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# Promoting gender equality and structural change in academia through gender equality plans: Harmonising EU and national initiatives

Zusammenfassung

Förderung von Gendergerechtigkeit und strukturellem Wandel im Wissenschaftsbereich durch Gleichstellungspläne: Integration von EU- und nationalen Initiativen

Gendergerechtigkeit wird in Hochschulen in der EU im Rahmen des Programms Science with and for Society (SwafS) der Europäischen Kommission durch die Umsetzung von Gleichstellungsplänen aktiv gefördert. Die Erarbeitung und Umsetzung von Gleichstellungsplänen wurde durch die Beteiligung an EU-Projekten in irischen sowie italienischen Hochschuleinrichtungen stark beeinflusst. Dieser Beitrag bezieht sich auf Erfahrungen des EU-Projekts SAGE (H2020), bei dem irische und italienische Universitäten kooperieren, die Athena SWAN Charta in Irland, den Aktionsplan Piano di Azioni Positive (PAP) in Italien und Interviews mit Gender-Expert*innen irischer und italienischer Hochschuleinrichtungen. Es wird untersucht, inwieweit die Teilnahme an EU- und nationalen Initiativen ähnliche Ergebnisse erzielen kann. Der Beitrag kommt zu dem Schluss, dass eine abgestimmte Strategie, die sich auf gemeinsame Prioritäten konzentriert und kulturelle, politische und soziale Vielfalt berücksichtigt, die Internationalisierung des Hochschulsektors fördern und den Prozess zur Herstellung von Gendergerechtigkeit in der Wissenschaft beschleunigen könnte.

*Schlüsselwörter*
Gendergerechtigkeit, Vielfalt, Strukturwandel, Horizon 2020, Gleichstellungsplan, Piano di Azioni Positive (PAP)

Summary

Gender equality has been actively promoted in EU academic institutions by the European Commission's Science with and for Society (SwafS) programme through the implementation of gender equality plans (GEP). GEP formulation and implementation was strongly influenced by involvement in EU projects in Irish as well as Italian higher education institutions. The paper draws upon experience of the EU project SAGE (H2020), in which Irish and Italian universities actively cooperated, the Athena SWAN Charter in Ireland, Positive Action Plans (PAP) in Italy, and semi-structured interviews with gender experts in Irish and Italian higher education institutions to explore the degree to which participation in EU and national initiatives can promote similar outcomes by the adoption of positive actions. The paper concludes that a harmonised strategy, focusing on common priorities and respecting cultural, political and social diversity, could promote the internationalisation of the higher education sector and accelerate the process towards gender equality in academia.

*Keywords*
gender equality, diversity, structural change, Horizon 2020, gender equality plan (GEP), Positive Action Plan (PAP)

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## 1 Introduction

This paper examines how participation in EU Framework Programmes (FP) and national initiatives has supported the adoption of actions promoting gender equality in academia in Ireland and Italy. Despite a declared global, persistent and strategic priority pursued in EU member states through departments of education, gender equality in academia remains aspirational (Husu 2001). Academia is not neutral when it comes to gender (Acker 1990). Research has focused on everyday gender interactions (Benschop 2009; Montes López/O'Connor 2019), patriarchal systems of support that benefit men (Bagilhole/Goode 2001), biased evaluations that influence recruitment and selection procedures (van den Brink/Benschop 2012), homophily that influences people to seek out and appoint those who are similar to themselves (Nielsen 2021, 2016), and daily micro-aggressions against female university professors (Montes-López/Groves 2019).

Since the 1990s, the European Union (EU) has played a pivotal role in promoting and implementing gender mainstreaming, through fixing the principle of gender equality into treaty articles, advocating action programmes and communications and setting up institutional bodies and mechanisms to support the inclusion of a gender perspective into policymaking (Drew/Canavan 2021). To this end, the European Commission has required the scientific community to address gender issues while preparing research proposals. Under the Research and Development Framework Programmes (FP), almost all scientific disciplines have been involved in promoting gender mainstreaming. FP6 (2002–2006), and particularly FP7 (2007–2013) established the basis for the Horizon 2020 approach to gender. In FP6, applicants for Integrated Projects and Networks of Excellence had to produce a short action plan on gender mainstreaming: a Gender Action Plan (GAP). However, by the end of FP6, GAPs were considered by the Commission to be a "burden to the research community" (Mergaert/Lombardo 2014: 12) though no evidence of this was found in the work of expert panels convened by the Commission. Hence, FP7 did not require GAPs to be submitted by applicants. However, the EC deemed structural change a necessary step towards gender equality, through developing statistical indicators, involving persons in positions of responsibility to support change, and raising awareness on gender issues (European Commission 2012). The European Commission subsequently launched a new set of calls for proposals, Science with and for Society (SwafS), to support universities and other research performing organisations (RPO) in structural change, through tailored gender equality plans.

At a national level, the UK and more recently Ireland have promoted gender equality and structural change in higher education institutions (HEIs) through the Athena SWAN (AS) Charter, while other EU countries, such as Italy, Spain, Finland and Austria, have specific legislation promoting gender equality, diversity and inclusion initiatives in HEIs.

The general research objectives leading to this paper were to understand what discourses gender equality experts use to make sense of the progress toward gender equality in HEIs through structural change and how they explain female under-representation. Following a review of literature on gender equality in academia, the paper focuses on structural changes that have emerged though EU FP projects and two national initiatives: the Athena SWAN Charter (IE) and Positive Action Plans (PAP) (IT). A paragraph

on the methodology adopted for selecting and interviewing a group of gender equality experts working in HEIs follows, then we illustrate the interview results and the conclusions.

## 2 Literature review

The links between gender inequality and structural issues in HEIs have been studied widely (Benschop/Verloo 2015; van den Brink/Benschop 2012). Structural change approaches go beyond re-balancing opportunities for women and men and seek equality of outcomes (Benschop/Verloo 2011). Inspired by Acker's seminal work (Acker 1992), practical strategies are sought, such as action research and activities to interfere with processes that are not neutral but highly gendered (Benschop/Verloo 2011). These strategies address the core norms and values prevailing in academia. Gender mainstreaming is a strategy in which actors are involved in the process leading to transformative outcomes (Stratigaki 2005). However, "feminist theorists and policy analysts remain divided as to the benefits of this purportedly system-wide approach to gender equity policy" (Eveline/Bacchi/Binns 2009: 220). Benschop and Verloo stress that gender mainstreaming lacks "a deep theoretical understanding of how change can happen without violently disrupting society or how revolution without a revolution can come about" (Benschop /Verloo 2011: 284).

National schemes to reduce gender inequality in academia have focused on cultural and structural approaches. These include the US ADVANCE programme of the National Science Foundation (founded in 2001), the UK Athena SWAN Charter (established in 2005) and the adoption of gender equality plans in EU countries such as Austria, Germany, Norway and Spain.

In 2012, the European Commission sought to include measures to address scientific priorities, contents and methods, including a gender dimension, into the overall scientific process, by identifying five sets of problems and broad objectives to facilitate the structural change process (Table 1).

*Table 1:* Problems and objectives

| Problems | Objectives |
|---|---|
| Opaqueness of decision-making | Making decision-making transparent |
| Institutional practices inhibiting women's career opportunities | Promoting excellence through diversity |
| Unconscious gender bias in assessing excellence and in the process of peer review | Removing unconscious bias from institutional practices |
| Gender bias leading to wasted opportunities and cognitive errors | Improving research by integrating a gender perspective |
| Employment policy and practice penalising women | Modernising human resources management and the working environment |

Source: adapted from European Commission (2012).

Several EU countries have adopted gender equality initiatives in academia, using a variety of approaches that lack overall coordination. A report issued by the European Commission (2014) focused on public research, showing national provisions and initiatives relating to gender equality (GE) in HEIs that were specific, positive and additional (Table 2) though no evidence is provided of any attempt at supranational coordination.

*Table 2:* Actions and policies at national level

| Actions at national level | Policy at the national level |
|---|---|
| Specific actions (SA) for the implementation of the EU directives in the specific sector of public research | Specific laws/acts regulating GE in public research, e.g. in AT, ES, NO, FR (since 2013) and BE (Walloon region) |
| Positive actions (PA) providing specific advantages in order to make it easier for the under-represented gender to pursue a vocational activity or to prevent or compensate for disadvantages in professional careers within the public research sector | Acts/incentives stimulating or obliging RPOs to explicitly set up GEPs, e.g. laws in ES, AT and NO; performance agreements in AT; Athena Swan in the UK; the Finnish Equality Act covering HEIs |
| Additional actions (AA) to achieve GE in R&D, not covered by the EU directives on GE in the labour market. They address institutional changes in the public research sector in order to correct gender inequalities and ensure GE. They also cover actions relating to the integration of the gender dimension in research content/programmes. | Strategies (i.e. guidelines, charters/codes, awards, etc.) at the national/departmental or regional level for GE in RPOs e.g. the UK Athena SWAN awards; the AT performance agreements; and the NO GE Award |

Source: adapted from European Commission (2014: 97).

The latest EU report on public research concluded 2016:

> "The analysis shows that the majority of Member States have made progress in setting up or planning more systemic strategies for gender equality in R&I. The measures described in the European Research Area (ERA) National Action Plans will continue to support institutional change through gender equality plans to act as a catalyst for Member State action. The high number of planned measures creates expectations of significant progress in the coming years. The actual improvement will depend on the capacity of Member States to maintain and reinforce the institutional change strategies adopted so far in the long term" (European Commission 2016: 8).

The She Figures 2018 report (European Commission 2019) presents the percentage of higher education institutions where GEPs have been adopted, based on a survey conducted by the Monitoring the Evolution and Benefits of Responsible Research and Innovation (MoRRI). These data remain the most complete currently available. The MoRRI data show that the proportion of RPOs that adopted GEPs in 2016 was 56 % across the EU-28, ranging from over 90 % in Sweden, Germany and the United Kingdom to under 20 % in Slovakia, Bulgaria and Czechia. The figures for Ireland and Italy were 60 % and 39 % respectively (European Commission 2019: 110). The variation is attributed, at least partially, to the fact that in some countries it is a legal requirement for RPOs to have a GEP, for example in Austria and Spain. Given that, in Italy, Positive Action Plans (PAP) have been mandatory for state universities since 2006, it appears that respondents to the MORRI survey did not equate them with GEPs. The EIGE website, dedicated to Gender Equality in Academia and Research in Italy, declares that "By Law, Public

Administrations – all public research organisations including Universities – must have a gender equality plan (also called Positive Action Plan and referred to hereafter as PAP)"[1]. Therefore, it is clear that a lack of harmonisation sometimes hinders the possibility of seeing similarities between national schemes.

In pursuing gender equality in academia the shift of emphasis, from the individual to cultural and structural causes, has led to strategies ranging from individual mentoring targeted at 'fixing' individuals (usually the women), to gender and diversity training for decision-makers and unconscious bias awareness for recruiters. These broader measures have sought to change the culture and address the structural perspective in academia, in which adherence to the principle of 'meritocracy' in appointments and promotion is propounded. Academic institutions involved in any EU funded proposal can raise awareness for those in charge of selection or career advancement mechanisms, since "collecting data and monitoring change, or the lack of it, is a crucial tool in creating transparency, identifying problem areas and tracking the effectiveness of measures to tackle unconscious bias" (Gvozdanović/Bailey 2021: 121).

There is no common or shared vision of what constitutes the best strategies. Timmers, Willemsen and Tijdens investigated the efficacy of gender equality policy measures implemented between 2000 and 2007 in Dutch universities. Their analysis revealed "a positive relationship between policy measures and the reduction of the glass ceiling and between policies in the cultural perspective and the increase of the proportion of women among professors" (Timmers/Willemsen/Tijdens 2010: 719). However, Benschop and Verloo claimed that progress was hindered by many impediments to change:

"Among those impediments are: the managerialist tendency of planned change, the need for simultaneous short and long-term agendas for change, the issue of resistance, the need to address gender-related emotions and attitudes, the intersectionality of multiple inequalities, and the inclusion and voice of all stakeholders, not only particular categories of women" (Benshop/Verloo 2011: 287).

Another impediment to change can be related to a lack of harmonisation among EU projects, when promoting structural change through GEPs:

"Despite the numerous dissemination and exploitation activities connecting past and current EU funded projects, the learning and training material available through the outputs of previous projects and the support offered by the EU and EIGE, each project establishes a specific way to create a GEP. All institutional GEPs are similar in their aims, but their structure and contents differ. This hinders the possibility of evaluating and using GEP data at EU and even national level" (Bencivenga 2020: 186).

One emerging strategy is:

"interrogating and focusing systematically not only on what happens but on that which does not happen. This involves asking what does not happen in women's academic careers, interactions and academic work environments more generally and what impact these non-happenings have on aspirations, careers, the working environment and the processes of knowledge production" (Husu 2021: 167).

1 See https://eige.europa.eu/gender-mainstreaming/toolkits/gear/legislative-policy-backgrounds/italy [access: 11 January 2021].

Several metaphors have been used to describe the difficulties experienced by women in academia. Berryman (1983) introduced the 'pipeline' model to explain women's progressive disappearance in science occupations and other academic disciplines "where leakages of female scientists leaving the pipeline occur and the volume decreases leading to shortages in female supply" (Bennett 2011: 151). The 'glass ceiling' (Hymowitz/Schellhardt 1986) is still current in academia, privileging men and the masculine and devaluing women and the feminine (Roberto et al. 2020). Another metaphor is that of the 'old boys club' operating through:

> "hoarding of information and shoulder-tapping to install faculty in committee and leadership positions rather than transparent invitations for participation. Governance of the boys' club model has the effect of excluding those who exist outside of the group and who do not have access to the information" (Schell/Cole/Hassel 2017: 20).

Raising gender awareness includes understanding how gendered organisations of universities require "not only female participation in management but also gender competent or even feminist managers" (Wroblewski 2017: 57). When there is no understanding of gender as a social construct, at senior level, challenging the structures and processes is difficult (Peterson/Jordansson 2017; van den Brink/Benschop 2012). It is easier to focus on measures such as parental leave and work-life balance that 'fix' specific problems without challenging the status quo where holding power is more relevant, such as in career advancement and election to senior roles in the professoriate and management structures.

Among the challenges that still hinder the path towards gender equality in academia are: the simplified notion of 'the woman' propounded by liberal and neoliberal feminism (Tzanakou/Pearce 2019); negative bias in the evaluation of female professorial candidates (van den Brink/Benschop 2011; Nielsen 2021); and the lack of attention to the dynamics of change (Schmidt/Cacace 2019). Competence in gender issues at senior level "is seen as a key prerequisite for those holding managerial leadership positions, and essential if gender parity at full professorial level is to be achieved" (O'Connor 2019: 142). Work-life balance among staff is still more aspirational than real and "expectations of family care and domestic responsibilities remain greater sources of work-life conflict for female scholars" (Drew/Marshall 2021: 64).

Overall, the verdict is not totally negative in that some progress is evident. Monroe et al. analysed 80 interviews with female faculty, concluding that "overt discrimination has largely given way to less obvious, but still deeply entrenched inequities" (Monroe et al. 2008: 215). According to Rosser et al. as

> "ADVANCE and Athena SWAN gain international recognition, their approaches and frameworks could be used as models for others to adapt and adopt (Sage in Australia exemplifies this). These successes in other related programmes facilitate the growing interest in and legitimisation of actions that address gender inequalities in societies globally" (Rosser et al. 2019: 607).

# 3 EU projects and national initiatives promoting structural change

In the following section, two EU projects and one Irish and one Italian initiative promoting gender equality will be reviewed.

## 3.1 INTEGER and SAGE EU projects

This article draws upon experience gained from two EU projects: INTEGER (FP7) and SAGE (H2020) that involved the creation and implementation of GEPs in ten academic institutions. The INstitutional Transformation for Effecting Gender Equality in Research (INTEGER) project (2011–2015) sought to address gender imbalances in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) disciplines, at both institutional and local level. To this end, INTEGER implemented Transformational-Gender Action Plans (T-GAPs) based on detailed baseline data assessments collected in three academies in France, Ireland and Lithuania.

Building upon the INTEGER results, the Systemic Action for Gender Equality (SAGE) project was funded under the Horizon 2020 SwafS programme to promote gender equality in academia through structural change in academies located in Italy, Portugal, Bosnia & Herzegovina, France and Turkey coordinated by the Irish partner from INTEGER. Three Irish HEIs collectively built upon their engagement in EU FP7 Projects (INTEGER, FESTA and GENOVATE) that led to the extension of the UK Athena SWAN Charter to Ireland in 2014.

## 3.2 Athena SWAN (AS) Ireland

The Athena Scientific Women's Academic Network (SWAN) Charter was launched in 2005 in the UK to advance the representation of women in STEMM academic/research roles. In 2015, the Charter was expanded to recognise work done in Arts, Humanities, Social Sciences, Business and Law disciplines (AHSSBL) and extended to staff in professional and support roles and to trans staff and students. The Charter currently addresses gender equality and not just barriers to women's progression.[2]

Athena SWAN (AS) is an accreditation scheme for universities, departments and research institutes in UK and Ireland (and more recently Australia) that have signed up to the AS Charter's ten key principles. Member institutions can apply for an institutional Bronze award, starting on a path that may lead to a Silver, and finally, a Gold award. Only after institutions have been awarded AS Bronze can individual departments/schools apply for AS awards. Self-Assessment Teams (SATs), comprised of members of staff within the institution/school/department, collate and analyse the gender disaggregated data for award applications and set out the actions to address identified barriers to gender equality. The standardised application includes a gender action plan in which all actions listed must be: specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and timebound (SMART).

2 See www.ecu.ac.uk/equality-charters/athena-swan [access: 11 January 2021].

In Ireland, the INTEGER partner, Trinity College Dublin, established teams that matched the composition of Athena SWAN Self-Assessment Teams (SATs). Subsequently, in order to anchor/institutionalise the gains from INTEGER and build upon them, an external stimulus was required, provided by the establishment of an Irish Athena SWAN National Committee. This paved the way for the extension of Athena SWAN into Irish academic institutions, with funding from the Higher Education Authority (HEA). The HEA Review (2016) and subsequent Gender Equality Task Force Report (2018) further endorsed Athena SWAN, making it a requirement for HEIs to hold an AS Bronze award within four years and a Silver award within seven years. Since 2016, three of Ireland's research funding organisations (Science Foundation Ireland, the Irish Research Council and the Health Research Board) made the holding of an Athena SWAN award mandatory to be eligible for research funding.

### 3.3 Positive Action Plans (PAPs) in Italy

In 2006, the Italian National Code of Equal Opportunities between Women and Men made it mandatory by law (Legislative Decree 198) for all public administrations, including the 96 state universities, to produce a 'positive action plan' (PAP – Piano di Azioni Positive), to remove obstacles preventing the full realisation of equality between women and men. An Italian university's PAP is prepared and implemented by an internal Unique Guarantee Committee for Equal Opportunities in Public Administrations for workers' wellbeing and against discriminations (CUG), established in 2010 (law 183/2010). In a PAP, the university outlines the positive actions planned for the following three years to promote gender equality. A PAP, not supported by a common template, has a narrative form and is similar to a GEP. Italian universities are engaged in meetings and training aimed at exchanging experience and support, such as a two-day training course for CUG members, held every other year, and seminars on specific topics, such as the gender budget.

Galizzi and Siboni (2016) investigated 28 university PAPs and found that they generally focused on the collection of gender disaggregated data; services related to maternity and childcare; and disseminating information on gender discrimination to address structural factors aimed at creating a more women-friendly environment. PAPs do not extend to gender awareness in science or fostering women's leadership. PAP measures are directed towards academic and administrative staff, thereby overlooking the needs of researchers in training and students, despite the fact that these could be target groups.

## 4 Methodology

The findings presented in this paper are part of a wider research agenda relating to gendered career progression in HEIs. A qualitative approach was used involving desk research and empirical data collection to allow data triangulation. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with gender equality and diversity experts working in Italian and Irish universities. Participants were chosen using a non-probability sampling technique: snowball sampling, starting from a list of experts, known for their professional roles and

publications that focused on female career progression in academia. The intention was not to extrapolate from the results but to target individual experts who could provide valuable insights into the research questions and contribute new ideas and perspectives.

A total of 21 universities were contacted, leading to 19 interviews with five men and 14 women drawn from academic disciplines, human resources (HR) and gender and diversity offices.

*Table 3:* Country/gender of respondents

| | Female | Male | Total |
|---|---|---|---|
| Ireland | 6 | 2 | 8 |
| Italy | 8 | 3 | 11 |
| **Total** | **14** | **5** | **19** |

Source: own data and own chart.

Secondary data collection and analysis began in September 2018 and the semi-structured interviews were conducted via Skype or face-to-face between November 2018 and December 2019. The interviews, which averaged 45 minutes, were audio-taped for subsequent transcription, anonymisation and coding. All interviewees were assigned a unique code according to interview number, country code (IT for Italy and IE for Ireland) and identified gender. All of them self-classified as male or female.

A constructivist approach to grounded theory (Charmaz 2006; Mills/Bonner/Francis 2006) was used as an analytical framework, incorporating constant comparative analysis as a method of qualitative data analysis (Charmaz 2006). Commonly used to generate theory, grounded theory procedures and techniques (Strauss/Corbin 1990) can provide a useful framework for smaller studies, where theory will not be generated. In particular, the data can provide an understanding of a specific issue, as is the case in this project. The aim was to explore, in depth, the current and prospective vision of experts on the progression of gender equality in academia, with a focus on structural change. No predefined hypotheses were applied to the analysis, which was influenced by ideas derived from practical experience gained from EU funded gender equality projects and literature.

## 5 Interview results

EU programmes and projects and national initiatives, aimed at promoting gender equality in HEIs, can be implemented in a variety of ways. Not all staff, nor departments, are involved in these initiatives and this may slow the implementation process. At the same time, HEIs may implement several initiatives to promote gender equality. The interviews with experts working in academia demonstrated the links and discrepancies between the macro level of national and international initiatives, and the micro level of initiatives taken in a specific university or even department. Interview data analysis concentrated on participation in EU and national initiatives: the extent to which the involvement of senior level academics is considered essential for structural change

in academia, the importance ascribed to the strategies for promoting gender equality, through GEPs or PAPs, and the structural obstacles that might hinder their achievement, including potential new forms of discrimination emerging from the efforts needed to promote structural change.

## 5.1 Senior management commitment

A transversal common agreement among respondents in Ireland and Italy is that involving senior managers in academia is essential in promoting change, thereby confirming EU and national schemes that require the formal commitment by presidents, rectors or other senior managers. One expert commented:

"If we look at the work we've done on gender action planning, and we look at what anyone else has done, there isn't one silver bullet that we can all sign up to and we'll solve our issues on gender equality. It's about having a high level commitment, and then following that through at all levels of the organisation." (01_IE_M)

Several respondents raised doubts about the gender competence of those holding higher positions, and thus having more power:

"[At the beginning of the EU project that created the GEP] the awareness was not there, the top levels in our University saw the numbers [gender disaggregated data], showing the very scarce presence of women full professors, but they did not perceive it in fact as a problem. For them it was natural, it has always been this way, nobody had ever considered the issue. So, the first step was to give them the gender disaggregated data but also to teach them how to read it, and also to understand that this data is problematic. And it is essential to do this, especially with those who have the opportunity to change things, to decide." (12_IT_F)

Some respondents stressed that 'competence' should be the precursor for reaching higher leadership levels:

"A recommendation that I think is really important and does not cost anything is requiring that those who are appointed to all line management positions, including the president, have already, before their appointment, shown evidence of their leadership ability to bring about change in gender inequality." (14_IE_F)

Some female respondents stressed that lack of competence in gender issues is not limited to male colleagues:

"Certain perspectives, in which the personal should never be political, never be public, are very evident, especially in certain areas. And it is therefore very evident not only the absence of awareness but also of the will [to promote change]. First of all, as a woman in academia, in a certain sense you have to adapt to rules that you have not helped to write, and which can be very difficult to live [with]. And that's why having women in top positions is not what solves the problems or leads inevitably to decisions that are more respectful of gender equality." (05_IT_F)

When speaking about senior and high level positions, respondents referred not only to academic staff but also to administrative and human resources, again confirming the need to create gender-related competence that is not currently required in these roles:

"[D]efinitely there's a huge role for HR. And interestingly, traditionally if you were looking at HR and even looking at centres of expertise within HR, you would look at recruitment development, organisation development, HR information systems, pensions, general HR. There was never an identified discipline within HR of managing diversity and equality, so that's an emerging agenda." (01_IE_M)

Even if the list of difficulties put forward by the respondents is long, the general perception is positive, as they all saw clear progress in the commitment of those in higher positions:

"If we look at our data as a university, very little changed, but in recent years I've seen an acceleration, and people are getting more educated and more aware of the subject, and they are thinking about it rather than just in terms of equality compliance thing, i.e. 'We must obey the law', and see it from a point of view of human potential; […] so, a bit more enlightenment, a bit more understanding of the importance of gender equality – I like to think." (01_IE_M)

## 5.2 Strategies and difficulties

Respondents mentioned several strategies that they considered fundamental to progressing towards gender equality and that were planned or implemented, either through national schemes or through EU funded projects, in their institutions. The strategies mentioned address individual, cultural and structural causes. The SAGE wheel, an updated version of the original INTEGER wheel, shows visually the variety of strategies, from career progression, to work-life balance, from engendering knowledge to institutional governance: these dimensions are all mentioned in the interview responses. Actions targeted at fixing the individuals, the culture and structural obstacles coexist in GEPs and in PAPs. These three targets constantly emerge: "So these are the areas: women's empowerment, organisational interventions and the cultural sphere of awareness" (12_IT_F).

Italian respondents saw unconscious bias, quotas and targets as more difficult to implement, unless supported by a cultural change, while Irish respondents frequently list them as fundamental and at least partially effective. The respondents, active or not in EU projects and in AS and PAP, mention work-life balance as a fundamental issue:

"Sometimes I feel like living in an eternal present, where work-life balance is the first topic we, and I mean 'we, women', discuss, again and again, while I would expect a more profound, 'academic' debate capable of challenging the status quo." (19_IT_F)

However, policies alone are not considered enough to create a concrete change.

"I also think that policies have a place but the danger of policies … The classic example of that is work life balance where you have policies that say you can take a career break, policies that say you have equality, policies that say you can opt to reduce your working time, flexible working week or flexible working year, but the reality is that they are a one way ticket, that it's very hard […] if you did take reduced hours, to reverse it, to be able to come back and revert into full-time." (02_IE_F)

The overall scheme of actions linked to Athena SWAN is very well known by all the respondents in Ireland, and all share the AS vision. While progress is undeniable, in the experience of all respondents, the path ahead remains difficult. Data and benchmarking are considered fundamental starting points:

"So, it [Athena SWAN] has made an amazing difference, and I think that it is a great way of actually benchmarking, although there are some flaws. But if you look at it strictly you can benchmark yourself against other organisations across the world on how you're doing regarding gender equality […] you have to really invest in gathering the data, and I think for some people it actually opens their eyes to the problem. I don't think they saw a problem before they actually saw the evidence, the actual physical evidence that there is only x percent of women in whatever position." (13_IE_F)

One respondent questioned the reliance on measuring research excellence via bibliometrics:

"I think also about the recognition of the way in which we assess research quality and success through bibliometrics and things like that, those measures are themselves gendered, and there's too much emphasis on quantity and not quality, so I think that needs to change. I recognise that it's difficult, because people have a certain faith in numbers, but we all know that the numbers can be manipulated. It's not always the best measure, and as a community we need to get away from this idea that the more papers you publish, the better you are." (03_IE_F)

Some respondents have been active in EU funded projects that addressed structural change. Creating a GEP, as a member of an EU project consortia, allowed them to notice the different strategies, pace, obstacles and forms of resistance in participating countries. However, the link between the existing PAPs and the GEPs implemented in international collaborations does not emerge clearly in the Italian interviews.

Consolidated practices and routines that may further impede women's progress, become invisible, even to experts, and care is needed to not reproduce them to avoid creating new discriminations:

"For example, certain tasks related to teaching, relationship management, are entrusted more often to women, who more willingly take charge of them. This, however, often damages their career, because it is not what is formally recognised as valuable, in Italy in particular." (12_IT_F)

## 6 Conclusions

This article builds upon existing literature on gender and structural change in academia suggesting that GEPs created through EU financial support may be shaped by, as well as influence, national strategies, as in the case of Ireland, or work in parallel with similar initiatives, as in Italy. Rather than starting a new process for each EU funded project, as happens currently, the harmonisation of approaches to GEPs could benefit national academic sectors, speeding up structural change and facilitating the comparison of institutional results both nationally and internationally. Recognising the importance of national initiatives, similar to GEPs, could facilitate the way to a European GEP system that could become a standard for comparing the level of gender equality in HEIs across the EU and other countries (Bencivenga 2020).

The main limitation of the study is the focus on HEIs in two EU countries. The results might, or might not, be replicable in other countries. However, the numerous EU financed projects in which HEIs belonging to all EU member states are collaborating in creating GEPs since FP7, show that transferability – if not replicability – of at least part

of the strategies is *de facto* possible. Indirectly, this is confirmed by the Gender Equality in Academia and Research (GEAR) tool, created by EIGE. GEAR offers practical advice and tools to HEIs through all stages of institutional change and is periodically updated, based on project results and related research experiences, documented in research papers by the consortia performing EU funded projects.

The findings confirm also the important role of those in senior positions as well as the difficulties in changing the status quo that, purporting to be driven by excellence and merit, does not address the need for structural change for gender equality. Strategies such as work-life balance, promoting visibility of gender issues, training of faculty and HR staff on unconscious bias and gender related issues, a balance of top-down policies and bottom-up communication and dedicated support to individuals are the measures deemed most urgently needed by the experts interviewed.

All of the Irish respondents mentioned Athena SWAN and were positive as to its objectives, even where they were not directly involved in its activities. Some mentioned EU funded projects if they had been/were working in one or more of them. The Italian respondents shared the same concerns and cited the same strategies as their Irish colleagues. However, unless directly involved in a CUG or an EU project, they tended to describe the problems, focusing on cultural and social issues, and were less involved in strategies and initiatives specifically focused on promoting structural change.

At least two possible strategies emerge from this paper. The first is to advocate more subtle sets of key performance indicators that include qualitative and quantitative measures of success. The second strategy would be to use all existing tools, protocols, non-formal initiatives, laws, (AS and PAP are two examples) to ensure that the GEP proposals integrate and build upon existing knowledge and experience. Together, these strategies can accelerate the achievement of gender equality, minimize resistance to change and promote the HEI's internationalisation.

Structural change underlies all aspects of promoting gender equality in HEIs. GEPs, AS and PAPs represent all-powerful lenses through which to identify the problems to be solved, difficulties to be overcome and mechanisms for change, thereby guaranteeing that attention to gender and diversity is not lost in the process. A strategy focusing on harmonising common priorities and strategies, while respecting cultural, political and social diversity, could promote the internationalisation of the higher education sector and accelerate the process towards gender equality in academia and at a societal level. This common harmonised strategy could contribute to promoting gender equality in HEIs while endorsing and reinforcing the EU motto *United in Diversity*.

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