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A NEW GENERATION OF GEPS

How academic organisations address equality, intersectionality, and diversity

Marisa Matias, Sara Isabel Magalhães, Jorge Peixoto Freitas, Alexandra Lopes, Conceição Nogueira, and Maria Isabel Dias

Introduction

This chapter examines the evolving landscape of Gender Equality (GE) initiatives within four academic institutions, focusing on the challenges, strategies, and successes in implementing GE Plans (GEPs). Gender Equality, meaning Equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities of women and men and girls and boys (EIGE, 2024), in higher education, is increasingly recognised not just as a matter of fairness but as a fundamental aspect of excellence and social justice. However, while progress has been made, the journey towards equality is far from straightforward. Universities and research institutions continue to face persistent gender disparities, both at the structural level and in everyday academic practice.

Drawing from the experience of the RESET project and its partners, this chapter will explore the complex dynamics involved in the design, implementation, and monitoring of GEPs. It highlights the need for a nuanced approach that considers not only gender but also other intersecting social categories such as age, professional group, socio-economic status, and sexual orientation. The concept of intersectionality is now becoming an essential framework for understanding and addressing the multi-layered nature of discrimination and privilege in academic settings. Through a critical examination of current practices, the chapter discusses how RESET universities tried to move beyond traditional gender-focused strategies to embrace more inclusive, intersectional approaches.

The chapter also reflects on the importance of co-design methodologies in developing effective GEPs. Such a participatory approach, with diverse stakeholders, ensures that the perspectives of all parties are considered and helps address resistance by fostering a sense of shared responsibility among stakeholders. Ultimately,

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this chapter provides insights and reflections for higher education institutions (HEIs) seeking to advance GE in ways that are inclusive and context-sensitive.

GEP as a tool in the European framework

GE is a concept that has been shaped by processes involving social, political, and institutional actors, as well as national and international organisations, influencing its meanings and GE policies (Lombardo et al., 2010). These meanings are multiple and sometimes more contradictory than coherent. Different visions of GE translate into different policy strategies (Walby, 2005). In consolidating an EU social policy framework, GE has become one prominent pillar and is one of the topics more often used as an example of what became known as the Europeanisation of national policies, understood here in a relatively simple way as the change in national policies as a result of pressures and/or developments in EU policies (Forest & Lombardo, 2012).

The European Union has been playing a leading role in proposing transversal policies, known as gender mainstreaming, which has more recently affected university organisations (Abels, 2011), in particular, since GEPs became a mandatory requirement to access European funding under the H2020 framework.

Despite the wide consensus about higher education and research playing a critical role in promoting social change, GE, diversity, and inclusion in society at large, the realisation that universities remain gendered and gendering organisations (Rosa et al., 2020) has shifted attention to promoting GE within academia as a necessary preliminary step. Mounting evidence about inequalities (i.e., unequal access to or enjoyment of rights, as well as the assumption of stereotyped social and cultural roles) such as persistent gender imbalances and pay gaps, gender segregation, both horizontally (across disciplines) and vertically (disproportional presence of women in higher levels of the academic hierarchies), as well as the public recognition of harassment and sexual assault as practices silenced over the years, have led to an acknowledgement of how academic institutions are structured on the basis of gender divisions of labour and power (European Commission, 2019; Hearn et al., 2022; Paoletti et al., 2020). It was in this *milieu* that the European Commission (EC) formalised its commitment to advancing GE in research and in higher education, with the Horizon 2020 framework representing a significant commitment from the Commission to foster GE. Horizon 2020 was shaped by three main dimensions of goals: closing the gap in participation, with an emphasis on promoting equal opportunities and gender balance in the composition of research teams; ensuring gender balance in decision-making processes, with an emphasis on composition of panels and advisory groups; and strengthening the gender dimension in research contents, with an emphasis on increasing the relevance of research for all persons and all groups in society.

One mechanism that has become increasingly nurtured by the EC in order to tackle gender inequalities in HEIs concerns the implementation of GE Plans

(GEPs). Under Horizon 2020, there were already specific calls for the implementation of GEPs, with funding allocated specifically for that purpose. This type of initiative excluded a significant number of universities from potential funding, and limited European countries that did not have national GE legislation or programmes from accessing funding. Thus, the only alternative for HEIs was to quickly design and implement a GEP.

GEPs are considered promising because they cover a very wide range of themes that are tackled taking into account the contextual and institutional factors of each academic organisation. GEPs cover recruitment and selection, and career development and progression, but also work–life balance, leadership and decision-making, the culture of the organisation, gender integration in research and education, as well as gender-related harassment, assault, and discrimination.

GEPs are required to be signed by top management and publicly advertised on the university website. Human resources with gender competence have to be allocated to the implementation of GEPs; sex/gender-disaggregated data have to be collected and monitored; annual reports based on indicators have to be published; and training for staff, including those in decision-making positions, has to be accounted for (EIGE, 2023). A GEP combines gender mainstreaming, that is, a systematic consideration of the differences between the conditions, situations, and needs of women and men (EIGE, 2024) with positive actions aimed at favouring access by members of certain categories of people, in this particular case, women, to rights which they are guaranteed to members of other categories (Bencivenga et al., 2021; Vida, 2020). GEPs are therefore a valuable tool for understanding gender inequality in HEIs and for making strategic changes in previously gender-insensitive universities (Bencivenga et al., 2021; Laoire et al., 2021).

To what extent GEPs are effective in triggering institutional and cultural changes in universities is far from being a consensual topic, with many criticising GEPs for resting on an overly instrumental rationale, while others highlight the conservatism of the frameworks that inform understandings of GE (Lätti, 2017). Yet, the dissemination of positive experiences in implementing GEPs in universities across Europe (Rosa et al., 2020) has definitely contributed to their wide acceptance as a promising practice, so much so that they would be resumed under Horizon Europe as an eligibility criterion.

Key approaches to GEP design at RESET

All GEPs developed under the RESET project followed two key principles – co-design and intersectionality, both of which are detailed in other sections of this book. As current literature emphasises the growing importance of intersectionality in designing GEPs, particularly in research and innovation (R&I) sectors, applying intersectionality in GEPs requires structural changes rather than simply adding diverse categories to existing frameworks. For example, organisations are encouraged to audit career progression criteria to address biases and ensure fair

representation in leadership roles. This aim comes up against the lack of data intersecting gender and other dimensions. Structural changes are essential to prevent intersectionality from being reduced to a buzzword. By embedding intersectionality deeply within GEPs, organisations can create genuinely inclusive environments that address the multifaceted challenges faced by individuals.

Another key approach in RESET GEPs is the use **of co-design**, that is, an emphasis on active and meaningful stakeholder participation (Iivari et al., 2023). This means identifying all relevant stakeholders who will use or be affected by the GEPs and inviting them to contribute to the design process. The process should encourage participants to learn from one another, recognising that combining diverse perspectives leads to creative and innovative solutions. As such, co-design approaches focus on equalising power relations and promoting democratic practices by actively including those who might otherwise be marginalised. In the RESET context, Gender Equality Boards (GEB) were a decisive aspect for co-design and for GEP's success. These boards have a steering role for Gender Equality Actions allowing for the support of governance to GEPs.

GEP design at HEIs

Drafting an initial GEP from scratch can be daunting, as there is a considerable lack of information, and existing data are scattered and most likely not disaggregated by sex. First measures include approaches that set foundations for action. A first GEP cannot be a long list of measures. One has to be strategic to set the ones that are more relevant to be considered, bring more impact, and are contextual and data-driven. For this purpose, it is important to set the stage and know the *status quo* of the institution.

Setting the stage

According to the GE in Academia and Research (GEAR) Tool, steps 1 and 2 of devising a GEP aim to get to know the institution in great detail to ensure the best adequacy and effective change of the proposed actions. One prior step we considered in our RESET approach was to get familiar with the national context and its developments in terms of gender and GE policies.

In this regard, the four institutions implementing the GE Plan within the RESET project come from four countries with significant differences in geography, language, and historical background, but also in the current sociocultural context: France, Greece, Poland, and Portugal. According to the most recent EIGE report[2] (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2024), in 2023, the countries of the four implementing partners stand far apart in terms of the GE Index. France is the only country above the EU average, ranking 6th, Portugal ranks 15th, Poland 18th, and in the last position of this index is Greece, ranking 25th.

While all four universities are committed to promoting gender equality, their contexts and approaches vary. AUTh faces significant challenges in gender

equality, with no women in its rectorate body and a low percentage of women in senior administrative positions. Despite these challenges, Greece has made efforts to align its legal framework with EU policies on gender equality. Laws mandate gender representation in decision-making bodies and promote gender equality in research and higher education. The National Action Plan for Gender Equality 2021–2025 included actions to promote gender equality in education, science, research, and leadership positions. The University of Bordeaux has implemented numerous measures to promote gender equality, including the Masterplan for Gender Equality (2015–2020) and the Action Plan for Professional Equality between Women and Men (2021). The university has a dedicated GEB and has expanded the remit of the Sexual Harassment and Sexist and Homophobic Violence Monitoring Unit. The university's commitment to GE is recognised with the "Sustainable Development and Societal Responsibility" label. Poland has faced anti-feminist backlash and resistance to GE regulations, creating challenges for the implementation of GEPs, nevertheless at UL, gender equality and inclusivity have been prioritised, with the mission to conduct reliable research and educate future generations. The majority of UL employees are women, and the university recognises issues faced by trans- and gender-diverse persons. Finally, at the University of Porto, there is a long-standing commitment to GE, reflected in its Value Statement and Strategic Plan. The university conducted its first gender-impact assessment in 2020 and has implemented a directive on work–life balance. Nevertheless, women are also lacking in top management positions and these core values have been difficult to incorporate in effective practices. As a member of the European University Alliance for Global Health (EUGLOH), the university is actively involved in promoting gender equality and diversity inclusion.

Knowing this national context was important as it shaped the academic environment and is a necessary step to a proper diagnosis of the GE situation. This diagnosis encompassed a combination of different sources of data, including the use of secondary sources and available information within university servers, collecting HEI worker's experiences and perceptions through a survey and through focus groups. Data was collected according to four priority areas, recommended in the GEAR tool:

- Recruitment, retention, and career progression including the availability of family-friendly policies;
- Leadership and decision-making (accountability, transparency, and inclusiveness);
- Gender dimension in research and knowledge transfer (content and curricula);
- Gender biases and stereotypes, sexism, and sexual harassment.

Data collection from an intersectional perspective comes up against several obstacles. The first was encountered as the information was dispersed across the universities: not only was there no centralised source of information but also sex-disaggregated data was not always available. Moreover, other socio-demographic information,

such as ethnicity and disabilities of HEI's workforce, was unavailable, limiting the intersectional approach.

While the secondary data gave a general overview of the university, the focus groups, performed with diverse key audiences – teachers, researchers, staff members, and top leadership – were able to complement the absent data and provide insights on how the HEI's staff was experiencing these issues within the university (see more on this data in Chapter 7 of this book).

Lastly, a large-scale survey collected information on perceptions and experiences of GE, biases, and resistances. The major obstacles here related to the low response rate and again to the difficulties in performing an intersectional analysis due to the preservation of participants' anonymity and non-disclosure of identifying information.

Crafting a first GE plan

Considering the academic context of each partner and the insights and findings deriving from the data collection, an extensive diagnosis was performed for each partner. Due to the complexity and the specificity of the respective contexts, a subset of the most salient findings and respective measures from each local GEP will be reflected here. **Horizontal segregation and lack of recruitment strategies to prevent biases were described by all partners when addressing the state of play in their institutions.** Women are the majority among employees in RESET institutions, particularly in lower status categories and in traditional fields of knowledge. They are less represented at higher hierarchical levels, except in areas where they are already a majority. Also, in all institutions, motherhood significantly impacts women's career progression, leading to slower advancement compared to men.

All these markers of inequality align with known processes within the literature, such as the "glass ceiling" metaphor. Invisible barriers exist, as formal rules do not put any limitation on women progression; however, biases in how the recruitment and promotion processes are undertaken contribute to this issue (Clavero & Galligan, 2021). The tip of the iceberg comes from the under-representation of women among professors and university rectors. Transversal measures that partners endorse in their GEPs are linked to reviewing and rewriting existing recruitment guidelines to make them more gender sensitive and to raise awareness of and combat gender stereotypes that are associated with scientific areas. At U.Porto, actions encompassed reviewing the process manual of recruitment and at UBx, the selection committees were targeted at raising awareness actions on gender stereotypes in recruitment. At UBx, a serious game, titled *Catch Me If You Can!*, was developed with this topic in mind. Another important stream of action included communication campaigns, such as those developed in UL, U.Porto, and AUTh, that made researchers of the under-represented gender visible in all research fields, also combating gender stereotypes regarding academic career development. At UL, the issue of women's under-representation in managerial positions was further

tackled by foreseeing a revision of the eligibility criteria for promotions. This was crucial, as the criteria used to chart career progression often do not encompass diverse pathways characterised by a discontinuous investment in scientific or pedagogical areas.

An ambiguous **discourse about quotas** was also widespread across partners' diagnoses. While quotas were recognised as tools for structural change, they were seen as conflicting with the notion of meritocracy. This tension was highlighted by participants describing "imposter syndrome" where individuals hired or promoted under quotas feel undervalued. Indeed, when gender quota systems are poorly implemented, it can undermine women's perceived value and companies' value within the market. Thus, while quotas are important, they alone cannot address gender inequalities (Rixom et al., 2023). At U.Porto, quotas were introduced on boards that make the decisions instead of introducing them to the application/selection process itself, as this would entail a lot of resistance; therefore, selection panels for career progression competitions need to have a 40/60 gender balance.

The issue of **parenthood's impact on women's career is interrelated with career progression and the struggle to reconcile professional and personal lives.** In the diagnoses, women were found to face more hardships in terms of balancing work and family. Leave-taking and the use of family-friendly policies were also highly gendered, with women using them most often. Men, meanwhile, reported prejudice when taking on caregiving roles. Most academics work evenings and weekends to meet diverse demands, such as innovative research, publishing in high-impact journals, teaching, supervising students, building networks, and securing research funding. Furthermore, excellence is linked to mobility, requiring academics to spend time at different universities, often abroad. Women face greater normative expectations for household and caregiving responsibilities (Rosa, 2022). In addition, work–life policies have limited effectiveness as traditional cultural norms about the gender division of labour and the ideal male worker persist in organisational culture. Although policies confer equal formal rights, informal expectations often pressure women to use these rights, while men remain focused on academic activities. These issues are also the priority areas for all partners' GEPs. At UL, a sensitive and flexible system for evaluating academic performance was designed, and UBx implemented a rotation in teaching and research responsibilities so that teachers and researchers have an opportunity to dedicate more time for research or teaching depending on their own choice. Measures such as training managers to better advise their teams on work–life balance measures (UBx), implementing a room for lactation in every school (AUTh), and an online portal encompassing work–life balance rights and measures for all HEI's staff (U.Porto) were also implemented.

With regard to **gender mainstreaming within the core activities of academia and research and knowledge transfer**, no formal policies or incentives exist. Female teachers and researchers often rely on informal practices (e.g., using some examples in classes, inviting male and female lecturers). While Horizon Europe

funding encourages gender mainstreaming, its added value remains debated. In all RESET GEPs, actions devoted to capacity-building and awareness-raising were developed. Researchers, professors, lab and faculty directors, and managers were trained on gender inequalities and possible bias in teaching and researching. These actions were also accompanied by providing specific tools developed within RESET – the Gender Impact Assessment Checklist to support the integration of gender dimension in academia.

Throughout the diagnoses, **intersectional discrimination was evident,** that is, discrimination intersecting gender and age (mostly) but also gender with professional groups (research, administrative staff, and teachers). A common finding across partners was the power asymmetries between administrative staff and teachers/researchers, driven by the hierarchical and elitist structures of HEIs. This perceived status difference may also hinder a collective sense of excellence as it emphasises competition based on individual performance. This challenge was approached by including all HEIs employees in capacity-building sessions and by applying work–life balance initiatives to all. Other reported sources of discrimination include sexual orientation and gender identity, ethnicity/nationality, or religion reminding us that power imbalances are multidimensional. In most partners, reporting mechanisms for gender-based violence, sexism, and sexual harassment were lacking. Despite this, harassment cases are widely acknowledged but often go unreported or uninvestigated ("black figures"). In addition, Gender-Inclusive Language (GIL) was also found to be a source of resistance and a systematic use was clearly absent. To tackle this challenge, the promotion of the use of gender-inclusive language supported by the RESET toolbox for gender-neutral, diversity-oriented institutional communication was included in all GEPs, with some partners adapting the toolbox to its own language (e.g., U.Porto). Another pack of measures covered the introduction or refinement of existing procedures to ensure a secure reporting system of cases of discrimination, sexism, or harassment. U.Porto launched a secure reporting mechanism for discrimination and harassment situations and put forward a commission to assess and screen the complaints. This procedure was accompanied by an update on the employees' and students' code of conduct and by training sessions. At UBx, actions were devoted to raising awareness on the existing system and on improving it. At all partner institutions, another set of training and capacity-building actions was focused on abilities to identify and report discrimination, violence, or harassment situations. One major action that oversees all of these is an explicit statement by the governance of a zero-tolerance policy and a code of conduct against discrimination and moral and sexual harassment.

The two key principles of RESET – co-design and intersectionality – underlined both the development process and contents of the GEPs. The co-design approach was carried within each partner by cooperative work with multiple stakeholders, ensuring the engagement of all and the commitment of senior leaders. A key step in this process was establishing GEBs at each university early on GEP design, and involving them from the data collection stage. These Boards' composition was

adapted to each partner alongside two dimensions: interest/commitment to gender equality and power within the institution. As such, a diverse group of members were part of this GEB. All GEBs were mandated by the Rector of each university with the mission to support and contribute to the design and monitoring of the GEP. However, not all were provided with dedicated time or budgetary resources. To design the GEP, besides GEB's inputs, RESET teams met with senior management (e.g., vice-rectors or chancellors) and key institutional offices. This inclusive approach fostered both a top-down and bottom-up process, mitigating challenges and resistances to GEP implementation.

Figure 6.1 illustrates the whole process for the GEP development, from step 1 of the GEAR tool[1] – Getting Started – to step 5 – Monitoring Progress and Evaluating a GEP. This scheme also highlights the co-design approach followed throughout this process.

Paving the way: implementing and monitoring

Having set up a GEP is the tip of the iceberg of all the work to be done, accompanying the implementation up close and constant monitoring is crucial.

RESET GEPs include actions for capacity-building, improvement of data monitoring systems, revising key documents to integrate GE and diversity, and establishing mechanisms for reporting discrimination. GEPs aimed both at a structural change with actions devoted to regulations, mechanisms for reporting discrimination, and changes in recruitment and progression procedures, but also emphasised individual change through actions such as training, and the promotion of inclusive language and of gender impact assessment tools in the daily life of HEI members.

To assist in the implementation stage, some partners have dedicated GE structures (e.g., AUTh Committee) or missions (e.g., UBx's), while others lack such facilities. In addition, as so nicely put by Roggeband and Verloo (2006), one of the main problems in the implementation of gender mainstreaming is that it paradoxically requires a high level of gender awareness among policymakers who are not gender experts. Thus, the involvement of key local stakeholders that can, effectively, implement the measures outlined in the GEP and transversally mainstream GE in the community and their practices is a key factor for successful implementation and for GE sustainability. In RESET, GEBs were the steering structures for GEP implementation and for GEP sustainability. These structures accompanied the entire process of GEP design and implementation, while the GEP implementation team primarily consisted of RESET team members and selected representatives from university services.

All partners' GEPs aimed to institutionalise this board beyond the RESET project to ensure the sustainability of the changes initiated. At AUTh and UBx, such a board is mandated by national law, and thus some resources (such as time allocation is already guaranteed). At UL, institutionalisation took place early on, and with the recent elections, the area of Equal Treatment and Non-Discrimination is now

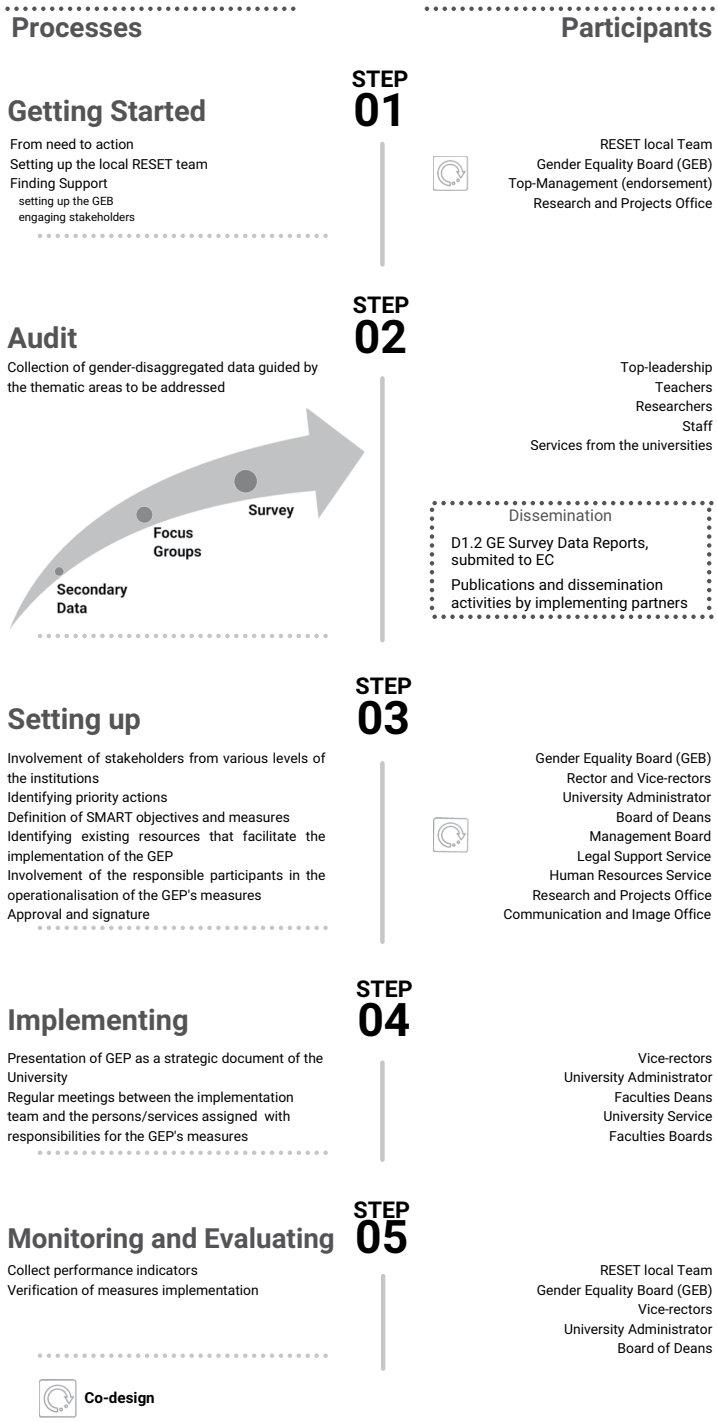

FIGURE 6.1 GEPs development guided by GEAR tool and the co-design approach

under the Rectory's jurisdiction. At U.Porto, institutionalisation only occurred in the final stages of GEP implementation.

Moreover, to fully implement a mainstreaming strategy, a transformation of institutional and organisational cultures is key, and this is a process that requires changes in the policy process, its mechanisms, and the actors who take part (Lombardo & Mergaert, 2013). Indeed, while some partners have road maps and guiding documents on diversity, inclusion, or gender equality, besides GEPs for introducing GE (e.g., UBx), most workers remain unaware of them. A wide communication and dissemination strategy during the implementation step should be prioritised, for instance, by sending regular updates to the community on GEP actions, by developing campaigns, and by devoting sessions to GEP's state of implementation.

It is also important to be aware that not all measures of a first GEP were accomplished; if that was the case, either the GEP was designed with short ambition and no "big" measures were included or no risks were taken. Nonetheless, the goal of unfulfilled measures is to highlight the areas to change and to pinpoint the factors restricting change. This will aid in understanding the dynamics behind this mismatch and what needs to be done to achieve the measure even if it means the measure must be dropped. As such, one of the tools to increase the effectiveness of change is the **continuous collection of data and data analysis** that allows for a continuous cycle of diagnoses and monitoring. As this is a "back office" task, without major visibility *per se*, it is important to find ways to make it visible; the U.Porto team started publishing annual infographics with some key indicators informing the community and making data publicly available. This constant attention and data collection enabled not only minor adjustments and technical decisions but also a look forward on further steps needed allowing for clear intervention boundaries and responsibilities.

Implementing GE initiatives clearly requires context-specific approaches (Laoire et al., 2021), alongside structural elements such as data systems and dedicated resources.

Resetting GEPs: GE as a process

Fully aware that the change process has been initiated with the GEP design, development, and implementation, it is always important to remember that new GEPs are to be devised. Indeed, the fact that an institution has a GEP in place does not, in itself, guarantee GE outcomes (O'Connor, 2020). Universities may engage in GEP actions for reasons other than a commitment to equality; for instance, because they have a legal duty to do so (Clavero & Galligan, 2021). Thus, while having a GEP in place is a positive element in seeking research funds, and in attracting talented staff and a greater pool of potential students, gender change and mainstreaming are lengthy processes.

Each new GEP is a step further to achieve greater mainstreaming, sustainability, and rooted GE. In the next section, we will take stock of the process developed in RESET's HEIs and reflect upon the barriers and challenges of gender mainstreaming.

Reflect to action: how academic organisations can move equality further

After the experience of crafting, implementing, and evaluating the first GEPs in the four RESET partners, we summarise a set of reflections that can help develop further GEPs.

Resistance to GEPs: a multifaceted challenge

One of the primary challenges to GEP implementation is resistance from various quarters within universities, at a time when gender issues generally tend to polarise public opinion in European societies. Resistance in this context can be defined as patterns of behaviour that people in power positions employ to actively or passively limit the implementation of gender equality initiatives (O'Connor & White, 2021). Some argue that GEPs are no longer necessary, claiming GE has been achieved or that existing policies suffice. Others advocate for equality beyond gender binaries, overlooking persistent disparities in academia, particularly in senior roles and specific fields (O'Connor, 2018).

Resistance also arises from concerns that focusing on gender excludes other important dimensions of inclusion, such as race or socio-economic status. LGBTQ+ groups, particularly trans and queer people, may critique GEPs as reinforcing binary gender norms, marginalising non-binary identities. While some push for universal equality, this undermines the need for targeted interventions to address systemic disadvantages faced by women and gender-marginalised groups. Another challenge is that resistance varies by university roles. Most academic roles are gendered, particularly those associated with power, which are predominantly masculine. However, resistance to gender equality initiatives is not exclusively gendered; for example, while some men may boycott or disengage from such efforts, women may also resist if they perceive their positions to be at risk due to these new measures. Therefore, it is important to adopt a multidimensional analysis of resistance, recognising that both men and women can be sources of resistance as well as allies in advancing GE. Furthermore, frontline staff, often witnessing micro-aggressions and discrimination, perceive greater inequities than senior leaders, who see improved gender balance at higher levels (Shober, 2014). For example, staff in student services often encounter micro-level discrimination, such as challenges faced by trans students in private spaces or in name use. Conversely, senior leadership might observe increased female representation in higher positions. This

disconnection between leadership and frontline staff can also result in differing views on the necessity and relevance of GEPs.

Intersectionality: bridging the gap between policy and practice

As mentioned, GEPs of the four universities were designed from an intersectional perspective – addressing not only gender but also factors such as age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and socio-economic status. GEPs contained some measures that intersected gender with age, gender identity, LGBTQ+ rights, or professional group. However, implementing this approach has faced significant challenges. Institutions face structural and legal barriers that limit the collection of data on various forms of discrimination. Data disaggregated by race and ethnicity is non-existent, and gender data is often ambiguous, conflating sex and gender. Without such data, it becomes difficult to understand and address the complex layers of discrimination within academic institutions.

Moreover, identifying intersectional groups based on multiple identities could violate anonymity principles, posing both ethical and legal risks. Identifying precise intersection nodes could identify the people who fall within them and inadvertently expose individuals to further discrimination. It is, therefore, clear that the HEIs are not yet fully equipped to embrace an intersectional perspective. Despite these hurdles, the inclusion of intersectionality remains crucial for addressing the complex and overlapping forms of discrimination that students and staff may face.

While diversity policies target the entire community and aim to promote inclusion to all, these policies may clash with case-by-case and informal practices that, nevertheless, allow for a more personalised approach and address the specific needs of individuals – thus ensuring a truly intersectional perspective.

Diversity: expanding the scope while maintaining focus

As mentioned, the concept of diversity presents both an opportunity and a challenge. The term diversity is, in fact, appealing to institutions because it allows them to overcome barriers relating to the concept of gender. Two discourses are often heard in academia: those who believe that the differences between men and women have been overcome or those who argue that there are no differences. Thus, the concept of diversity could extend the intervention of a GEP to all people, which better aligns with the concept of inclusion and, therefore, faces fewer barriers. Hence, it is undoubtedly an important project, but the risk of making such a broad plan is that it could dilute the gender inequalities that still exist in academia. Indeed, shifting an intersectional approach to a diversity one can obscure the overlapping forms of discrimination. While diversity policies promote visibility for groups defined by race, sexuality, or disability; targeting these groups in isolation undermines the intersectional approach.

At the consortium level, this concept was the subject of in-depth debate as reflected in the terminology "GE and Diversity" or simply "Diversity Equality".

In terms of inclusive language, there is a gradual acceptance of communication that includes both men and women, although language that is inclusive of non-binary identities remains less accepted. This reflects the ongoing tensions between traditional understandings of gender and more inclusive, non-binary approaches. This highlights the need for ongoing education and awareness-raising initiatives to promote a truly inclusive academic environment.

In sum, diversity thus allows to *Broaden the Conversation* fostering a more inclusive environment for all and/or *Dilute the Focus on Gender*, overshadowing the specific challenges faced by women, undermining the core objective of achieving GE.

Generation and socio-economic dimensions

The academic environment mirrors broader societal changes, where different social classes and generations coexist, each with varying levels of engagement with gender issues. Older generations, having experienced more gender disparity, often see current progress as sufficient; while younger generations, influenced by social justice movements and digital activism, advocate for more radical, immediate changes. These younger generations, especially students, are more attuned to gender complexities and are supportive of LGBTQ+ rights and inclusive language. This generational divide reflects different understandings of equality, leading to varied expectations for achieving GE in academia.

Socio-economic status also influences perceptions of gender issues. Students and staff from lower socio-economic backgrounds may prioritise financial challenges over GE, viewing job stability and contract security as more pressing concerns. The intersection of class and gender adds complexity to GEP implementation, as not all members of the academic community are equally invested.

Sociopolitical climate

The current sociopolitical climate offers both opportunities and challenges for GEPs. On the one hand, European funding regulations require universities to address gender imbalances, providing a financial incentive to GEP development. This external pressure creates a structural impetus for change, ensuring that GE is not only a matter of internal policy but also a requirement tied to institutional funding. In parallel, there is a growing awareness and advocacy for GE among younger generations and student bodies, who are more vocal and proactive in promoting inclusive practices, such as advocating for LGBTQ+ rights and for the use of inclusive language. On the other hand, resistance from right-wing ideologies and conservative backlash against social justice movements such as #MeToo complicates efforts to achieve GE. This highlights the need for HEIs to defend their

GE initiatives, balancing advocacy for progress with resistance from conservative elements.

Conclusion

In reflecting on the experiences of crafting, implementing, and evaluating the first GEPs among the four RESET partners, it is evident that advancing GE in HEIs requires innovative and adaptive strategies. The complexities highlighted in this chapter underscore the need for nuanced approaches that address both persistent inequalities and emerging challenges. Resistance to GEPs remains a multifaceted challenge, rooted in differing perceptions of progress and concerns about inclusivity. While adopting an intersectional approach to GEPs holds promise for inclusivity, it also presents practical difficulties related to data collection, privacy, and institutional readiness. Similarly, while broadening the scope to embrace diversity can mitigate some resistance, it risks diluting the focus on specific gendered inequities that persist in academia.

To push gendered academic organisations further, it is crucial for HEIs to remain vigilant in defending their commitments to GE, while simultaneously navigating the broader dynamics of diversity and inclusion. Balancing targeted interventions for GE with a broader inclusive agenda will require sustained effort, reflection, and adaptation, ensuring that these plans evolve to meet the diverse needs of all members of the academic community.

Note

1 https://eige.europa.eu/gender-mainstreaming/toolkits/gear/step-step-guide.

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