

Gender Equality Plan: An Explorative Analysis of Italian Academia

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Abstract: Since 2015, the European Union, always sensitive to gender issues, has been recommending and actively supporting the implementation of the Gender Equality Plan (GEP) in academic and research organisations: a set of commitments and actions that aim to promote gender equality through a process of structural change. Moreover, the European Commission recognises GEPs as an eligibility criterion for participation in all Horizon Europe calls for research and innovation. Gender issues in academia are particularly topical in Italy. According to the last Global Gender Gap Report, in terms of economic participation and opportunities, Italy ranks 110th out of a total of 146 states, after several developing countries. In the country, even though women outnumber men among graduate students, a strong inequality in superior grades of the academic careers persists. In compliance with Decree No. 2/2019, and in line with EU-COM No.152/2020, Italian universities are required to adopt a GEP, which identifies the strategy of individual universities for gender equality. Consequently, most Italian universities have implemented their first GEP edition in last two years. Despite the growing attention to gender issues in academia, studies on GEP implementation and content are still scarce. Therefore, this paper aims to explore the implementation of GEPs in Italian universities by responding to the following research question: (RQ1) What is the state of the art about GEPs in Italian universities? Content analysis will be employed to identify to what extent universities have disclosed the information related to their GEPs. The study consists of the analysis of the total population of 67 Italian public universities that have been drafted referring to the period 2019-2025 (except for one GEP drawn up for 2015-2021). Results highlight that most universities easily disclose information on goals, actions, beneficiaries and institutional members and that universities seem to have difficulties in identifying the subjects operationally involved in the plan implementation, the financial resources and the expected results of the policies adopted for each action. This paper is original for two reasons. First, it provides insights into GEPs as a novelty strategic tool. Second, it represents the first empirical study that provides an overview of the GEPs' structure and contents, with a focus on Italian academia.

Keywords: Gender equality plan, Diversity, Gender gap, Universities, Empirical research

1. Introduction

Gender issues in higher education institutions have attracted considerable attention from scholars and public institutions over the last few decades (Clavero, Galligan, 2021; Sales Oliveira, Augusto, 2017; Osborn et al., 2000; Council of the EU, 2015, 2020; EIGE, 2016). Nowadays, the greater participation of women in all sectors of society is evidenced (WEF, 2006 and 2022), particularly in developed countries. However, these advances have not occurred proportionally. Emerging evidence has highlighted the strongest gender inequalities in academia across the world (Teichler, Höhle, 2013; Górska et al., 2020). In this sector, the under-representation of women in senior academic positions, such as professors and university rectors, represents the most visible manifestation of gender discrimination (Van den Brink, Benschop, 2012; Clavero, Galligan, 2021; Teelken et al., 2021), but it represents only the tip of the iceberg. Moreover, the Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated the pre-existing inequalities (European Union, 2021). In fact, scholars have demonstrated that women academics have been disproportionately affected by pandemic-related changes (Górska et al., 2021; Boncori, 2020; Guy, Arthur, 2020).

With the aim of reducing the gap, a number of measures and policies have been implemented by institutions at different levels: international, regional and single states. In this sense, the European Union (EU), always sensitive to gender issues (Osborn et al., 2000; Council of the EU, 2015, 2020; EIGE, 2016), has been recommending and actively supporting the implementation of the Gender Equality Plan (GEP) in academic and research organisations: a set of commitments and actions that aim to promote gender equality through a process of structural change (EIGE, 2016). Furthermore, the European Commission recognises GEPs as an eligibility criterion for participation in all Horizon Europe calls for research and innovation.

Italian academia is a productive research setting for the study of gender issues. According to the last Global Gender Gap Report (WEF, 2022), in terms of economic participation and opportunities, Italy ranks 110 out of a total of 146 States, behind several developing countries. Even though women graduate students outnumber men in Italy, top academic positions are an area in which inequality clearly persists (Morana, Sagradora, 2021).

In compliance with Decree No. 2/2019, and in line with EU-COM No.152/2020, Italian universities are required to adopt a GEP, which identifies the strategy of individual universities for gender equality. In this regard, in 2021, CRUI (Conference of Rectors of Italian Universities) published a vademecum containing guidelines and suggestions for GEP drafting. As a result, most Italian universities have implemented their first GEP in the last two years. Despite the growing attention to gender issues in academia, studies on GEP implementation and content are still scarce (Clavero and Galligan, 2021). Therefore, this paper aims to explore the implementation of GEPs in Italian universities by responding to the following research question:

(RQ1) What is the state of the art as regards GEPs in Italian universities?

To accomplish the research goals a content analysis was employed (Krippendorff, 2018). The study consists of the analysis of 67 Italian public universities in order to map out the propagation of their GEPs and analyse the content of those that have been drafted with reference to the period 2019-2025 (only one case for 2015-2021).

According to the main findings, most analysed universities easily disclose information about their objectives, actions, beneficiaries and institutional members. At the same time, more difficulties appear in identifying those operationally involved in the plan's implementation, the financial resources and the expected results of the policies adopted for each action.

2. The Gender Equality Plan Background

In 2022, the EU's Gender Equality Index score was 68.6 points out of 100 (EIGE, 2022). Data clearly show that gender equality has still not been achieved, despite the improvements made since the ETAN report was published (Osborn et al., 2000; European Commission, 2021). Prevailing gender inequality is especially apparent in the area of Research and Innovation (R&I) where women students are decidedly thin on the ground in certain disciplines and scientific spheres and where women are poorly represented in senior academic posts and on the boards and committees of R&I institutions. Furthermore, companies and start-ups of a scientific nature — concerned, for example, with technology or engineering — also reveal a lack of women researchers (European Commission, 2021).

Since 2012, the European Commission's strategy on gender equality in R&I in the European research area (ERA) framework has been grounded on three aims: promoting gender equality in scientific careers; guaranteeing gender balance in decision-making processes and bodies; incorporating the gender dimension in R&I content.

In pursuit of these goals, in 2015 and again in 2020, the EU invited Member States and research funding organisations to provide incentives with a view to encourage research performing organisations, including universities, to focus on gender equality and mainstreaming strategies, including with a GEP and the integration of the gender dimension into R&I content (Council of the EU, 2015 and 2020). A GEP is a systematic and strategic measure which defines the priorities and the specific targets to be achieved, based on a detailed assessment of the current situation; it also specifies the action to be taken in order to improve gender equality in R&I organisations (EIGE, 2016).

A further step in that direction was taken in 2021 with the launch of Horizon Europe (HE) — the key funding program for research and innovation. A new eligibility criterion was introduced to strengthen gender equality as a priority: organisations applying for HE funds are required to have a GEP in place. This criterion should be complied with by the following categories of legal entities: research funding bodies (national ministries and other public authorities), higher education institutions and research organisations (both public and private).

The European Commission indicated four compulsory requirements for a GEP: to be a public document available on the organisation's website, to include the dedicated human and financial resources constituting the means and expertise to implement the gender policies, to include data collection and monitoring sex-disaggregated data on personnel (teaching staff, researchers, technical-administrative staff) and to include training activities on gender equality for the whole organisation.

Moreover, there are five gender equality areas that a GEP should seek to address: 1) work-life balance and organisational culture; 2) gender balance in leadership and decision-making; 3) gender equality in recruitment and career progression; 4) integrating the gender dimension into research and teaching content; 5) measures against gender-based violence, including sexual harassment. Furthermore, for each area, it is desirable to provide a clear definition of the objectives and to list the actions designed to achieve them, specifying indicators, targets, timelines, sharing of responsibilities and allocation of resources (EIGE, 2016).

By specifying these requirements, the Horizon Europe eligibility criterion has put GEPs at the top of the agenda of organisations in the R&I sector. As a result, European universities which require access to funds have to implement a GEP.

In the literature, GEPs have been criticised as an ineffective policy tool for resolving issues of gender in academia. Sales Oliveira and Augusto (2017) argue that the inadequate involvement of key stakeholders in the process integral to a GEP is the main reason for this failure. Clavero and Galligan (2021) show that insufficient attention is paid to the role of academic power in creating gender unfairness at all institutional levels and the role of organisational culture in the perpetuation of gender inequalities. The fact that an institution has a GEP in place does not in itself guarantee the existence of a set of suitable policies to promote gender fairness (O'Connor, 2020; Clavero, Galligan, 2021). Universities may decide to implement GEP measures for reasons which have little to do with a commitment to justice and equality: for instance, with a view to remain competitive on the global market (Tzanakou & Pearce, 2019), or because they are legally obliged to do so (Ikävälko & Kantola, 2017). In fact, the existence of a GEP is a positive factor in applying for research funds — such as in the case of the HE program — and in attracting talented staff and greater numbers of prospective students (Clavero, Galligan, 2021).

Nonetheless, GEPs are also recognised as an essential means of creating gender equality awareness and serving to promote cultural change (Barros et al., 2018; EIGE, 2016). According to Clavero and Galligan (2021) the process of producing a GEP may offer an organisation opportunities for adjusting the power balance between genders. This process in itself can raise awareness of gender inequalities through quantitative and qualitative data collection. Furthermore, the process may create inclusive spaces for discussion, learning and cooperation, fostering a commitment to gender equality on the part of students and staff at different levels of the organisation (Clavero, Galligan, 2021). All together, these activities have the potential to promote an active sense of belonging and to ensure a shared commitment to institutional change (Ovseiko et al., 2017).

In light of these considerations and given the recent introduction of GEPs, more empirical research is needed to assess their effect on the universities' strategies to tackle the gender gap (Clavero and Galligan, 2021). However, studies should first consider the analysis of GEPs diffusion and their main characteristics. With that in mind, this paper aims to fill this gap, analysing the current state of GEPs in Italian academia.

3. Methodology

Content analysis has been employed (Krippendorff, 2018) to identify to what extent universities have disclosed the information related to their GEP and mapping the compliance with Decree No. 2/2019, and in line with EU-COM No.152/2020. The study consists in analysing 67 Italian public universities to map out the diffusion of GEPs and analyse the content of those drafted referring to the period 2022-2024. The research process has been divided into three parts. The first step was to verify that the total population of 67 Italian public universities was registered by the CENSIS (Italian centre for social investment studies) according to the classification in terms of large, mega, medium, and small universities and Polytechnics based on the number of students enrolled.

This analysis led to the elimination of 9 universities that were not registered by the CENSIS. The second step was to extract and collect the published GEP, and we found that 6 out of 67 universities did not draw up the document; therefore, there are 59 published GEPs. Finally, the third step was to analyse the content of the GEPs in terms of the time period, number of pages, language(s) adopted, GEP team, GEP context analysis, strategic areas, coherence with the areas suggested by CRUI, and for each area: goals, actions, sub-actions, direct and indirect targets, institutional and operationally responsible, human, logistic and financial resources, output, outcome, timeline, KPIs and their evaluations, priority and SDGs. These factors represent the contents (mandatory and not) of how a GEP action sheet should be drafted according to the CRUI (Conference of Rectors of Italian Universities) suggestions. Moreover, we have included another element of analysis such as the presence of the SDGs which indicate the link between the forecasted goals to meet gender equality with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Successively, a descriptive statistics analysis was performed.

4. Findings

In a sample of 58 universities, 89.65% of universities have published the GEP; while 10.35% have not published the document. Therefore, the final sample consists of 18 large universities, 15 medium universities, 10 mega universities, 6 small universities, and 3 polytechnics (Table 1).

GEPs have been mainly published by universities located in the northern region (21), followed by those located in the south (16); while, in the centre and in the islands, 12 and 3 GEPs have been published, respectively (Table 2). The universities that have not published a GEP are mainly located in the south of Italy (3 out of 6), followed by universities located respectively in the centre (2 out of 6) and in the north (1 out of 6) of the country. Moreover, these universities are mainly large universities (4 out of 6), followed by one medium and one mega university.

The territorial dimension was determined according to the definition used by the Italian Institute of Statistics (ISTAT). Marche, Lazio, Umbria and Tuscany belong to the central region. Valle D'Aosta Piemonte, Liguria, Lombardia, Emilia Romagna, Veneto and Friuli Venezia Giulia belong to the northern region. Finally, Calabria, Basilicata, Puglia, Campania, Molise and Abruzzo belong to the southern region, and Sardinia and Sicily to the islands.

Table 1: Number of GEPs by Universities' Size

Size	n	%
Large University	18	34.62
Medium University	15	28.85
Mega University	10	19.23
Small University	6	11.54
Polytechnic	3	5.77

Table 2: Number of GEPs by Geographic Localisation

Geographic localisation	n	%
North	21	40,39
Centre	12	23,08
South	16	30,76
Islands	3	5,77

With regard to the GEPs' general information, Table 3 shows the GEPs' number of pages. Polytechnics, on average, have published the GEPs with the highest number of pages (72.66), with a minimum value of 60 and a maximum value of 86. While, medium universities, on average, have published the GEPs with the least amount of pages (31.93), with a minimum value of 15 and a maximum value of 52.

Based on the estimated time for the achievement of forecasted goals (Table 4), large universities, on average, seem to require the most time (2.66 years) to undertake the actions devoted to reducing the gender gap, with a minimum value of 2 years and a maximum value of 6 years; while, small universities seem to require less time (2.16 years) to implement actions, with a minimum value of 3 years and a maximum value of 2 years.

Table 5 shows that only 6 large (11.53%), 4 medium (7.69%), 4 mega (7.69%), and 3 small (5.76%) universities have published a GEP in both Italian and English. Moreover, it results that only one polytechnic has published the document only in English. While, 12 large (23.07%), 11 medium (21.15%), 6 mega (11.53%), 3 small (5.76%), and 2 polytechnic (3.84%) have published a GEP only in Italian.

Table 6 provides information on the number of universities that have inserted the context analysis into their GEP. Data shows that only 18 universities (about 34.61% of the sample) have provided a full context analysis; while 4 universities (about 7.69% of the sample) have provided the analysis but only partially. In addition, 30 universities (about 57.69% of the sample) have not provided information on the context analysis.

Based on the compliance (Table 7) with Decree No. 2/2019, and in line with EU-COM No.152/2020, the results show that 27 universities (about 55.76% of the sample) have fully reported the thematic areas required by the Decree; while 25 universities (about 44.23% of the sample) have reported the areas but with some changes. The main changes regard the introduction of one or more strategic areas such as institutional communication, the strengthening of gender-related activities and skills, or organisational culture and gender communication, and a different denomination of the areas than the one proposed by the CRUI.

Table 8 shows the number of universities that have disclosed the information regarding the members of the team responsible for drafting the document in their GEPs. Specifically, data shows that 44 universities (about 84.61%) have disclosed this information.

Table 3: GEPs' Pages Number

	Mean	Std. dv.	Max	Min
Large University	40.222	20.758	70	10
Medium University	31.933	10.457	52	15
Mega University	44.600	19.022	90	27
Small University	39.333	21.878	62	11
Polytechnic	72.667	13.013	86	60

Table 4: Foreseen Time for GEPs' Realisation

	Mean	Std. dv.	Max	Min
Large University	2.667	1.029	6	2
Medium University	2.2	0.414	3	2
Mega University	2.4	0.516	3	2
Small University	2.167	0.408	3	2
Polytechnic	2.333	0.577	3	2

Table 5: GEPs' Languages

	Only Italian	Only English	Italian and English
Large University	12	0	6
Medium University	11	0	4
Mega University	6	0	4

	Only Italian	Only English	Italian and English
Small University	3	0	3
Polytechnic	2	1	0

Table 6: Presence of GEPs' Context Analysis

	Yes	No	Partial
Large University	9	8	1
Medium University	3	11	1
Mega University	2	7	1
Small University	2	4	0
Polytechnic	2	0	1

Table 7: Compliance With Strategic Areas Proposed by CRUI

	Yes	No
Large University	6	11
Medium University	9	6
Mega University	5	4
Small University	4	2
Polytechnic	3	0

Table 8: Presence of GEP Team in the Document

	Yes	No
Large University	13	5
Medium University	13	2
Mega University	9	1
Small University	6	0
Polytechnic	3	0

Table 9 shows the universities' compliance with the GEPs' required contents. The sample consists of 46 universities out of 52. In fact, 6 universities have been eliminated from the sample due to missing data regarding

the GEPs' analysis sheet. In fact, most of these universities did not disclose data regarding the area of gender equality in recruitment and career progression.

Specifically, focusing on the mandatory aspects of the document (recognisable in the table by the asterisk *), data show that the indication of the areas regarding the work-life balance and organisational culture (area 1), the gender balance in leadership and decision-making (area 2), the gender equality in recruitment and career progression (area 3), the integration of the gender dimension into research and teaching content (area 4) and the measures against gender-based violence, including sexual harassment (area 5), are information disclosed by 100% of the sample. For each strategic area, universities seem to be able to identify the goals to reach and the actions to implement in favour of gender equality processes in organisations. Moreover, most of the universities have highlighted, in their GEP, the main beneficiaries and the institutions responsible for the strategies devoted to reducing and guaranteeing gender equality with percentages that range from 93.47% to 97.82%. A high percentage have been registered also in the information regarding the deadline to achieve the forecasted actions and KPIs useful to monitor and measure their accomplishment.

However, universities seem to have issues in identifying how human and financial resources can contribute to the realisation of gender equality, the operational responsibility for the effective realisation of the plan, and the outcome in terms of social and economic changes generated in the organisation. In fact, the percentage of universities that have disclosed these issues ranges from 45.65% to 67.39%.

Finally, universities seem to report little content regarding sub-actions, indirect targets, logistic resources, output, KPIs evaluation process, goals priority and SDGs. This result could be related to the fact that this information is not compulsory to disclose.

Table 9: Compliance With the GEPs' Contents

	Universities (n=46)				
	Area 1	Area 2	Area 3	Area 4	Area 5
Thematic area*	46	46	46	46	46
Goals*	43	43	43	43	43
Actions*	45	45	45	45	44
Sub-actions	20	18	18	18	19
Direct Target*	43	43	43	42	43
Indirect Target	24	23	24	24	24
Institutional Responsible*	43	44	44	44	44
Operational Responsible*	29	27	27	28	28
Human resources*	22	21	21	22	21
Logistic resources	4	3	4	5	5
Financial resources*	24	23	23	24	26
Output	21	21	21	21	21
Outcome*	30	30	31	30	30

	Universities (n=46)				
	Area 1	Area 2	Area 3	Area 4	Area 5
Timeline*	41	41	41	41	41
KPIs*	41	40	40	41	42
KPIs Evaluation Procedure	6	6	6	6	6
Priority	6	6	6	6	6
SDGs	23	24	24	24	24

5. Conclusions

According to the definition of the European Commission, GEPs are considered a document concerning a set of actions integrated into the organisational strategic vision, useful to identify: gender distortions and inequalities; implement innovative strategies to overcome these issues; define objectives; and monitor their achievement through suitable indicators. The intent of a plan for gender equality, the areas of intervention and the issues to be addressed can vary depending on the specific situations in which they are implemented. What can be a good idea for one university is not necessarily the best choice for another. This means that, within the scope of their autonomy, universities cannot choose to broaden the actions and/or other types of discrimination as long as the policies are clearly defined. In this context, considering that gender equality is a fundamental value of the European Union and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which benefits research and innovation (R&I), is able to attract and retain talent, ensures that everyone can maximise their potential, and supports democratic and equitable societies, it becomes pivotal to understand how universities are taking action for gender equality.

This paper aims to identify to what extent universities have disclosed the information related to the GEPs to investigate their compliance with the requirements established by UE.

What emerged is that 6 universities (about 11.53% of the sample) have not drafted a GEP yet. This data is worrying because universities are required to draft the Positive Action Plan (PAP) that requires, as a continuation of the Gender balance sheet, the mandatory adoption of a GEP. This is even more important considering that a GEP represents a mandatory document for participation in all Horizon Europe calls for research and innovation. Therefore, universities lacking a GEP miss the opportunity to have access to one of the most ambitious and advanced tools to foster transnational scientific collaboration and mobility in Europe (such as the Horizon Europe program) and ignore their role in being part of the social, economic and environmental change promoted by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Focusing the attention on the universities that have published a GEP, it emerged that 6 GEPs out of 52 had been drafted in a way that does not allow the comparison. This result shows that there is still confusion on how the document has to be drafted and what it should contain. However, the CRUI has published a document comprising all the instructions to follow to elaborate a GEP; therefore, universities should pay more attention to what is suggested by such an important institution.

Finally, with regard to compliance with the GEPs' contents, we found that the components of a GEP that are mainly disclosed are the five areas of intervention defined by the European Commission.

For each area, universities mainly provide information on the goals, actions, main beneficiaries and institutional members. Conversely, almost half of the sample seems to have difficulties in identifying the subjects operationally involved in the drafting and effective implementation of the stated actions, the financial resources intended for the implementation of the plan and the expected results of the policies adopted for each action. On the one hand, these results show that universities are aware of their situation on issues related to gender inequalities, how to manage and collect data to identify objectives geared toward achieving gender equality based on the starting situation and how to prepare an action plan, which defines how these objectives will be

achieved. On the other hand, it seems that universities are still reluctant to allocate financial resources to reduce the gender gap, and to identify offices or specific people solely responsible for carrying out actions devoted to promoting an equilibrium between men and women.

The contribution is advanced scientific knowledge about the adoption of a GEP as a novel instrument in academia. The study also suggests to university managers the need to accurately satisfy the compulsory requirements of GEPs to improve the disclosure, and to be more conscious about the importance of implementing GEPs to obtain funds to develop their research missions. Furthermore, the study can help policymakers to understand how universities can be helped to implement actions to overcome gender inequalities in academia.

The study has some limitations. First, the exploratory analysis focused on the compliance contents of GEPs, while other research could analyse what actions should be undertaken to address gender inequalities. Second, the study focused on the Italian context; it could be interesting to examine the implementations of GEPs with a comparative perspective at the European level. Third, the study observed the GEPs in their first versions; future longitudinal studies will better understand the evolution of this practice and observe the changes over time. Considering the above limitations, the next step of our research is going more in-depth on the subject, analysing the kind of thematic areas and key actions included in the GEPs to identify and address gender inequalities. Doing so, we expect to contribute to the literature debate around gender issues through an in-depth analysis of GEPs with a specific focus on academia as a field requiring further study (Clavero, Galligan, 2021).

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