

## **Abstract**

Although there is continuous progress towards gender equity within the Higher Education (HE) sector in Europe, when it comes to positions of authority women academics still face the reality of either the “glass-ceiling”, preventing them getting to the top, or the “stone floor”, keeping them at the bottom. The scientific aim of *The European Research Training Network “Women in European Universities”* (WEU), sponsored by the European Commission, is not only to assess the professional status of women in academia, still one of the fields of social inequality, but also to analyse the main reasons for women’s under-representation in top rank positions in European Universities [<http://www.women-eu.de>].

It seems essential in understanding such a study to have in mind a clear picture of the systems of HE in each of the participant countries, (Austria, France, Germany, Poland, Spain, Sweden and United Kingdom), and that is the purpose of this “Contextual Analysis”. The main aim of this training paper is to provide an overview of the United Kingdom’s national system of education, with special emphasis on the HE sector, as a first step in our attempt to identify “best practices”, which later will contribute to a comparative analysis among the seven countries.

The paper is divided into five main sections. After a brief historical introduction, a description of the structure of the education system is provided, with the main focus on Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), legal status, management and funding. The objective of the research project is to detect possible barriers and/or “women friendly” measures, within the educational system, since they might influence women’s career pattern. Thus, the second section focuses on the description of the qualifications needed to be grade for a research or teaching position in a HEI. To shed further light on the topic, the current issues of the political debate are identified and specific trends towards marketisation and commercialisation emphasised. Although a further statistical analysis will be provided in the next training paper, to round out the paper and enhance the picture given, some figures are provided through the paper and in section four. Finally the conclusion highlights some strengths and weaknesses within the HE system in the United Kingdom (UK) which we expect to be of decisive significance for the subsequent research papers of the project.