

How to Measure the Impact Generated by the Gender Equality Plan?

Anna Brescianini, Mariasole Bannò and Camilla Federici

Università degli Studi di Brescia

anna.brescainini@unibs.it

mariasole.banno@unibs.it

camilla.federici@unibs.it

Abstract: Gender Equality Plans (GEPs) are the primary policy tool to advance gender equality in research and innovation in Europe. The European Commission has mandated an institutional requirement for all public and research performing organisations applying for Horizon Europe 2021-2027 grants. These entities must develop GEPs addressing organisational culture, work-life balance, gender balance in leadership, recruitment and career progression, gender mainstreaming in research and teaching, and measures against gender-based violence. The Commission has outlined four mandatory elements for GEPs: they must be public documents, allocate resources for implementation, be based on sex/gender-disaggregated data collection and monitoring, and include training and capacity building. This new requirement is expected to stimulate significant activity at institutional and state levels across EU countries. From the research presented here, we expect an ongoing self-assessment of the progress of the actions implementation to reduce gender inequality and valuable suggestions for the future GEP UniBs 2025-2027 design and planning.

Keywords: Impact Drivers; Actors' mobilisation; Person-Centred Approach.

1. Introduction

Since 2015, Gender Equality Plans (GEPs) have been the main policy instrument to promote gender equality in research and innovation in Europe. With the new eligibility requirement for entities applying for the Horizon Europe 2021-2027 calls, the European Commission has introduced an institutional mandatory requirement for all public and research performing organisations applying to become beneficiaries of Horizon Europe grants. Horizon Europe applicants must elaborate their context-related GEPs based on a comprehensive understanding of gender equality. GEPs must cover organisational culture and work-life balance, gender balance in leadership and decision-making, gender equality in recruitment and career progression, gender mainstreaming in research and teaching, and measures against gender-based violence. The European Commission also specified four mandatory elements: the GEP must be a public document, resources must be dedicated to its implementation, it must be based on the collection and monitoring of sex/gender disaggregated data, and training and capacity building must be provided. This new requirement is expected to generate a wave of activity at institutional and state level in the EU countries.

To date, no single monitoring and evaluation tool for GEPs has been validated. If targets are not defined for monitoring progress, success or scope of communication, the assessment of the undergoing organisational transformation is arduous. This shortage could also reduce the commitment of stakeholders toward the objectives.

For these reasons, monitoring and evaluation tools must be seen as instruments to support effective actions and accountability. Secondly, by establishing a monitoring system that can evaluate the actions and resources allocated, knowledge of the changes is also improved.

Since 2015, European-funded projects carried out by research performing organisations have seen different shapes of monitoring and evaluation, with the effort to produce synthetic indices calculated based on a mix of qualitative and quantitative parameters (GenderTime project-UNIPD-GEI). This mixed methodology considered only academic personnel, or quantitative methods that considered endogenous and exogenous factors (PLOTINA project-UGII), but which, having to synthesise, have placed aspects that are not comparable or with little possibility of comparison on the same evaluation level.

In recent years, new European projects have brought proposals for monitoring and evaluation, including not only the evaluation of the effectiveness of actions, but also the very complex topic of "social change".

A comparison of experts involved in several European funded projects (LIBRA; Gender-SMART; CASPER) led to the identification of critical aspects including the possibility of comparing certain results between research institutions; the time it takes before the results of GEP interventions become evident; and above all, the desire to implement mutually consistent monitoring and evaluation systems (Ferguson 2021).

One of the approaches used to monitor and assess structural changes through Gender Equality Plans is an institutional capacity building model, which emerged from a journey that started in 2012 partially thanks to the Horizon 2020-funded projects in which many universities and research centres participated. Developed by the consultancy firm Yellow Window in 2013, this model is designed to assess the gender mainstreaming capacity of public administrations, both of the European Commission and of each EU Member State. The strength of this model is that it focuses on the implementation process and what drives it. As such, it is well equipped to take into account different stages of institutional development and different starting points.

A second tool proposed is that of actors' mobilisation (Kalpazidou Schmidt, Cacace, 2019), which focuses on the mobilisation of internal actors to support the change process. According to this perspective, what happens in an institution is evaluated from the perspective of the internal processes that are set in motion for gender equality. The model encompasses the creation of an internal agent of transformation, the activation of internal decision-making bodies, the interaction between the dynamics set in motion and the structural circumstances, and finally the resulting outcomes in terms of sustainable institutional change.

The consortium partners in charge of external monitoring and evaluation (Knowledge & Innovation and ISAS, respectively) in the Horizon 2020 LIBRA and Gender-SMART projects, which focus on the design and implementation of gender equality plans, used the Impact Driver model for their work, either in combination with the Actors Mobilisation model (LIBRA project) or by integrating the two models (Gender-SMART project).

In the CASPER project, funded by the European Commission to assess the feasibility of introducing a gender equality award and the certification system in research and higher education institutions in Europe, this work was taken up and further developed. The result is an effective evaluation model that includes 12 impact drivers and 6 stages of institutional capacity building and enables the measurement of institutional processes and the degree of institutionalisation. The model can be used as a self-assessment tool, as an awareness-raising and capacity-building tool, but also for evaluation by external experts.

The tool - already tested by a group of research organisations (Central Europe University; University of Cagliari; Cyprus University of Technology; University of Deusto; Oxford Brookes university; French Agriculture Research Center for International Development; European Institute of Oncology) allows for a comparative analysis through its indicators and scales, providing valuable insights into the factors influencing the change process.

2. Case Study University of Brescia (UniBs)

The case study under investigation concerns the GEP of the University of Brescia. It is considered representative because it is the first time the GEP has been introduced at this university and the medium-small size of our university is representative of approximately 30% of Italian universities.

The drafting started in December 2021. A multidisciplinary commission was appointed, with the participation of lecturers from the various departments, technical administrative staff and students, dedicated to the shared construction of the UniBs GEP.

The objective was immediately shared of producing a document that follows the indications of the Vademecum promoted by the Conference of Italian University Rectors (CRUI) for the drafting of the GEP; it collects the indications of the Gender Balance to enhance what has already been carried out by UniBs and is proposed as a planning document for the three-year period 2022-2024. Operationally, the coordinating role was entrusted to an internal Commission figure and the areas of in-depth study were defined (the 5 defined by the GEP on the basis of the CRUI Vademecum) with responsibility assigned to a contact person.

For each area of intervention, each working group proposed objectives, which were then shared across the board. Hence, for each objective, each working group proposed functional activities to achieve the objectives.

Another significant aspect concerned the effort to define a predictive cost for each action in each area of intervention, dividing the types of cost into internal resources needed to implement the actions, and external costs to be planned in the University Budget.

Following the approval of the GEP in 2022, the Academic Board initiated the structuring of the Gender Commission, which is in charge of implementing the actions for the three-year period.

Given these premises, it is deemed interesting to apply the Gender Equality Impact Drivers Revisited model defined in 2022 by Mergaert, Cacace and Linkova, to the analysis of the GEP implementation process within the University of Brescia, since:

- The 12 impact drivers identified appear to be sufficiently structured to accommodate the different dimensions of the three-year plan defined, especially in terms of improving internal knowledge; involvement and dissemination of the culture of gender equality inside and outside the research institution; orientation of governance towards change. As mentioned earlier, the indices hypothesised above were synthetic and inadequate as attempts to summarise inconsistent results in a single measurement value.
- The 6 steps allow the temporal determination of the progress of these change factors and tell the story of the stage the research organisation is in, with also the possibility of reading some factors more developed/advanced than others and being able to act on some of them.
- The 4 components of the internal stakeholders' mobilisation model very succinctly represent what the same authors argued in a previous article: "the cultural change of an organisation must take place through the involvement of governance and the grassroots, through a top-down and bottom-up participative process. Acting in the absence of internal, authoritative change agents, who 'contaminate' different internal and external stakeholders with the promotion of gender equality initiatives, will not lead to a truly stable transformation process'.
- The 4 components deemed strategic for the verification of effective internal change within the institution (recruitment; career advancement; work-life balance and the gender dimension in research) take into account aspects relating to horizontal and vertical segregation; verification of the actual neutrality of research, especially in STEM studies; compliance with existing regulations (e.g. promotion/application committees); and monitoring and effectiveness of the activities implemented.

3. Expected Results

The analysis will be carried out in December 2023-March 2024. The analysis of the UniBs GEP according to this model will take into account some elements that have emerged from the evaluation of the tool by research organisations that have tested it:

1. Some Indicators Are Simpler To Assess, Others More Complex;
2. Economic And Personnel Resources For Implementation Or Leadership Could Be "Vulnerable" Factors, I.E. They May Change Over Time;
3. The Tool Needs To Be Used By Someone Who Knows The Research Organisation And It's Functioning Very Well (Difficulty In External Evaluation Without Support From Within);
4. It May Happen That Less Institutionalised Organisations Are More Lenient In The Self-Assessment Process.

The results will provide a self-assessment with respect to the ongoing progress of the GEP actions implemented to date (2 years after start-up) and will make it possible to

- assess the human and economic resources put in place against the results obtained;
- highlight critical issues;
- enhance actions that are not very effective;
- enhance actions that are bringing more results.

4. In Conclusion

This study explores what are the impact factors for assessing institutional capacity in a complex organisational context such as research performing organisations and higher education institutions, emphasising a person-centred approach and the quality of stakeholder relations. Case studies offer valuable insights, enabling learning based on practical experience, especially in heterogeneous groups. This pioneering research can expand by comparing other universities and incorporating various research methods.

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