

Participatory Strategies to Integrate Gender+ Into Teaching and Research

Fernanda Campanini Vilhena¹; Rita Bencivenga²; María López Belloso³; Angela Celeste Taramasso⁴ and Cinzia Leone⁵

¹ Faculty of Social and Human Sciences, University of Deusto, Bilbao, Spain

² Department of Chemistry and Industrial Chemistry, University of Genoa, Italy

³ Faculty of Social and Human Sciences, University of Deusto, San Sebastian, Spain

⁴ Department of Civil, Chemical and Environmental Engineer, University of Genoa, Italy

⁵ Istituto Italiano di Tecnologia (IIT), Italy

fernanda.campanini@deusto.es

rita.bencivenga@unige.it

mlbeloso@deusto.es

angela.celeste.taramasso@unige.it

cinzia.leone@iit.it

Abstract: This article explores the use of participatory approaches to promote gender equality in academia, focusing on initiatives implemented in two universities. First, we look at the experience of the University of Deusto (Spain) in developing a handbook to integrate a gender perspective into teaching and research practises through an equality, diversity and inclusion lens (EDI). This initiative, carried out as part of the university's Gender Equality Plan, featured active involvement from scholars representing the faculties of Law, Psychology, Social Sciences and Humanities, Engineering, Business, and Theology, as well as the university's Social Responsibility Unit. It serves as a valuable example of how participatory strategies can effectively engage a wide array of institutional stakeholders in change-oriented actions. Promoting increased participation fosters a sense of ownership of the process and outcomes among stakeholders and strengthens institutional recognition. Second, we analyse the introduction of a "gender+-responsive curriculum" developed at the University of Genoa (Italy), as part of the university's Gender Equality Plan. This initiative seeks to promote inclusion across all disciplinary subjects by incorporating current research that examines subject matters through the lens EDI, where relevant. The pilot implementation was undertaken in an undergraduate course focused on hydraulic engineering and hydrology, drawing guidance from various resources, including academic publications and EU-funded project reports. This initiative highlights the practical implications and challenges associated with interventions aiming to challenge conventional teaching and research norms from an EDI perspective, particularly in STEM fields. By exploring the experiences, obstacles and solutions associated with a gender+-responsive curriculum, we broaden our understanding of academia's potential to advance gender equality, diversity, and inclusion. In examining the two experiences, we emphasise the theoretical underpinnings that underscore the importance of participatory approaches for promoting meaningful and enduring changes in academic institutions. Additionally, we highlight the ongoing challenges associated with implementing such changes and offer initial insights into potential strategies for overcoming these obstacles. Our goal is to ensure that gender and other intersecting diversity factors are not relegated to the edges of institutional priorities, but are instead mainstreamed into wider institutional practices.

Keywords: Gender Equality Plan, Gender+, Equality Diversity and Inclusion, Gender+ Curriculum

1. Introduction

Fostering gender equality and gender mainstreaming constitutes one of the six priorities of the European Research Area, with the incorporation of the gender dimension into Research and Innovation (R&I) content being one of the related objectives. The European Commission has consistently reinforced this commitment since the 2012 communication for "A Reinforced European Research Area Partnership for Excellence and Growth". Currently, Horizon Europe (2021-2027) pursues this objective through two central avenues: the inclusion of the gender dimension in project proposals by default, and the requirement for institutions seeking funding under the programme to establish a Gender Equality Plan (GEP). Among other areas, GEPs are recommended to address the introduction of the gender dimension into teaching and research. Notably, the emphasis extends beyond gender to encompass the consideration of other intersecting socio-economic factors such as race, social class, sexual orientation, and functional diversity (gender+).

Despite the continuous efforts, progress in addressing gender inequalities in teaching and research remains slow across all academic fields. The She Figures 2021 publication shows that, in 2018, women represented only 26.2% of full professors and 33.8% of researchers (EU-28 proportion). Less than 2% of academic publications incorporated a gender dimension, with Engineering and Technology field exhibiting the lowest inclusion rate

(European Commission, 2021). While the publication does not provide specific data on the inclusion of a gender and diversity perspective into teaching methods and curricula, it underscores the significance of interventions that pursue such an objective as a crucial aspect in promoting EDI principles within the overall scientific spectrum, aligning with international goals long established by the United Nations (2011) concerning the need for a gender-sensitive, diverse and inclusive education.

Over the past years, endeavours to drive change in academic organisations have employed a range of strategies to close the gap between planned interventions and actual implementation (Engeli and Mazur 2018), with participatory approaches emerging as valuable mechanisms for enhancing engagement, inclusivity, and collaboration throughout change processes (see Barbieri, Cois and DeSimoni, 2021; Dahmen-Adkins, Karner and Thaler, 2019; Pajares, 2020). Such a strategy aligns with European guidelines to engage a wide range of relevant stakeholders in transformative efforts (EIGE, 2016) and has proven advantageous at all stages of change processes (i.e., gender audit, design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation). In this paper, we look at two university initiatives to analyse the potential of using participatory approaches to enact initiatives aimed at introducing the gender, diversity, and inclusion dimensions into teaching and research at European universities.

2. Engendering Participatory Approaches

A participatory approach “involves stakeholders in the problem definition and analysis of gender inequality and supports them to identify possible interventions” (Bleijenbergh and van Engen, 2015, p. 431). In the context of gender reform interventions in academia, participatory approaches emphasise active engagement and collaboration among faculty, students, administrators, and other community members, in the formulation and implementation of actions. While techniques may vary according to specific contexts and objectives, participatory strategies often aim to achieve a balance among the interests, privileges, and responsibilities of the involved stakeholders. As Thomson and Rabsch (2021) explain, “the aim of co-creation is to collaborate, ‘create together’, cooperate and share ideas, knowledge, practice, and build on the existing stocks to develop them further” (p. 5). Within this framework, institutional actors are not passive recipients of the outcomes of change initiatives, but rather active agents in the change process, meaning that decisions related to problem identification and intervention strategies emerge from a collective, bottom-up perspective, rather than from the conventionally expected top-down direction.

Previous studies revealed that participatory and co-creation methodologies facilitate the implementation of change-oriented interventions both when applied internally within an institutional team (Bleijenbergh and van Engen 2015) and when employed by transnational and multi-institutional communities of practices (Thomson et al, 2022). Kalpazidou Schmidt and Cacace (2019) assert that cooperation among different stakeholders and the development of transformative actions based on the results of participatory procedures represent “not only the conditions for change, but also a crucial part of the change process itself” (p. 323), as they challenge conventional norms rooted in a centralised logic of power exercise.

Scholars who have explored concrete interventions utilising participatory and feminist approaches within change processes in academic institutions have identified several associated advantages. Notably, studies have noted that these approaches trigger discussions and enable stakeholders to take decisions through negotiation processes, ultimately facilitating a shared understanding of the issues to be addressed and a collective identification of potential interventions. Such a collective view creates ownership of the project’s goals, increases stakeholders’ commitment to the process, and facilitates implementation of actions (Bleijenbergh and van Engen, 2015; Dahmen-Adkins, Karner and Thaler, 2019; Sangiuliano, Canali and Madesi, 2019). In addition, the active engagement of stakeholders located at different institutional positions in the decision-making, planning, and actual implementation of change initiatives has shown to foster collaboration and synergies between the teams leading these initiatives and broader institutional bodies and actors (Kalpazidou Schmidt and Cacace, 2019).

Studies have also highlighted the potential of participatory practices to foster knowledge generation among stakeholders, serving the dual purpose of raising awareness about gender and diversity issues and equipping institutional actors with new competences related to institutional change. When diverse stakeholders work together through co-production methodologies, diverse types of knowledge become more accessible to the broader academic community and more responsive to each other (Dahmen-Adkins, Karner and Thaler, 2019). For instance, Bleijenbergh and van Engen (2015) noted in their research that stakeholders involved in the process of developing a participatory modelling to support gender equality in career development in two Dutch universities were able to “reconcile the contradiction between addressing individuals or addressing

organisational structures” (p. 434). In a distinct context, Espinosa-Fajardo, Bustelo and Velasco (2022) elaborated on this in their examination of an evaluation process of a European-funded project designed to drive institutional change in partner organisations. They found that the adoption of a collaborative and feminist approach in the evaluation facilitated the co-construction of knowledge regarding the change processes between evaluators and the teams in the evaluated organisations, which not only heightened stakeholders’ sense of ownership of the evaluation process but also improved their comprehension of how to enact structural change in practice.

Furthermore, as a result of engaging a wide range of stakeholders and listening to different voices, more inclusive and innovative processes may emerge. Gorbacheva, Mourtzi and Stein (2019) offer an interesting illustration of how an IT-supported participatory GEP design enhanced internal awareness about gender equality, triggered creativity in GEP development, and provided insights to create GEPs that actually consider the needs and perceptions of interested community members. In connection with these creative and more inclusive processes, participatory approaches can assist teams responsible for driving change interventions in addressing the challenges and resistance that may arise when enacting change processes (Gorbacheva, Mourtzi and Stein 2019; Palmén and Caprile 2022).

Ultimately, the engagement and commitment of multiple stakeholders, their increased awareness on EDI issues and enhanced knowledge of institutional change practice have not only demonstrated to increase individual stakeholders’ validation and of interventions, but also trigger organisational commitment and accountability (Bleijenbergh and van Engen 2015). Together, these advantages would enhance the institutionalisation of change-oriented actions over the long haul and contribute to the sustainability of their outcomes (Kalpazidou Schmidt and Cacace 2019). This positions participatory approaches as a point of interest for those seeking to bridge the gap between theory and practice of gender-sensitive, diverse and inclusive institutional change in academia.

3. University of Deusto: Developing Guidelines for Introducing the Gender Perspective Into Teaching and Research

The University of Deusto is a private, medium-sized and teaching-oriented university located in the Autonomous Community of the Basque Country in Northern Spain. Deusto sits in a context where both national and regional law provides for gender equality as a fundamental principle for public action (including universities and research centers) and mandates GEPs for entities with over 50 employees (Organic Law 2/2007 and Real Decree 6/2019) and the creation of gender Equality Structures for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) (law 4/2007). In this direction, Law 14/2012 on Science, Technology and Innovation establishes the implementation of the gender perspective as a crosscutting category.

While EDI principles have for long guided the university’s mission, with the first GEP being enacted in 2008, it was in 2019 that Deusto assumed the external commitment of implementing a more robust and complex GEP, under the framework of the Horizon 2020 project GEARING-Roles (“Gender Equality Actions in Research Institutions to traNsform Gender ROLES”).¹ With the guidance of an expert support partner overseeing a dedicated work package for capacity building, training and support, GEARING-Roles defined a co-creation and participatory approach for the design and implementation of GEPs in the different implementing partner organisations. At Deusto, the document was orchestrated, designed, and executed with the support of a diverse set of institutional stakeholders, who collaboratively created and implemented a GEP containing eight intervention areas and 63 actions.

One specific action provided for the elaboration of self-tailored guidelines for incorporating the gender perspective into teaching and research. Since its inception, the initiative was approached as a space for reflection and collective building. To ensure representation of all faculties (Law, Psychology, Social Sciences and Humanities, Engineering and Business), internal calls were launched for academic staff to integrate the pilot initiative, finally forming three groups with 60 participants in total. The first group, dedicated to the area of teaching and consisting of 17 faculty members, was framed within a call from the Quality and Teaching Innovation Unit for projects that encourage teaching innovation. The participation in such project provided institutional legitimacy to the process and materialised the commitment of the institution, resulting in the participants of the group dedicated to the teaching area having the time invested in the project recognised as

¹ <https://gearingroles.eu/project/>

part of their workload. The second group, focused on the area of research, was formed by 20 researchers, whose participation was driven by their personal interest and commitment, as the group was not under the scope of an official institutional programme and therefore the hours invested were not officially recognised. The third group, composed of 23 members, acted as a control group to provide feedback to the final document.

The process was structured into phases, with the aim of progressively increasing the engagement and competencies of participants. Initially, all participants underwent external training facilitated by experienced institutions, with a focus on integrating the gender dimension into both teaching and research. The teaching sessions encompassed discussions regarding day-to-day classroom practices and dynamics, encouraging participants to analyse their practices through a gender-sensitive lens. During the research sessions, participants could collaboratively review their own research projects, with the group providing insights into how the inclusion of a gender perspective in all research stages would have increased the quality and reach of their findings. Given the involvement of staff from different departments, the training generated a huge interest within the broader academic community, and sessions were replicated in a shorter version to members of the university in the following period. The second stage included monthly meetings of the two groups dedicated to teaching and research. The groups collectively decided the structure of the document, identified indicators and adapted them to the specific context of Deusto, and developed useful examples of how to mainstream gender into teaching and research in different disciplines based on their own professional experiences. Throughout the process, groups were also subdivided into groups by discipline to review and consolidate work out of the common sessions. This work has achieved the common ground for the final draft of the guidelines, which were further reviewed by the Control Group.

The collective effort produced a handbook that serves as a practical guide based on examples of real experience for integrating a gender and diversity perspective into teaching and research activities in various disciplines (for the complete handbook, refer to Pérez, Pando Canteli and García Muñoz, 2021). Notably, the process was as important as the result, as it involved a diversity of stakeholders with varying levels of knowledge and engagement on the issue. This approach fostered active engagement of all the participants and increased their sense of ownership of the outcome, instigating individual and collective reflection processes replicable across the broader university community. Nevertheless, it is essential to note that the creation of the handbook was a first step that continues with the dissemination of the document and the ambition of a systematic implementation at the institutional level. While the creation process was highly successful and constitutes an example of engagement and institutional collaboration, university-wide implementation poses challenges due to the limited current resources for dissemination and training actions.

4. University of Genoa: Introducing a Gender+ Responsive Curriculum

The University of Genoa (UniGE) is a public research university. Founded in 1481, it is among the largest universities in Italy and it is located in the city of Genoa, on the Italian Riviera in the Liguria region of northwestern Italy.

The path that has led Italian universities to promote EDI related policies, including the promotion of gender equality, has gone through the following main stages: the establishment of Equal Opportunities Committees (CPO) in 1991 (Law 125/1991) to propose to university governing bodies and general administration measures and actions aimed at preventing and combating any form of discrimination based on gender, race, ethnic origin, age, disability, religion, personal beliefs, sexual identity and any other condition that may lead to discrimination. In 2010, the “Single Guarantee Committees for Equal Opportunities, the Improvement of Well-being and against Discrimination” (CUG) were made mandatory in all public administrations (Law 183/2010) in order to ensure the realisation of both formal and substantive equality by combating all forms of direct and/or indirect discrimination, including discrimination based on gender. The CUG carries out a Positive Actions Plan (PAP) every three years. Later on, with the guidelines for universities published by both the National Conference of CUGs and the Coordination Group of the Conference of Rectors of Italian Universities (CRUI), the Gender Balance (GB) Report began to spread throughout Italian universities in 2015.

UniGE has set up all these committees and adheres to these documented guidelines. It is worth mentioning that UniGE has not only the Rector’s Delegate for Disability (mandatory by law in Italian Universities) but also a Rector’s delegate for Equal Opportunities. In 2022, UniGE implemented the Gender Equality Plan 2022-2025 in response to the requirements of the Horizon Europe funding programme. PAPs and GBs, that refer also to Sustainable Development Goals, facilitate the transition towards inclusive GEPs as they address several potential grounds for discrimination.

Incorporating a gender perspective into a curriculum involves integrating an EDI dimension into existing curricula and research, which is a common approach in gender equality initiatives. In our case, the unique aspect is the introduction of a gender dimension into a STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) curriculum. This initiative is one of the actions planned for the second year of the UniGE GEP, Area 4, “the integration of the gender dimension in research and teaching content”, and reinforces its inclusiveness, as recommended by Horizon Europe, which encourages the addition of an EDI perspective rather than focussing solely on gender. The actions include three transversal pilot actions: at department/faculty level (macro), project level (meso) and curriculum level (micro), specifically targeting STEM subjects — areas where the involvement of teaching and research staff is more challenging. The micro action, the gender+ curriculum, was launched after the feasibility of the two previous actions had been demonstrated.

The idea of the gender+ curriculum stems from the belief that in today's educational landscape, it is essential for teachers to be aware of the current state of research in the areas of gender, diversity, and inclusion in the area they teach. Even if educators are not actively engaged in EDI related research, they should provide their students with relevant information to understand this increasingly important aspect across all disciplines. In addition, it is crucial to provide teachers with effective strategies to explore these aspects in the future, e.g., by referring to European Union documents or EU-funded research projects, in particular those at the edge of research, such as those financed by the ERC and the Pathfinder actions and programmes.

The pilot project for this curriculum took place in the second semester of the 2022/2023 academic year and was aimed at the course: Hydraulic Engineering and Hydrology (undergraduate programme: Mechanical Engineering - Energy and Production). The integrative curriculum takes the gender+ dimension into account when formulating educational objectives for the curriculum, defining learning outcomes for teaching and structuring the curriculum. It uses the European Qualifications Framework and the Dublin descriptors. It refers to EDI-friendly EU proposals, research articles, EU reports and recommendations related to the course topics. It will be further tested in other courses (starting with “Impacts of Disasters on Coastal Environments, Risk in Natural Environments” (Master's programme: Engineering for Natural Risk Management) and other disciplines in the coming semester.

A professor, actively involved in the previous activities and convinced of the potential of approaches closely aligned with research and teaching, worked for several months with an EDI expert and a design expert. Together, they identified materials to be integrated into the course, selected content that could be directly linked, created description sheets and ran the pilot course. The EDI expert also took part in the pilot project. This participatory approach allowed for a bottom-up creation that not only convinced the students — who in many cases chose to focus their final project on the integrated EDI topics — but also had a positive impact on other STEM professors. They are now interested in following a similar path.

5. Discussion

Despite contextual disparities, the two observed initiatives underscore the pivotal role of participatory strategies in facilitating successful change initiatives. Actively engaging different stakeholders through participatory approaches instilled a sense of ownership among them, fostering a sustained commitment to both initiatives in subsequent phases. This active and collaborative engagement not only garnered stakeholder endorsement but also internalized and championed the initiatives, leading to more comprehensive processes that embraced diverse insights and experiences, ultimately resulting in more inclusive outcomes.

Notably, at the University of Deusto, the significant representation of the different faculties in the process of creating the handbook facilitated the attainment of institutional recognition for those actively involved. This marks a pivotal shift towards transitioning from gender equality initiatives driven mainly by the personal commitment of certain individuals to institutional responsibility for gender equality matters. By fostering engagement among institutional actors across varied institutional areas and roles, including those in management and decision-making positions, participatory approaches bolster a broader understanding and endorsement of gender equality initiatives throughout diverse hierarchical levels within the institution, thus setting the stage for a more comprehensive and sustainable framework for institutional change. At the University of Genoa, the pioneering Gender+ curriculum has strengthened the agency of those involved in developing and trialling it. The experience created a link in their perception of the GEP between what Horizon Europe calls for, which is often seen as just a tick box exercise, and a concrete action that combines their power to choose the learning path they offer with a new, inclusive meaning added to the subjects they teach.

Both initiatives are geared towards change and challenge traditional teaching and research methods. In both cases, the application of a participatory approach stimulated discussions on content, format and implementation strategies and encouraged individual and collective reflection on teaching and research practises. The resultant documents show a variety of examples of practise in different areas of knowledge. This initial step paves the way for disseminating the two initiatives and their systematic integration into the university's teaching and research landscape.

Their success depends on a number of factors that cannot be taken for granted, such as, for the handbook, institutional support and resources, representation and commitment from different departments and capacity building and, for the curriculum, the availability of a multidisciplinary working group and the interest of academics to change the traditional approach and embark on a learning journey in new directions. In both cases, it was a successful strategy to rely on the gender+ and equality agenda at European and national level and on internal negotiations (utilising formal and informal spaces) to overcome an initial period of apparent inertia, as this was seen as a predictable part of change processes to achieve the planned objectives. Participatory strategies facilitated the creation of new negotiation spaces, deviating from the traditional approach of EDI initiatives being driven by a select group of dedicated actors (colloquially the 'equality and diversity people'). This shift redistributed responsibility and ownership of change processes across wider groups of the academic community, including managers and decision-makers.

Certainly, resistance is a major obstacle that is still difficult to overcome. Resistance is often related to refusal to change, but also to self-preservation and self-referentiality of those who have been sitting in the so-called ivory tower for many years and tend to repeat or defend. Initial insights for overcoming implementation challenges suggest the need for targeted dissemination campaigns, highlighting the benefits and potential impact of gender-sensitive institutional changes both as a social justice matter and a form of complying with national and European norms. Moreover, the challenges can be overcome with constant action and strategies leveraging internal networks, seeking external funding, and establishing strategic alliances with advocacy groups.

Last but not least, both the handbook and the gender-specific curriculum were developed at university level as part of the GEP. Consequently, the negotiations and strategies took place at institutional level, offering a replicable model for implementation in other universities.

6. Conclusions

We acknowledge that the main limitation in this study is that both initiatives are still at an early implementation stage. At the University of Deusto, the participatory process led comprehensive guidelines for integrating gender into teaching and research across various disciplinary areas, yet their practical application remains in an initial phase, contingent upon factors beyond the commitment of those who engaged in the creation of the document. The case at UniGE, in turn, emerged as an initiative embedded in the GEP and driven by a smaller group of committed professors and experts in the context of a specific course in the STEM field, and is currently being tested in other university courses. Although both initiatives produced satisfactory results, their reproducibility has yet to be demonstrated, especially in what regards the implementation of final outcomes at wider institutional level.

Nonetheless, these initiatives produce promising opportunities for future research. The participatory nature that underpinned the creation of the handbook and the inclusive curriculum opens up the possibility of exploring the effectiveness of such collaborative approaches in academic settings. Investigating the lasting impact of these initiatives on teaching practises, learning outcomes and institutional dynamics is an interesting approach for research. Moreover, investigating the scalability and adaptability of these models in different educational contexts could provide valuable insights into their wider applicability.

Furthermore, exploring the long-term impact on student engagement, academic achievement and inclusivity within the learning environment would make an important contribution to educational research. Assessing the development of practises resulting from the integration of the handbook and the implementation of the inclusive curriculum could provide valuable data on their transformative potential in higher education over time.

Additionally, comparative studies between institutions implementing similar participatory frameworks versus traditional top-down approaches could shed light on the comparative benefits and challenges associated with collaborative curriculum development. Finally, exploring the role of technological advances in enhancing participatory approaches and facilitating widespread adoption is an interesting area for future investigation.

These avenues hold immense potential to expand knowledge and provide information on best practises in educational innovation and inclusive curriculum development.

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