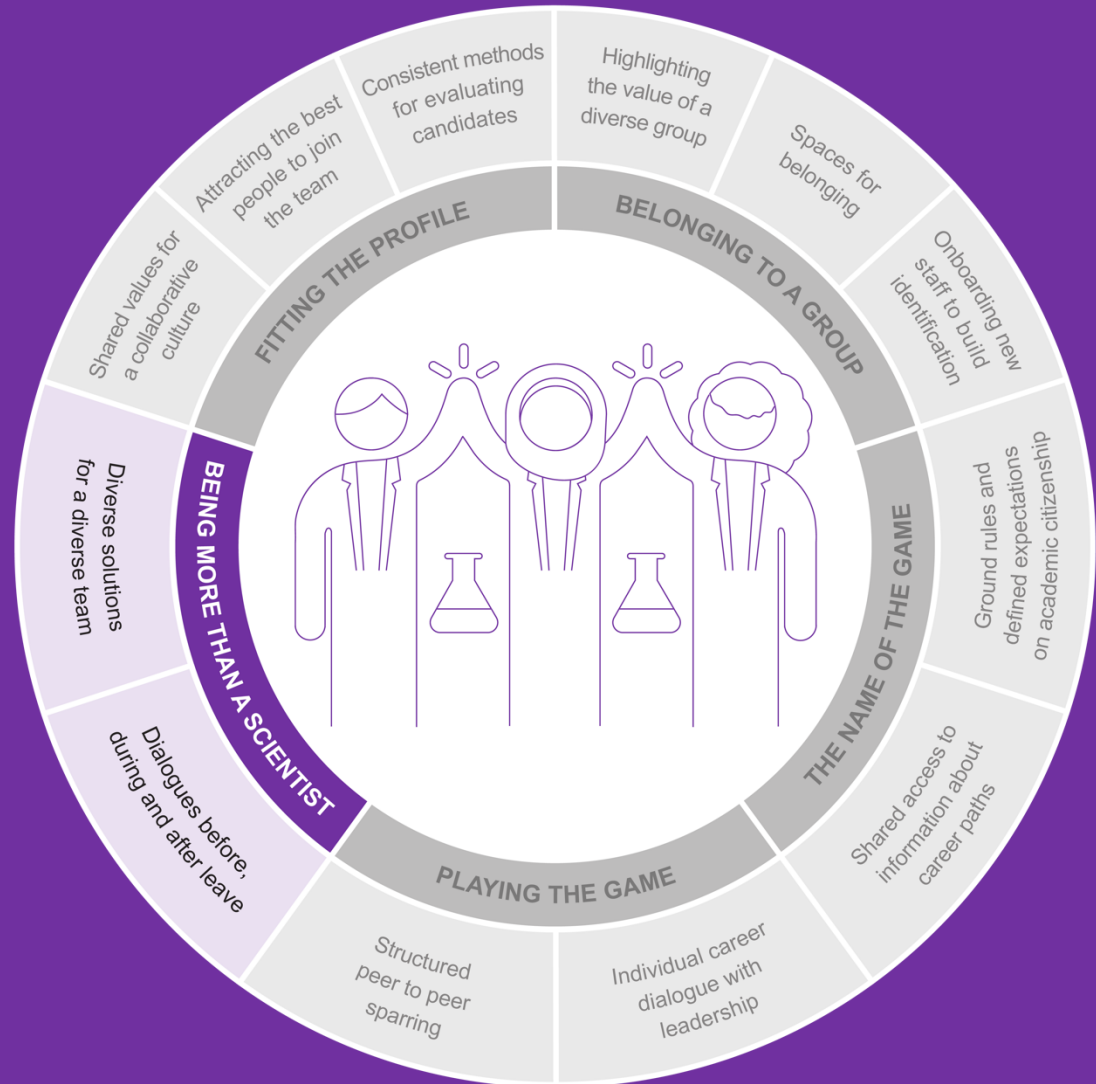
Peer to peer sparring can be initiated by the university but should be driven by the researchers themselves.

Being more than a scientist

Female scientists experience a conflict between their academic ambition and their ambition of being more than just a scientist. There is a potential in supporting scientists in striking this balance to retain them in academia.

Approaches from the Living Labs:

- Dialogues before, during and after leave
- Diverse solutions for a diverse team



Parental network, Faculty of Natural Sciences - Aarhus University

At Aarhus University Faculty of Natural Sciences have established a network for parent-to-be researchers and researchers with young children. The purpose of the parental network is to have a social forum where researchers can exchange experience in relation to being a parent in Denmark and being a researcher on leave or returning to academia. Learnings have been that there is a need for such a channel, but that it does not necessarily need to be a network with frequent meetings. The setup gave the university important information that pointed to concrete, low-hanging-fruit actions, such as creating baby changing facilities and breastfeeding rooms.

Formalised conversations around parental leave - Aarhus University

To formalise parental leave dialogues, Aarhus University (NAT/TECH) has introduced an HR-developed conversation guide that ensures clear, mutual expectations between employees and leadership before, during, and after leave.

Dialogues before, during and after leave



WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Engaging in dialogue before, during, and after parental or other leave safeguards continuity, well-being, and academic momentum while respecting the right to disconnect. Prior to leave, proactive conversations identify tasks to complete or pause and arrange a careful handover of projects and supervision. They also signal that different life stages and needs are supported, strengthening trust and psychological safety. When roles and opportunities are handled fairly and reintegration is planned, researchers stay engaged, return with energy, and pursue ambitious ideas. Making room for these conversations creates a safer leave experience and provides the opportunity to create individually tailored solutions.



KEY PEOPLE TO INVOLVE

- Leadership holds the responsibility of inviting for dialogues, potentially also engaging in dialogues with other researchers on the affected projects to align expectations.
- HR and other administrative staff can help developing and distributing frameworks for dialogues, inviting for meetings etc.



ACTIONS TO TAKE/GOOD PRACTICE

- Define expectations early: Align on before, during and after leave plans (handover, coverage, communication cadence, contact preferences, and re-entry milestones)
- Make roles and ownership explicit. Document responsibilities: Who handles which tasks during leave?
- During leave, there should be no expectation of availability; opt-in updates and clear contact preferences can prevent surprises while protecting boundaries.
- Plan re-entry. Agree a phased workload ramp-up.
- Keep a transparent record: Share a short written summary of agreements (timelines, responsibilities, support offers)

Diverse solutions for a diverse team



WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Establishing transparent dialogues on expectations creates clarity, trust, and room for difference. When people know what is expected and can voice what they need, they are more likely to engage, collaborate, and perform.

Active transparency turns potential friction into constructive alignment: it surfaces diverse work styles and constraints, legitimises them, and enables fair, context-aware arrangements rather than one-size-fits-all rules. It also strengthens accountability by giving teams a common reference for decisions and follow-up, so feedback translates into improvements and people can do their best work.



KEY PEOPLE TO INVOLVE

- Leadership holds the responsibility of identifying the individual needs and support a collective culture that embraces honest conversations and provides the best circumstances for a diverse team to perform and succeed.
- Administrative staff can support leadership decisions and provide necessary frameworks.



ACTIONS TO TAKE/GOOD PRACTICE

- Involve the target group: Use anonymous surveys or check-ins to surface needs and experiences
- Share back, openly communicate or discuss findings and planned actions.
- Anonymous feedback and reporting helps ensure high response rates and more honest answers.
- Normalise needs-based conversations: Invite openly to conversations where researchers can state what helps them succeed (e.g., meeting formats, family constraints, cultural or accessibility needs) without forcing one-size-fits-all solutions.

CASE FROM LIVING LAB

Surveys to uncover gaps in expectations and unmet needs

Several participating universities have used surveys as a baseline to understand well-being and work/study environment. SDU have involved students through an anonymous survey, asking about needs and experiences to create a shared, transparent starting point but also to get knowledge and feedback on how new initiatives are experienced. Findings led to actions to secure clearer reporting pathways and an institute-wide seminar on microaggressions and minority stress. The initiative with the anonymous survey boosts participation and signals that when issues are raised, SDU discusses them openly and acts accordingly.



We're all different and need different things to function. For some, a structured 20–30-minute nap isn't laziness, it's how they were raised and what keeps their rhythm and health in balance. Recognising this lets us make space for different needs - whether it's a parent exhausted after sleepless nights or a colleague from a culture different from ours where 'quiet time' is normal. I don't think we should make naps mandatory, but having the conversation about it really opened up to interesting perspectives.

Living Lab participant



BEING MORE THAN A SCIENTIST

Advice from Living Labs

- *Dialogues before, during and after leave*
- *Diverse solutions for a diverse team*



Signal institutional support on leave proactively: Establish open dialogues that make non-negotiables and flexibilities explicit early and guarantee fair access to opportunities post-leave to build trust and improve retention.



Acknowledge different cultural norms and perspectives: Recognise that different backgrounds shape working styles. Ask open questions to surface implicit norms and avoid assumptions.



Discuss and/or set expectations on ways of working: Co-create simple, concrete agreements—e.g., expectations on response time, office-hours, work from home/work from office, and participation in academic or social events.



Be flexible if possible. To retain a diverse talent pool, it might require diverse and differentiated work arrangements.



Invite for an open dialogue on life circumstances influencing work-life, fx family obligations, living conditions etc. This enables an open and honest conversations on how to create the best circumstances for employees on all levels to carry out excellent research as individuals as well as being part of a group.

ENABLING WORLD CLASS RESEARCH AND EDUCATION

“
We can't change
everything,
but we can move
something.

Living Lab participant

Individual actions are not trivial; they are catalysts that interact with broader systems to create a meaningful change.

With a collective intentionality across universities, we can align and scale individual actions. When these actions are connected, they will have systemic effects that reach far beyond each context ⁵.

From this point onwards, the aspiration is that the Living Labs spark curiosity and inspire others to get started and that the concrete solution themes illustrate how it can be done.

This is not “rocket science”! With aligned ambitions towards a more diverse research environment and with simple and concrete ideas and methods at hand, the Danish STEM research environment is in a good place to expand the room for excellence to thrive through a more diverse research environment.

5: O'Brien, K. (2021). You Matter More Than You Think: Quantum Social Change for a Thriving World. CCHANGE Press.