

# Why EDI Matters

**Equ(al)ity, Diversity and Inclusion  
in European Universities**

**Annalisa Oboe, Věra Sokolová,  
Helena Wahlström Henriksson (Eds.)**

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*Why EDI Matters* is a book with an errand. It builds on the research, practices and activism of European academics who accepted the challenge of writing essays that in various ways claim that equ(al)ity, diversity and inclusion are central to the life of higher education institutions in democratic societies, at a moment when these values are under threat in many parts of the globe.

As Editors of this collectively designed volume, we have had the privilege of working with over forty scholars and academics, from fourteen prominent universities across Europe. Our gratitude goes to all who have invested their time, energy, competence and creativity to contribute to the book. Throughout the process of initiating, drafting, writing-up, and completing the text, we have enjoyed the collective as a forum for collaboration, and mentorship, as happened during the shared peer-review and feedback process.

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Now we let the book go, may it reach many and inspire many more.

Annalisa Oboe, Věra Sokolová, Helena Wahlström Henriksson

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## INTRODUCTION

ANNALISA OBOE, VĚRA SOKOLOVÁ, HELENA WAHLSTRÖM HENRIKSSON

### **The Times We Live and Work In: Crises and Resistance**

A new time of *krísis* is upon us – social, cultural, epistemic, political, economic and environmental.<sup>1</sup> The world of research is also experiencing a crisis, and there is a widespread feeling that the challenge for science and academia has never been greater, particularly as scientific knowledge has become the object of violent attacks aimed at discrediting its value and usefulness. Academic freedom is being curtailed, institutions of higher learning disqualified, and censorship is (again) a governmental tool in the hands of autocratic regimes.

Most of us were surprised when, in January 2025, the newly elected President of the United States of America opened his mandate with a major political attack against EDI, which erased not only words – equ(al)ity, diversity, inclusion – from the current vocabulary, but entire areas of scientific knowledge and social life, as well as of human existence. Terms such as gender, LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer), but also women, disability, climate, social justice (the list continues to expand),<sup>2</sup> have been removed from government websites, eliminating EDI programs, closing courses in schools and universities, and starting an astonishing sort of witch-hunt on research and researchers across the country.

Some reactions to such violent backlash have come from the world of science. The editors of leading scientific journals on gender and sexuality studies, for instance, have responded to the irresponsible erasure of words/concepts that have been essential to the development of knowl-

<sup>1</sup> In its primary etymological meaning, the Greek word *krísis* means choice, decision – a decisive moment of danger, depression, fear or conflict that requires an epochal intervention and vision: a crisis is a moment when important decisions need to be made.

<sup>2</sup> The list of banned words is on the US PEN website, <https://pen.org/banned-words-list/>.

edge about ‘the human condition’, with a “Statement on the Importance of Sexuality and Gender Research” (*The Journal of Sex Research*). They argue that the removal of these terms will impact *all* research:

Many proposed keywords, such as gender, ethnicity, biases, and socioeconomic status are integral components in all types of research to understand the individual and social differences between groups of people. Removal of datasets and comprehensive information on specific populations will disproportionately negatively impact minoritized individuals, who already experience significantly worse physical and mental health. (“Statement” 2025)

For scholars in the Humanities and Social Sciences the current situation seems to be a sad *déjà vu*, since it mirrors scenarios in dystopian writing of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century that predicts a bleak future for humanity – starting from the abolition of freedom for women, feminists, dissenters, lesbians, and the prohibition to hold books, to read and to write. Such scenarios are now beginning to coincide with our present. Canadian author Margaret Atwood has eloquently described them in *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985), where the fictional Republic of Gilead looks very much like Trump’s America forty years after the publication of the novel. In Gilead and in today’s USA, the war on language, on reading and writing, indeed on thinking, appears to be a potential weapon for making unwelcome realities disappear.

However, one of Atwood’s most famous quotes, “A word, after a word, after a word is power” serves as a potent reminder of the transformative power embedded within language. In this line from her poem “Spelling,”<sup>3</sup> each word acts as a building block, seamlessly connecting with the next to create a potent force shaping perception, eliciting emotional responses, and influencing societal dynamics. Analysing the relationship between linguistic expression and power reveals the deep entanglement of language with thought and social structures. It invites a recognition of language not merely as a communicative tool but as a constitutive element, integral to the construction of reality.

In this volume, we insist on the ‘reality’ of – and the ‘desire’ for – words such as equ(al)ity, diversity, inclusion and social justice, because they contribute to a deeper understanding of our world, and to the fight against stereotypes and discriminations as preliminary steps towards free societies.

<sup>3</sup> “Spelling” is part of the 1981 first edition of *True Stories*, Oxford University Press, p. 18.

## Changing Words and Worlds

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century EDI has become a cornerstone of social justice rhetoric, yet equality, diversity and inclusion are evolving concepts, which did not surface in sociological or legal discourse at the same time, nor have they preserved their meanings unchanged in different historical periods. In fact, they have undergone significant conceptual transformations, sometimes following socio-cultural trends, at other times anticipating and informing future change. Terms that once signified surface-level fairness – equal treatment, demographic variation, and the admission of marginalized groups – now reflect a deeper reckoning with power, history, and systemic change.

In the modern age, the idea of *equality* finds its roots in the Enlightenment philosophies of natural rights and social contract theory. Thinkers such as John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau posited that all individuals are born equal and sovereign, thus contributing to laying the foundation for revolutions against aristocratic privilege, and inspiring documents like the American *Declaration of Independence* (1776), with its assertion of unalienable rights to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness,” and the French *Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen* (1789). The latter document, affirming equality on the basis of human rights, has been considered a landmark in the history of western democracy, although it was soon regarded as limited by its exclusion of a variety of social groups from enjoying the same rights as ‘male’ citizens: “Thus children, the insane, minors, women, those condemned to a punishment either restricting personal freedom or bringing disgrace ... will not be citizens.”<sup>4</sup> It was through the work of subsequent thinkers and rights movements that equality’s scope expanded. In 1791, French activist and playwright Olympe de Gouges had the courage to point out the absence of women from the body politic in her *Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen*, and the following year British philosopher and women’s rights advocate Mary Wollstonecraft critiqued gender hierarchies in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). The abolitionist movement challenged the dehumanization of enslaved peoples, and in the age of the industrial revolution labour uprisings demanded economic equity and workplace protections. The Civil Rights Movement, led by figures like Martin Luther King Jr., galvanized anti-discrimination laws

<sup>4</sup> See Agamben, “Biopolitics and the Rights of Man” in *Homo Sacer*, 1998.

prohibiting racial segregation. As philosopher Iris M. Young observes, the meaning of equality was gradually expanded through “the inclusion and integration of the excluded” (Young, 167).

Therefore, if equality initially denoted legal parity and uniform treatment irrespective of individual circumstances (Rawls, 1971),<sup>5</sup> in time critics as well as cultural and political movements highlighted how formal equality often perpetuates structural disadvantages. For instance, Young argues that the “assumption of equal opportunity” fails to account for “structural inequalities” (Young, 163). The emergence of *equity* as a necessary step towards social justice reframed ‘fairness’ as the proportional distribution of resources and opportunities based on need: Amartya Sen appropriately defines equity as “making judgments about the relative advantage of different people” (Sen, 295). Equity and justice, which interrogates the historical and institutional roots of inequality – such as racism, sexism, ableism, and colonial legacies (Fraser), have become a framework for redistributive and restorative measures, demanding not only tailored interventions but also systemic change in law, governance, and culture.

Extending the idea of equality to a multiplicity of ‘differences’ has also reinforced the semantic and political value of *diversity*. As a sociological category, diversity began to take shape in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, particularly after World War II, and became more prominent and formally theorized from the 1960s onward. Diversity once referred primarily to demographic heterogeneity – that is, to the presence of individuals from distinct racial, ethnic, gender, or cultural backgrounds (Mor Barak); in organizational and educational settings it was often measured by numerical representation alone. As it emerged alongside the Civil Rights era advocacy for pluralism and multiculturalism, diversity was originally thought of as the *coexistence* of distinct racial, ethnic, and cultural identities within the social fabric. However, as sociologist Stuart Hall argued, diversity is not simply demographic, and bell hooks stressed that superficial diversity risks tokenism and continued marginalization (Hall, hooks). Several interventions began to highlight that mere *presence* is not enough, and that diversity falls short when individuals feel unable to express their perspectives or navigate institutional norms (Baumeister and Leary). More importantly, Hall pointed out that the concept of diversity

<sup>5</sup> “Each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive basic liberty compatible with a similar liberty for others” (Rawls, p. 60).

is shaped by surrounding discourses of power, media, and culture, and should be considered as a key concept for analysing power relations. To speak with Sara Ahmed, the point of diversity work should be to change institutional power dynamics (Ahmed).

In academia today, genuine diversity depends on cultivating a sense of belonging where diverse voices are empowered and can influence institutional cultures, curricula, and decision-making (Nishii). This aligns with the evolution of inclusion from simply integrating excluded groups to co-creating and restructuring systems in partnership with those groups: the focus has shifted from headcounts to the redistribution of authority.

*Inclusion* has undergone significant evolution within sociological discourse and policies, transforming from an initial focus on disability and education to a broader societal paradigm. As with equ(al)ity and diversity, this evolution reflects changing perspectives on social integration and human rights. The term inclusion gained prominence during the 1960s and 1970s, and was initially centred on educational contexts, as well as disability studies and disability rights activism, where ‘inclusion’ challenged the segregation of persons with disabilities. Figures like Judith Heumann, often called the “Mother of the Disability Rights Movement” and Ed Roberts mobilized for de-institutionalization, independent living, and accessibility measures enabling people with disabilities’ full societal participation. The movement also profoundly reshaped architecture, education, and legal frameworks (Pelka). In the 1980s the concept expanded to encompass wider societal issues (Armstrong et al.), and the 1990s marked a pivotal shift as international bodies, notably the United Nations, adopted ‘social inclusion’ as a key policy objective (Silver). This period saw the application of inclusion to various marginalized groups and its recognition as a fundamental human rights issue. Concurrently, social scientists developed indicators to measure and track social inclusion, facilitating evidence-based policymaking.

The dawn of the twenty-first century witnessed the integration of inclusion into organizational studies and diversity management. Businesses began to recognize the value of diverse, inclusive cultures, linking them to innovation and improved organizational performance (Shore et al.). The concept thus evolved from merely acknowledging diversity to actively valuing and leveraging diverse perspectives, with ‘belonging’ emerging as a crucial component of inclusive environments (Mor Barak). More recently, inclusion has become increasingly intertwined with intersection-

ality, acknowledging the complex, multifaceted nature of social exclusion (Crenshaw); social justice movements have centralized inclusion in their advocacy, while the digital age has spawned new considerations of digital inclusion (Warschauer). Moreover, the concept has expanded to embrace cognitive differences through the lens of neurodiversity (Singer).

As the concept of inclusion has gained prominence, it has also attracted critical scrutiny. Scholars have begun to question whether inclusion truly addresses systemic inequalities or merely masks ongoing disparities. Nirmal Puwar explores how the inclusion of minorities in elite spaces can paradoxically reinforce existing power structures; Sara Ahmed critiques institutional diversity initiatives, arguing that they often fail to produce meaningful change, while Ellen Berrey posits that diversity rhetoric can obscure persistent inequalities in corporate and academic settings; Wendy Brown's critique of neoliberal approaches to inclusion also questions whether integration into existing systems can effectively address structural inequalities. In the field of education, scholars have challenged the efficacy of multicultural education and inclusion policies in addressing deep-seated racial inequalities (Darder, Gillborn).

It may be said that the evolution of inclusion as a sociological category reflects broader societal shifts towards recognizing and valuing diversity. The critical perspectives sketched above in fact call for more transformative approaches that address the root causes of systemic exclusion and inequality, and highlight the complexities and potential limitations of inclusion as a means of achieving social equity. It should also be observed that several interlocking dynamics have propelled these conceptual shifts, the most important probably being social movements identifying systemic injustices; increased globalization and cultural exchange; digital amplification enabling marginalized voices; and political backlash forcing proponents to refine theoretical underpinnings.<sup>6</sup> The

<sup>6</sup> Dynamics propelling these conceptual shifts in the 21<sup>st</sup> century may be found in: *social movements and activism*: movements such as Black Lives Matter, #MeToo, and Disability Justice have spotlighted the limitations of formal equality, driving the adoption of equity, justice, and intersectionality in mainstream discourse; *globalization and cultural exchange*: increased intercultural contact and migration compel institutions to engage more deeply with diverse worldviews, fostering practices that go beyond token diversity toward genuine belonging; *digital amplification*: social media platforms enable marginalized groups to broadcast experiences of exclusion and to mobilize for systemic change, elevating demands for co-creative inclusion and structural redesign; *political backlash and contestation*: the rise of populist and conservative critiques of equity and political correctness has forced proponents of social justice to refine and defend their frameworks, resulting in more precise definitions and robust theoretical underpinnings.

contemporary meanings of equ(al)ity, diversity, and inclusion reflect a broader evolution from surface-level fairness to deep structural transformation – a recognition that sustainable social justice requires not only expanded participation but also the redistribution of power, continuous reflexivity, and the redesign of inequitable systems.

Tracing the historical roots and evolution of the EDI triad reveals how our current conceptions of equ(al)ity, diversity, and inclusion are deeply interlaced, and that the pursuits of these values have converged into a shared vision of equity-driven systemic transformation. Realizing this vision demands dismantling walls, redistributing power and resources, and remaking structures of governance, education, and civic life. These intertwined meanings also reflect growing recognition that sustainable social justice may only be achieved through multidimensional, intersectional strategies that holistically address deep-rooted inequities, systemic injustices, and institutionalized barriers. With this volume we want to inspire colleagues across differences and across university settings to engage, or keep engaging, with that crucial endeavour.

### **EDI in Academia: Collaboration and Care**

Education is a crucial vessel through which to articulate EDI values and pass them on to future generations. Universities play a pivotal role in the development of sustainable societies through a commitment to equal opportunities. They should prepare the citizens of tomorrow by stressing not only the importance of critical thinking but of diversity and equality, as well (Verducci). Contemporary global challenges require that both institutions and individuals at all levels of the educational process work together and utilize their differences as assets, opportunities and advantages. As leading educational institutions in their countries and across Europe, universities should take a lead in this undertaking, alongside the United Nations and its 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (United Nations website).

Despite recent progress in achieving equality in research and innovation in Europe, gender and other differences in participation and representation in academia remain large and gender perspectives in education and research are often neglected (Rosa and Clavero). While, for instance, gender gaps among higher education graduates have been

reduced in many degree programs and fields, and students from disadvantaged backgrounds form a greater part of the student body across European universities, women and minorities are still under-represented in certain fields of study, especially in STEM and in senior research and professorial positions (Avolio et al., Tal et al.). Equality and inclusion are of crucial importance in facilitating long-term improvement of the quality and excellence in research and innovation. For that reason, leading international academic umbrella organizations, including the Coimbra Group Universities network, have gradually focused increasing attention and activities in this direction.

The Coimbra Group (CG) was founded in 1985, as “an association of long-established European comprehensive, multidisciplinary universities of high international standard committed to creating special academic and cultural ties in order to promote, for the benefits of its members, internationalisation, academic collaboration, excellence in learning and research, and service to society” (Coimbra Group website). Over the past forty years, the Coimbra Group has become a synonym for the spirit of academic solidarity, respect, care and positive thinking. The core of the association are thematically organized working groups, which consist of members nominated by participating universities interested in the given theme. Throughout the year, the working groups work individually and independently on projects, which they design themselves and have approved by the CG Executive Board. Once a year in June, the entire Coimbra Group meets in one of its universities for an Annual Conference and General Assembly.

The impetus for the creation of the Equality and Diversity Working Group (ED WG), which is the youngest of the twelve working groups, came at the public conference on “Women in the University”, organized during the Coimbra Group Annual Meeting held at the Jagellonian University in Krakow in June 2019. This conference provided the first opportunity within the Coimbra Group to discuss the topic of EDI in a large open forum, and in the broader context of the Coimbra Group mission. Discussions surrounding this event articulated the need for creating a formal structure for future collaborative efforts in the areas of equality, diversity and inclusion. ED WG was formally established in 2020, preceded by a year of informal preparations. When ED WG was created, 26 out of 42 universities of the Coimbra Group sent their nominees to take a part in the group’s activities (Coimbra Group website).

Combining members from both academic and administrative positions in their respective universities, ED WG strives to support and promote networking across the Coimbra Group universities in the area of inclusive education and leadership, equality between women and men, diversity, anti-racism and intersectionality. The formal working group format provided a much-needed opportunity for cultivating inspirational dialogue and sharing practices across all participating universities. Its diverse member body, however, has presented a challenge as well. Since EDI is such a transversal issue, it has often been challenging for ED WG to find the right balance between the ambition of the group to function as an intellectual ‘think tank’ and its practical focus on sharing implementation practices and organizing inspirational academic events.

Over the past five years, ED WG has actively participated in the research and publication of the Coimbra Group Report on the CG universities’ responses to the Covid-19 crisis (CG Report on Covid-19), organized well-attended webinars on disability and intersectionality; inclusive curriculum projects; and on AI ethics and governance. In the fall of 2022, ED WG represented the Coimbra Group at the conference on ending gender-based violence in academia in Prague, Czech Republic (ED WG website), and since 2024 it sits in the European Commission’s sub-group of experts on ‘Inclusive Gender Equality in the European Research Area’ and provides consultations on its strategic documents (ERA Policy Agenda Action 5). Last, but not least, ED WG focuses on promoting the incorporation of diversity into pedagogical practices, collaborative research projects and institutional measures across the Coimbra Group.

### **The Process of Making this Book: Practicing Open Science**

This publication came about as the most recent initiative of the ED WG and, throughout the process of creating this volume, it has been guided by a focus on collectivity, honoring the ideal of open research. The idea of publishing a book on why equ(al)ity, diversity and inclusion matter in academia was hatched in an ED WG meeting in September 2024 and hence came directly from the group. The chair and co-chair of the group were joined by one more co-editor who wrote up a call for papers based on the group’s discussions and ideas.

Like the initiation of the book project, each consecutive step in its completion has been a group endeavor, but in various ways. In response

to the call for contributions in January 2025, 40 abstracts were submitted, half of which were accepted as potential chapters. For the work of scrutinizing the abstracts, in order to have broad expertise and various perspectives the three co-editors engaged three more readers from the working group who volunteered to read and review the proposals, and we all agreed on which to invite.

The first drafts of chapters were submitted in late March. At this point, all chapter authors were asked to engage in a collaborative peer reviewing process, and all chapters were critiqued in themed response groups during an intensive two-day workshop in late April 2025, hosted by Charles University in Prague. This open peer-review method is a step towards humanising academic work in a move to face-to-face discussions between author(s) and reviewers, which enables direct follow-up questions from authors to readers' comments and demands constructive and thoughtful criticism. Furthermore, given the peer groups' shared academic interests – whether issues of bias and differences linked to AI or making provisions for student refugees – these linked focal points facilitated fruitful conversations in the spirit of constructive criticism. In addition, open peer review is a very concrete means for training younger academics who may be less experienced as reviewers, as well as a means for older colleagues to learn anew, since it takes us out of conventional work processes that we have come to see as standard.

With the feedback from editors and chapter contributors, authors revised and resubmitted their chapters in early June. Soon after, another short hybrid-form workshop was held during the Coimbra Group's annual meeting in Bologna to clarify the road forward and how the editorial team would work with the publisher towards a publication in Fall 2025. Here, too, crucial discussions were held regarding academic demands on scholars depending on seniority or juniority, bibliometric and qualitative reviewing procedures, differences across disciplines and domains, and across geographies. Above all, there was agreement across differences that the book was even more urgently needed than we thought when it was initiated, for the reasons outlined in the beginning of this Introduction. Following this meeting, authors had another round of feedback from the editors, and revised and submitted final versions.

The result of our joint work is now in your hands – or on your screens – and like the collaborative process that produced it, it is a diverse, multi-voiced, multi- and interdisciplinary collection in many European in-

flections of English, our academic *lingua franca*. As is often the case, a couple of chapters have fallen out of the project along the way, and at times for personal reasons that remind us of the unequal work/life conditions we live with. The remaining chapters, we contend, are strong contributions to the ongoing and academically life-sustaining discussion about how EDI matters in higher education in Europe – and beyond – in teaching, in research and in the academic work cultures where our everyday professional lives happen, as students and as colleagues.

### **The Book's Contents: Sections and Chapters**

The chapters in this volume are structured into three sections, although, as the reader will discover, there are also several overlapping concerns and themes across these sections. The first section is **Making Sustainable Futures: Education, Research, Social Justice**, which opens crucial questions regarding a range of current issues.

In the first chapter, titled **From Silence to Spotlight: Towards Epistemic Justice in Women's Digital Representation in the Age of Artificial Intelligence**, Núria Ferran-Ferrer and Miquel Centelles explore how Library and Information Science (LIS) and Artificial Intelligence (AI) can challenge gendered exclusions in knowledge systems. Grounded in feminist and gatekeeping theory, it examines five research projects by the WikiWomen group, Universitat de Barcelona, that expose and counteract systemic bias across Wikipedia, academic metadata, university archives, and AI infrastructures. Through case studies and participatory methodologies, it proposes inclusive, ethically designed alternatives for knowledge classification, authorship visibility, and digital memory. The chapter advances a vision of epistemic justice, showing how rethinking visibility and representation can transform knowledge infrastructures to be more equitable, participatory, and reflective of diverse contributions.

The next chapter moves on to curriculum development: in **Making the Curriculum Inclusive in Two European Universities: Approaches, Challenges and Opportunities**, Edurne García Iriarte, Seán Adderley, Gemma Corbalán, Irina Marin, Derina Johnson and Julie Fraser review approaches to develop inclusive curricula in two Coimbra Group universities, Trinity College Dublin (Ireland) and Utrecht University (Netherlands). *The Trinity project* involved partnerships with academics and students, training and support and institutional development of inclusive

policies and practices, having students' voices at the core of the project. *Utrecht University Inclusive teaching tools* are an open online resource including a reflection tool and an inclusive teaching toolbox to develop inclusive learning environments. Evaluation results and reflection on the institutional implementation of inclusive teaching tools are presented to identify challenges and opportunities as both institutions mainstream inclusive curriculum practices.

In **Genders, Knowledge, and Social Justice: Advancing EDI through Transdisciplinary Teaching**, focusing on the central role of curriculum development and teaching, Annalisa Oboe and Chiara Xausa discuss how, since 2021, the University of Padua's *Genders, Knowledge, and Social Justice* course has equipped students with critical tools to challenge knowledge neutrality and promote inclusion. Grounded in gender studies and intersectional analysis, the course explores seven domains based on the EIGE framework, fostering cross-disciplinary skills and cultural awareness. It blends critical theory with real-world applications through lectures, workshops, and expert dialogue. Its impact on students demonstrates the value of integrating EDI into academic curricula and, as a best practice model, it offers replicable strategies for other institutions – particularly within Coimbra Group and European University Alliances – committed to advancing EDI in higher education through transdisciplinary teaching and learning.

Building on empirical evidence gathered through an action-research project at the Faculty of Information and Audiovisual Media at the University of Barcelona (Spain), in the following chapter, **The Gender Perspectives in Media and Information Science: A Case Study from the University of Barcelona**, Anna Villarroya, Juan José Boté-Vericad and Maria-José Masanet examine the integration of gender and LGBTQ perspectives within Media and Information Science studies. Drawing on focus groups with students and faculty, as well as a participatory workshop with faculty members, the research reveals a generalized interest in adopting a gender perspective, while also identifying substantial barriers to its implementation. The chapter further discusses subsequent initiatives that emerged from this initial project, highlighting ongoing efforts to promote inclusion and curricular transformation.

This is followed by Åsa Cajander, Beni Suranto, Tony Clear and Ramesh Lal's **Overlooked by Design: The Challenges of Incorporating Human-Centered Perspectives and EDI in IT Development**

**During the AI Boom.** The chapter addresses the persistent challenges of integrating Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) into IT projects, emphasizing the limited adoption of Human-Centered Design (HCD) principles and the growing complexity introduced by AI technologies. It highlights how current practices often overlook marginalized users and perpetuate systemic bias. In response, the authors advocate for a strong commitment to HCD values and a strategic shift toward Human-Centered AI (HCAI) to ensure the development of inclusive, ethical, and context-aware technology in the AI era. Through real-world cases and institutional insights, it outlines practical pathways for embedding EDI into digital innovation across academia, industry, and public services.

The two final chapters in this section centre on refugees and students at risks' access to higher education in Europe. In her chapter **EDI, Care and Social Justice: Welcoming Refugees and Students at Risk at the University of Padua**, Elisa Gamba discusses the deep moral and social responsibility of Higher Education institutions to support those fleeing hardship, persecution, or environmental crises in search of a better life. In 2023, over 120 million people were forcibly displaced, many of whom face barriers to education, particularly in host countries. While the global university enrollment rate is 42%, only 7% of refugees access higher education. Gamba's contribution explores the University of Padua's leading role in addressing this disparity through inclusive policies, scholarships, and targeted support for refugees and at-risk students, emphasising the role of equity, diversity, and inclusion in higher education.

The last chapter likewise concentrates on refugee students: **From Displacement to Belonging: Building Inclusive Universities through Bespoke Refugee Education Pathways** by Mary Dempsey, Andrew Flaus and Aidan Harte. Education pathways enable talented refugees to move from countries of first asylum to continue their education and integrate into a new host country. The University of Galway piloted Ireland's first pathway reflecting its commitment as a University of Sanctuary, embodying its values of respect, openness, sustainability, excellence and belonging. This initiative broadens access to higher education and demonstrates how EDI initiatives can drive meaningful change. Refugee scholars have enriched the campus through their academic success, diverse perspectives and smooth transition to employment. It has also fostered innovative collaborations with NGOs and partners building strong networks essential to the initiative's success.

The second section of this volume, **Addressing Injustice: Invisibility, Discrimination, Violence**, deals with problems of injustices in academia – and their potential solutions – across various differences, scenarios, and sites.

First up is **The Student Movement in Europe: A New Strategy for Inclusion**, in which Arno Schrooyen and Lisa Schivalocchi describe the comprehensive equity, diversity and inclusion strategy developed by the European Students' Union (ESU) to advance systemic change in higher education across Europe. The strategy promotes inclusive governance, accessible environments and targeted support for marginalised students. It informs both internal transformations and external advocacy, addressing structural inequities through policy engagement at institutional, national and European levels. Key priorities include combating gender-based violence, improving access and support for students with disabilities and embedding inclusive practices in higher education frameworks. ESU's approach emphasises evidence-based interventions, stakeholder collaboration and sustained policy dialogue to foster a more equitable and inclusive European education system.

In the next chapter, **Struggling to End Gender-Based Violence in Higher Education: Theories, Policies and Practices** Cristina Gamberi and Cristina Demaria argue for the pivotal role that European Higher Education institutions play in counteracting gender-based violence by disseminating knowledge and facilitating strategic actions for a safe work/study environment. However, they observe, in order to make a difference, HEI must also recognize how their organizational structures and culture intersect with hierarchies of power and discrimination. Starting from a critical examination of existing literature, this chapter focuses on how the University of Bologna is trying to counteract GBV with two helpdesks, a data collection and monitoring system, and communication campaigns. Intertwining theories, policies and practices, the chapter aims to assess the benefits, and the main obstacles, of these EDI policies to increase awareness.

Offering another perspective on work to end violence in universities, Siobán O'Brien Green and Iveta Bayerová in **Leveraging the Potential of the Coimbra Group to Address Gender-Based Violence in Academia: An Exploratory Case Study** describe work to date by the Equality and Diversity Working Group of the Coimbra Group in relation to gender-based violence (GBV). The chapter outlines the impacts and

scale of GBV in the European university sector, for staff and students, as well as the potential for university umbrella associations, such as the Coimbra Group, to provide coherent and unified responses to GBV. It also discusses the role of University Alliances as accelerators for action opposing GBV. Finally, it presents future routes for collaboration within and beyond universities, including the European Commission and Coimbra Group members, to combat GBV.

The next contribution, Bernardo Cortese's **Academic Workers with Special Caregiving Duties: A Perspective from Italian Universities** deals with the situation of academics who are university employees as well as caregivers of persons with disability. The chapter begins by outlining the International and EU legal regimes applicable to their situation, as regards the equality and non-discrimination principle, and the right of their family members with disability to live independently and have a family life. It also presents the provisions of the Italian legal system to exemplify how national law may strengthen, or counter, international frameworks. The following sections sketch the factual situation of such workers, and explains the risk of discrimination they face, partly due to a number of regulatory and administrative practices particular to academia.

**Women in STEM: Understanding Challenges and Providing EDI Initiatives**, by Caroline Eggle, Patricia Elgoibar and Jonathan Calleja-Blanco, illustrates how, while increasing legislation aimed at promoting gender equality in the workplace has contributed to narrowing the gender gap, women in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) continue to face significant barriers at societal, organizational, and individual levels. Based on research, this chapter highlights the interconnected challenges women face and their implications for, equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) in STEM. Building on these challenges, the authors propose recommendations for fostering inclusive workplaces where female STEM professionals can stay healthy and thrive. The role of universities, particularly STEM departments, becomes key for addressing the global underrepresentation of female students in such disciplines (UNESCO, 2024).

In the final chapter of this section, **Gender Inequality: Insights from the University of Padua's School of Engineering**, a collective of the university's authors – Silvana Badaloni, Elena Barzizza, Franco Bonollo, Chiara Dalla Man, Gaudenzio Meneghesso, Antonio Rodà, Luigi

Salmaso, Silvia Todros, Giacomo Vezzosi – discusses persistent inequalities in the STEM field(s). The chapter first presents a survey of more than 500 students in the University of Padua’s engineering programs, which highlighted pronounced gender stereotypes and gender inequalities in the engineering field, with female students reporting significant impacts on their academic and professional aspirations. The second part of the chapter introduces the concept of ‘gendered innovation’, advocating for the integration of gender perspectives in scientific research and technological development, as exemplified by the University’s pioneering course on “Gender and Ethics in Artificial Intelligence”. The text then outlines the School’s efforts to promote inclusivity, but above all it stresses the need for systemic reforms, including curricular adjustments, mentorship programs, and cultural changes.

In the third section of this volume, we turn to concrete issues connected to **Changing Institutional Structures: Policies, Practices, Care**, again foregrounding both good examples and challenges connected to EDI work in our institutions.

Christiane Schwieren’s initial chapter on **EDI Matters: Insights from Research and University Equal Opportunity Practices at Heidelberg University** explores the intersection of gender, diversity, and behavioral economics, highlighting the often one-sided (non)relationship between research and practice: researchers typically offer insights to practitioners but rarely integrate practical experience into academic work. Drawing on her five years as Equal Opportunities Commissioner at Heidelberg University, Schwieren reflects on how this experience has reshaped her research agenda. Focusing on the underrepresentation of women in STEM and leadership roles, she proposes a participatory research approach that addresses biases resulting from self-selection in research and the praxis of equal opportunities, and argues for EDI as a collective strategy to improve academia and emphasize the need for more intersectional, practically relevant research.

In **Stepping into a Discourse: The Introduction of Guidelines on Gender-Sensitive Language at Vilnius University** Monika Orechova, Irena Stonkuvienė and Akvilė Giniotaitė investigate how and why the Guidelines on Gender-Sensitive Language, introduced at Vilnius University in 2021 became the most discussed university document of the past decade. A five-page Q&A format document led to numerous opinion pieces, TV news items, and an appeal from a group of members of the

Lithuanian Parliament demanding to recant the Guidelines. The chapter expands on the public reactions to the initiative and the discourses surrounding it, and elaborates on the struggles that a university may encounter when striving for equity and diversity, and how these struggles tie in with the deeper issues of the society the university serves.

Next, Alena Sander, Florence Degavre and Maguy Ikulu's chapter on **Institutionalizing Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion at UC Louvain: Challenges, Resistance, and Successes** explores UC Louvain's evolving journey toward institutionalizing equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI), sparked by a landmark event in October 2023 that brought together over 1,000 participants. The initiative generated momentum and led to concrete steps, including the creation of an EDI department and the appointment of a Pro-rector for EDI. While challenges remain, such as limited resources, fragmented efforts, and cultural resistance, the chapter highlights the progress made and the commitment of key actors. Drawing on Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's work, the chapter offers a nuanced analysis of barriers at multiple levels, while showcasing promising strategies and the potential for lasting institutional transformation.

Věra Sokolová and Iveta Bayerová's chapter **Transforming Charles University into a Caring Institution: The Impact of EDI in a Post-Socialist Context** examines how Charles University has begun to embed equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) into its institutional culture, with care as a central value. Explaining the context of post-socialist East Central Europe, the chapter traces key developments such as the adoption of the Equal Opportunities Plan, the creation of the Equal Opportunities Board, the establishment of a university-wide ombudsperson, and implementation of a survey on caregivers' needs. The authors show how EDI, supported by EU-level frameworks, student initiatives and new university leadership, has become the driver of institutional change, and how care, both as a value and a practice, has played a key role in this transformation towards social justice in academia.

**The Role of Universities in Promoting EDI Amidst the Ukrainian Crisis: Challenges and Initiatives at Jagiellonian University** by Kinga Anna Gajda, revisits the issue of inclusion of students who are migrants and refugees in higher education as a process aimed at promoting equality and integration. Jagiellonian University has implemented numerous initiatives to support the integration of Ukrainian students, including language courses, social campaigns, media projects, and in-

tercultural workshops. Notwithstanding the exacerbating social polarization and the proliferation of disinformation, the university fosters dialogue and actively counters stereotypes. Collaboration with external organizations and student participation further strengthen the academic community and contribute to building societal resilience.

In the final chapter of this book, **Gender Equality Practices in Irish Higher Education: University College Galway and Trinity College Dublin as Case Studies**, Laura Loftus and Siobán O'Brien Green delve into the ways that Irish universities, including Coimbra Group members University of Galway and Trinity College Dublin, have made notable progress in gender equality over the past decade. National EDI frameworks and collaborative initiatives, such as Athena Swan, have helped embed equality into institutional structures and cultures. Despite ongoing challenges, including the need for sustained resourcing, these efforts have fostered accountability, increased female leadership representation, and driven lasting change. The Irish experience offers valuable lessons for other traditionally conservative institutions in balancing systemic reform with institutional autonomy. Case studies from Galway and Trinity highlight the impact of this approach on gender equality programs.

While each chapter deals with specific initiatives at specific universities, taken all together they bear witness to ongoing efforts to implement EDI in higher education contexts. All chapters engage critically with their topics, discussing challenges and setbacks as well as successes and breakthroughs. They testify to the crucial roles of engaged academics – individuals and groups, teachers, administrators, researchers and students – who initiate, maintain, and develop the university in directions that help build more sustainable and humane futures.

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I.

*MAKING SUSTAINABLE FUTURES:  
EDUCATION, RESEARCH, SOCIAL JUSTICE*



# *FROM SILENCE TO SPOTLIGHT: TOWARDS EPISTEMIC JUSTICE IN WOMEN'S DIGITAL REPRESENTATION IN THE AGE OF DIGITAL HUMANITIES AND ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE*

NÚRIA FERRAN-FERRER, MIQUEL CENTELLES

## **Introduction**

The construction and circulation of knowledge in the digital age has opened unprecedented opportunities to democratize access to information (Castells). Yet, it has also exposed the structural biases that continue to marginalize women and other minoritized groups within knowledge organisation systems (Centelles and Ferran-Ferrer, 'Assessing Knowledge Organization Systems from a Gender Perspective'; Ford and Wajcman). This chapter begins from this tension between open access and systemic invisibility, aiming to explore how information technologies—particularly open knowledge platforms and artificial intelligence—can either reinforce or challenge these inequalities.

Informed by intersectional feminist theory (Crenshaw; Harding; Haraway) gatekeeping theory (Shoemaker and Vos) and Library and Information Science (LIS) disciplines (Hjørland), this work focuses on the ways editorial decisions, community policies, and technological infrastructures shape what—and who—is made visible.

Five research projects conducted at the University of Barcelona by the WikiWomen research team—Cover Women, Dones de Categoria (Top-class women in English), HerStory, Patrimoni Humà UB (PHUB) (Human Heritage in English), and Women and Wikipedia—critically explore how gender and intersectionality are represented, curated, and often silenced within digital knowledge infrastructures. A central focus is Wikipedia's main page, analyzed through the Cover Women project, which illustrates how this highly visible and symbolically powerful gateway—shaped by the dynamics of new media such as interactivity, digitality, and global reach—is curated predominantly by a male editorial community. This

imbalance has critical implications for which narratives are legitimized and whose contributions are made visible in one of the world's most influential public platforms.

The other four initiatives extend this critical perspective to broader institutional and technological settings. They examine how classification systems, editorial decisions, academic metadata, and AI architectures contribute to structural forms of underrepresentation. Drawing on multiple and interdisciplinary methods—quantitative analysis, qualitative interviews, and editorial policy reviews—and using tools like Wikidata, OpenRefine, and semantic ontologies, these projects propose inclusive, co-created, and ethically designed alternatives. Collectively, they contribute to a redefinition of digital humanities as a space not only for access and preservation, but for epistemic justice.

This chapter offers both theoretical and practical insights into how information systems shape academic memory. It argues that diversity must go beyond token inclusion; it requires rethinking relevance, classification, and ontologies with a focus on justice. Hybrid AI models—merging symbolic reasoning with neural networks—present innovative tools for identifying and mitigating bias. When embedded in cultural infrastructures, they can reshape the aims and practices of digital humanities from a feminist perspective.

The chapter engages directly with current debates around Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) in academia and digital infrastructures. Drawing from feminist theory, Library and Information Science (LIS), digital humanities, and AI, it examines how systems like catalogues, classifications, and generative models can either perpetuate or disrupt inequality. By integrating feminist epistemologies with digital innovation, the chapter repositions digital humanities as a site of critical recognition, where marginalized voices gain space in collective memory.

This introduction sets the stage for a detailed exploration of how these principles are enacted in practice to build a more inclusive, just, and representative record of human heritage. Through five core research objectives, the chapter addresses: 1) recognizing women's contributions in university heritage, 2) restructuring biased classifications, 3) addressing gender gaps in open platforms, 4) enhancing visibility through authorship and citation, and 5) designing neuro-symbolic AI for fairer retrieval and visualization. While theoretical foundations—feminist theory, gate-keeping theory, and LIS—are introduced early on, each objective draws

from them specifically: 1 and 4 are rooted in feminist theory; 2 and 3 align with gatekeeping theory; and all objectives engage LIS and knowledge organization, with 5 integrating all three to propose inclusive AI.

By addressing these interconnected questions, the chapter builds a coherent framework that bridges critical theory, information science, and technological design—ultimately contributing to equitable, transparent, and participatory knowledge infrastructures. Each of the five following sections is structured around one core objective and linked to a specific project.

### **Women, Heritage, and Information Systems**

The historical underrepresentation of women in institutional memory is not just omission but structural invisibilization. Catalogues, repositories, and databases often reproduce gendered hierarchies by inadequately documenting women’s contributions. This section reimagines university heritage to meaningfully recognize women’s professional trajectories. Drawing on feminist theory and critical knowledge organization studies, it examines exclusion mechanisms and proposes more inclusive, accurate, and equitable models of representing human heritage.

#### ***Acknowledging women’s contributions in university heritage***

In order to effectively acknowledge the contributions of women and their professional roles within the human heritage of universities—while also preventing their exclusion from systems such as catalogues, repositories, and databases—the *Human Heritage of the University of Barcelona (PHUB)* project proposes a comprehensive and innovative approach built upon archival science, semantic technologies, and gender equity.

At the heart of the PHUB initiative lies the conviction that visibility begins with identification. Its first objective is to biographically identify and document individuals—especially women—who have contributed to the university’s academic and cultural life, even if they have not been officially recognized. Priority is given to figures with personal archives, institutional spaces named after them, or acknowledgment from their academic communities.

Visibility, however, also depends on how information is structured and connected. PHUB therefore uses semantic web technologies and

linked open data to enrich cataloguing and integrate local records with platforms like Wikidata, Wikipedia, and Europeana. This ensures women's contributions are visible within broader, interoperable knowledge systems. The project also uses digitisation and generative AI to preserve and enhance historical documents. High-resolution scanning and OCR enable the restoration of materials, while AI helps summarize content and annotate metadata, improving accessibility and contextualization. Another key component is spatial recognition. PHUB proposes an interactive campus map linking historical figures to physical locations. This fosters a stronger connection between memory and space and supports gender-sensitive naming practices for university buildings.

Beyond technical solutions, PHUB adopts a participatory approach. Through co-creation sessions, forums, and open calls, students, staff, and alumni contribute records and insights. This community-driven methodology reframes heritage not as a fixed archive, but as a collective, evolving narrative. In doing so, PHUB builds a more inclusive and representative institutional memory that reflects the full diversity of those who shaped it.

Finally, all these efforts are framed within a commitment to the FAIR principles (Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, Reusable) and to the international integration of data. By connecting the university's human heritage to national and global systems such as the *Sistema d'Arxius de Catalunya* and Europeana, PHUB ensures long-term visibility, reuse, and scholarly access to women's legacies.

In short, PHUB demonstrates that making women visible in the human heritage of universities is not a single action, but a multifaceted process. It requires identifying overlooked figures, describing them with care, connecting their stories to broader networks of knowledge, and inviting the community to participate in memory-making. Through the combination of feminist archival practices, semantic technologies, and open knowledge infrastructures, the project lays the groundwork for more equitable, inclusive, and enduring systems of institutional remembrance.

### ***Reducing gender bias in knowledge organization systems***

The *Dones de Categoria* project represents a significant and rigorous effort to uncover, diagnose, and ultimately confront the gender bias embed-

ded in the systems of knowledge organization (KOS) used by Wikipedia—specifically in its Catalan edition, the Viquipèdia. Though focused on an online collaborative encyclopaedia, the findings and reflections of this project resonate strongly with broader institutional challenges, including those faced by universities in documenting, preserving, and giving visibility to their human heritage. This is especially relevant when considering how catalogues, repositories, and digital archives are constructed and maintained—often reproducing the same mechanisms of exclusion they aim to overcome (Centelles and Ferran-Ferrer, “Assessing Knowledge Organization Systems from a Gender Perspective”; Centelles and Ferran-Ferrer, “Taxonomies and Ontologies in Wikipedia and Wikidata”)<sup>1</sup>.

At the heart of *Dones de Categoria* lies a deep concern with the systemic underrepresentation of women in the classification systems that structure knowledge and guide information retrieval (Ferran-Ferrer, Miquel Centelles Velilla, Macià Martínez, Boté-Vericad, et al.). Categories, as shown by the project, are far from neutral; they are socially and linguistically constructed mechanisms that reflect dominant cultural norms. In the case of the Catalan and Italian editions of Wikipedia, the community’s repeated decisions to disallow the creation of gendered categories such as “women” or “non-binary people” has led to a striking form of erasure. While other language editions—such as English or French—allow for gendered navigation of content (e.g., “Women archaeologists”), the Catalan edition maintains a rigid adherence to a masculine generic that effectively renders women invisible, even in categories where they form the majority of entries (i.e. “Nurses” in the Catalan Wikipedia is “Infermers” although almost all the included biographies are from women).

This situation mirrors challenges faced in university heritage systems. Academic catalogues and archival repositories often organize content based on criteria that appear neutral but, in practice, uphold normative assumptions—particularly regarding gender (Macià et al.). For example, women are frequently underrepresented in subject classifications, appear less often as main agents in collection descriptions, and are more likely to be included in the margins: as spouses, assistants, or anonymous contributors. The *Dones de Categoria* project thus offers an important lens through which to understand the structural biases inherent in

<sup>1</sup> This research project was financed by the Xarxa Vives d’Universitats, a network of 13 universities in Catalan-speaking territories that promotes higher education, research, and cultural cooperation.

classification, especially when these systems are used to mediate access to memory and recognition.

A key element of the project is its in-depth analysis of the Knowledge Organization Systems (KOS) used by Wikipedia (through category schemes) and Wikidata (through ontologies). The project combines qualitative and quantitative methods, including heuristic evaluations, user testing, expert interviews, and inspection of decision-making processes. This methodological triangulation reveals not only the presence bias—the measurable underrepresentation of women—but also a bias in process, where the rules, standards, and community dynamics perpetuate exclusion through apparently rational decisions. Our research results show how, in the Catalan Wikipedia, debates about category naming conventions were driven by a small group of contributors and led to the banning of identity-based categories, reflecting a resistance to acknowledging gender as a relevant facet of classification. These decisions were justified on the basis of maintaining neutrality or avoiding fragmentation, yet their consequences were far from neutral: they produced an information structure in which women are harder to find, less visible, and less recognized (Ferran-Ferrer, Centelles, Macià, et al.).

A central problem identified by *Dones de Categoria* is the structural limitation in how information is retrieved and visualized when gendered categories are not available. In the Catalan and Italian Wikipedia's editions, the prohibition of gender-based categories directly affects users' ability to find biographical entries about women or people of non-binary identities. This is not merely a semantic or ideological issue—it is a question of access. Without these categories, articles about women become buried within masculine-generic groupings, making them harder to locate, aggregate, and analyze, both for casual users and for researchers.

In the context of university information systems, similar issues arise when metadata does not reflect gender, when search filters are limited to binary or normative classifications, or when there are no mechanisms to highlight content about women in professional or historical contexts. The lack of granular, inclusive metadata leads to a failure of information retrieval and visualization, ultimately perpetuating invisibility through technical constraints.

In response to this, *Dones de Categoria* proposes a structural shift from rigid category schemes to more flexible and inclusive ontologies, particularly through the adoption of Wikidata's semantic frameworks. Unlike

Wikipedia's category system, Wikidata enables nuanced modeling of identities, professions, and relationships through properties and classes that reflect a wider spectrum of gender identities and social attributes. This ontological approach allows information systems to support dynamic, multi-dimensional searches and representations, which can adapt to users' informational needs and respect individual self-identification. For university archives and catalogues, adopting similar ontological principles could mean enabling searches not just by title or department, but by roles, gender identities, or language use—thus opening up new ways to see and understand the contributions of women and marginalized groups within the institution's heritage.

A particularly important contribution of *Dones de Categoria* is its analysis of editorial and governance processes. The project highlights how editorial and governance decisions are often centralized and opaque, reinforcing existing norms. In many universities, similar dynamics are at play: heritage decisions—such as inclusion in official records, naming of halls or scholarships, or the digitization of personal collections—are often taken by small committees, following unstated criteria, without mechanisms to ensure representational equity. *Dones de Categoria* invites us to democratize and make transparent these processes, recognizing that who gets to decide matters just as much as what gets decided.

Finally, *Dones de Categoria* insists that addressing these issues is not only a matter of accuracy or fairness, but also one of democratic and cultural responsibility. When women's roles in the university are not adequately documented, celebrated, or made accessible, the institution fails to recognize a significant part of its own history and identity. It fails future generations of students and scholars who seek to understand how knowledge has been built, maintained, and challenged over time. The invisibility of women is not just an omission—it is a distortion. Thus, transforming the systems through which we represent heritage is an act of epistemic justice.

In conclusion, the *Dones de Categoria* project offers a model for how rigorous academic research, technical innovation, and feminist advocacy can come together to expose and transform exclusionary knowledge infrastructures. For universities seeking to effectively acknowledge and represent the contributions of women within their human heritage, the lessons are clear: recognition begins with representation, and representation depends on how we organize, classify, and give meaning to

information. This means redesigning systems not only to include what has been left out, but also to interrogate the very logics by which we define relevance, authority, and identity. By doing so, institutions can move toward a heritage practice that is not only more inclusive, but also more truthful, resilient, and aligned with the values of equity and diversity.

### ***Curating diversity and addressing underrepresentation***

The *Cover Women* project provides a compelling and empirically grounded response to how the underrepresentation of women and other marginalized identities in open knowledge curation and cataloguing processes can be corrected in global digital systems. Focusing on Wikipedia's main page—a highly visible and symbolically powerful gateway to knowledge—Cover Women analyses the presence of gender and intersectional biases and uncovers how editorial structures, metadata conventions, and community norms shape who is featured, how they are described, and what kinds of narratives gain prominence. The project identifies both structural and cultural barriers to inclusion and proposes targeted interventions to build a more equitable and participatory infrastructure (Ferran-Ferrer, Centelles and Fernández; Ferran-Ferrer, Francisco Kugler, Fernández and Centelles).

While *Cover Women*<sup>2</sup> primarily addresses editorial bias and visibility dynamics on Wikipedia's main page, it also offers significant insights into how Knowledge Organization Systems (KOS) themselves encode and perpetuate gender bias. By analyzing metadata schemas, category systems, and ontology structures—particularly through Wikidata—it becomes evident that the very architectures of knowledge shape what can be seen, searched, and recognized. In this sense, the project also demonstrates how existing KOS can be audited, critiqued, and restructured through feminist and intersectional lenses. Strategies such as expanding metadata fields, rethinking occupational taxonomies, and enabling self-identification within structured data models are essential steps toward more inclusive and equitable knowledge infrastructures (Ferran-Ferrer and Fernández).

Although Wikipedia and universities may seem like very different ecosystems, they share important structural similarities in terms of how knowledge is produced, selected, organized, and legitimized. In both en-

<sup>2</sup> *Cover Women* is a research project financed by the Wikimedia Foundation (G-RS-2402-15223).

vironments, editorial practices, classification systems, and decision-making processes play a decisive role in shaping whose contributions are made visible and whose are rendered invisible. Drawing from the findings and methodologies developed within *Cover Women*, it is possible to identify a series of approaches that universities can adopt to more effectively acknowledge and represent women's professional roles within their institutional heritage, while actively working to avoid their exclusion from catalogues, repositories, and other information systems.

One of the core contributions of *Cover Women* lies in its diagnosis of presence bias, particularly the underrepresentation of women and people from historically marginalized groups. The team uses tools such as OpenRefine and Wikidata reconciliation to analyze which biographies appear on the main page across seven language editions, examining properties such as gender, occupation, ethnicity, and language. This method reveals not only the low number of women featured, but also the types of roles and identities that tend to be highlighted or excluded. Applying this approach to the university setting means undertaking a similar effort to audit existing databases and heritage records. It becomes essential to ask: who is included in our institutional catalogues? Which types of academic or professional trajectories are documented? Do women appear mainly as students, as professors, as support staff—or are their contributions largely absent? Without this kind of data-driven visibility analysis, it is impossible to build an inclusive narrative of university heritage.

However, visibility is not only a question of presence; it is also a matter of representation. As *Cover Women* shows, the way content is framed and categorized plays a key role in reinforcing or challenging systemic bias. In Wikipedia, the criteria that determine which articles appear on the front page—such as “notability”, “neutrality”, or “encyclopedic tone”—are not purely technical, but culturally and ideologically charged. These editorial policies often reproduce dominant narratives that privilege male-coded topics, Eurocentric perspectives, and traditional disciplines. Similarly, in the university context, cataloguing practices and metadata standards often reflect historical biases. Descriptive vocabularies may rely on occupational labels or authority records that reinforce gender stereotypes, or they may lack fields that allow for the nuanced description of women's experiences, particularly when these fall outside of established academic categories. Furthermore, catalogues may privilege research outputs over pedagogical work, activism, or community engage-

ment—spheres where women and minoritized groups have often made vital yet underrecognized contributions.

To address these biases within KOS, *Cover Women* proposes several redesign strategies. First, it advocates for a shift from static, hierarchical category schemes to more flexible and inclusive ontologies, capable of modeling identities, professions, and relationships in non-binary and non-normative ways. Second, it calls for the co-creation of classification vocabularies in collaboration with underrepresented communities, ensuring that categories reflect lived experiences rather than institutional assumptions. Third, it encourages the incorporation of intersectional metadata fields that can capture the multidimensionality of contributors' identities and roles. These structural changes are essential not only for enhancing representation but for enabling systems to adapt to evolving understandings of diversity and inclusion.

Universities must critically review their editorial and cataloguing practices through a gender and intersectional lens. This means examining selection policies, metadata, and community involvement. The project's comparison across language editions uncovered both exclusionary patterns and inclusive practices—such as the Spanish Wikipedia's “*Mujeres en Portada*” initiative, which prioritizes visibility for underrepresented women and professions. This demonstrates how editorial cultures can shift through awareness and strategy.

*Cover Women* also highlights the role of gatekeepers in shaping visibility. Interviews with Wikipedia editors revealed how individual biases and community norms influence what is preserved and celebrated—insights directly relevant to how universities manage archives, commemorations, and exhibitions. Opening these processes to dialogue and co-creation is key to more inclusive memory practices.

Technically, the project shows the limits of structured data. While Wikidata properties like gender or occupation support large-scale analysis, they often rely on binary or narrow classifications. Universities face similar challenges and must revise metadata to reflect diverse identities and experiences—through self-identification, expanded gender categories, and more nuanced occupational descriptors.

Finally, what makes *Cover Women* particularly powerful as a model is its commitment to participatory research and intervention. The project is not limited to academic analysis; it actively collaborates with editing communities, feminist collectives, and Wikimedia user groups to devel-

op practical tools, guidelines, and strategies for systemic change. These include editorial recommendations, bots and AI-based assistants, and open-access datasets for ongoing monitoring. The ethos of this work is based on dialogue, co-creation, and responsiveness to the real needs of the communities involved. This spirit of participation should also guide efforts in the university setting. Rather than treating heritage as something fixed or given, institutions can embrace it as a living process, open to negotiation and transformation. This means involving not only archivists or historians, but also students, faculty, alumni, and social movements in the shaping of institutional memory. It also means acknowledging that memory is always political—and that a truly inclusive heritage must confront, rather than conceal, the exclusions of the past.

In sum, the project offers concrete pathways for correcting underrepresentation through changes in content curation, cataloguing structures, and participatory governance. For universities, this means moving beyond symbolic gestures toward a deeper reconfiguration of how they document, celebrate, and remember the people who have shaped their history and open space for multiple voices, identities, and ways of knowing.

### ***Enhancing academic visibility through authorship and citation***

The *Women and Wikipedia* research project addressed a fundamental challenge in the visibility and representation of women in academic systems: the difficulty of reliably identifying and recording the gender of scientific authors in large-scale bibliometric databases. We produced an article that focused specifically on the domain of academic authorship, but its findings are highly relevant to the broader question of how women's professional contributions are acknowledged—or erased—within institutional information systems, including those used by universities to manage and curate their human heritage (Boté-Vericad et al.).

At the heart of the study lies a critical observation: most large-scale academic databases, such as Scopus or Web of Science, lack structured and reliable gender metadata for authors. This absence is not merely a technical shortcoming—it has deep consequences for the representation of women in academic memory. When gender information is missing, incomplete, or inferred through biased systems, the resulting bibliometric analyses tend to reinforce existing disparities by undercounting or misclassifying women and non-binary individuals. Consequently, their

contributions are harder to trace, harder to quantify, and ultimately less likely to be recognized in institutional catalogues, repositories, or historical narratives. This invisibility also has cascading effects on notability—a key criterion for inclusion in academic rankings, institutional histories, and even platforms like Wikipedia. Since notability often relies on citation counts, editorial presence, or authorship metrics, any gender gap in these areas directly impacts women’s perceived academic relevance.

To address this issue, we propose a dual-method approach for gender identification, combining manual verification (via institutional profiles, grammatical cues, and self-identification) with automated data extraction from linked open data sources such as Wikidata, VIAF, ORCID, and Gender-API. This methodological model is directly applicable to the university context. If institutions wish to accurately represent the contributions of women within their heritage systems, they must invest in both the enrichment of existing metadata and the development of inclusive identification protocols. Relying solely on automated tools, as the study shows, leads to partial and often skewed results—especially for names that are culturally ambiguous, non-Western, or non-binary.

Moreover, the project critically examined the biases embedded in classification systems. For instance, Wikidata, while promising as a central node of linked data, uses the property “sex or gender” (P21) in a way that conflates sex, gender identity, and sometimes even sexual orientation. These conceptual ambiguities result in inconsistent records and limit the visibility of those who fall outside binary gender norms. Similarly, VIAF’s reliance on institutional authority files often reflects the biases of contributing institutions, further marginalizing underrepresented scholars. This diagnosis reveals that inclusion is not just about adding women into existing systems, but also about restructuring those systems to accommodate diversity in a meaningful and accurate way.

From a practical standpoint, we could demonstrate the importance of linked open data and interoperable identifiers (such as ORCID, Scopus IDs, or Wikidata Q-numbers) in building more comprehensive and representative information ecosystems. For universities, this insight is crucial: if catalogues, repositories, or alumni databases lack mechanisms to connect individuals across platforms, they risk fragmenting or losing traces of women’s careers—especially in interdisciplinary, international, or non-traditional academic paths. Promoting the use of persistent identifiers and encouraging faculty and staff to maintain up-to-date records

(e.g., in ORCID or institutional CRIS systems) becomes a necessary step toward institutional equity.

Furthermore, we emphasize the ethical and epistemological dimensions of gender identification. Visibility must be pursued with care, transparency, and respect for self-identification. This is especially important in contexts where data collection can lead to unintended consequences, such as reinforcing stereotypes, violating privacy, or exposing individuals to discrimination. Universities, as custodians of both knowledge and people, have a responsibility to implement gender-aware metadata policies that are not only technically robust, but also ethically grounded. This includes recognizing non-binary identities, allowing for self-description, and avoiding binary assumptions in classification schemes.

Moreover, the analysis of citation patterns reveals structural biases: women's work is cited less frequently, especially in male-dominated disciplines or when published in non-mainstream venues. These biases are compounded when authorship metadata is incomplete or inaccurate, making it harder to trace the intellectual lineage of women scholars. Universities and research infrastructures must address this by fostering more equitable citation practices, supporting underrepresented authors, and integrating gender-aware metrics into their evaluation systems.

Finally, gender visibility is situated within the broader context of academic justice. Bibliometric data does not merely describe academic life—it shapes it. It informs funding decisions, hiring patterns, institutional rankings, and even historical commemoration. If the data is biased, so too will be the narratives and decisions built upon it. By offering a replicable methodology for improving gender identification in authorship data, the *Women and Wikipedia* project provides tools that universities can adopt to ensure that their information systems reflect the true diversity of the communities they serve.

We could demonstrate that effectively acknowledging and representing women's contributions in the human heritage of universities requires more than simply "including women" in existing frameworks. It demands a rethinking of data infrastructures, a commitment to ethical representation, and an investment in interoperable, inclusive metadata systems. By adopting hybrid approaches that combine automation with human judgment, and by embracing ontologies capable of expressing gender diversity, universities can move toward a more accurate, equitable, and inclusive memory of their academic communities.

### ***Leveraging AI to combat bias in information retrieval and visualization***

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is increasingly central to knowledge infrastructures. However, if developed from biased data or without critical oversight, it can reinforce systemic exclusions—particularly of women and gender minorities. The HerStory project addresses this risk by applying feminist and interdisciplinary methodologies to rethink how AI can support inclusive historical memory.

*HerStory*<sup>3</sup> focuses on digital archives related to Francoist repression and censorship, which often exclude or fragment women’s narratives. A key challenge identified is database fragmentation, many academic projects create isolated datasets with no shared identifiers, preventing the recognition of individuals (especially women) who appear across multiple sources. Without integration into public platforms like Wikidata or Wikipedia, these data remain invisible to broader audiences.

To overcome this, HerStory develops a hybrid AI architecture based on *retrieval-augmented generation (RAG)* and *knowledge graph integration*. RAG enhances generative AI by grounding outputs in curated corpora, reducing hallucination, improving traceability, and enabling domain specificity. Meanwhile, knowledge graphs bring semantic structure and transparency, linking entities (people, events, institutions) and capturing contextual relationships. This model shifts AI from probabilistic prediction toward epistemically grounded generation.

The project adopts a neural-symbolic approach, combining deep learning’s adaptability with symbolic AI’s interpretability. Symbolic systems offer logical clarity but lack flexibility, while neural models are powerful but opaque and prone to bias. Neural-symbolic models allow for inclusive, explainable, and responsive systems—capable of representing non-binary identities, nuanced historical contexts, and intersectional metadata.

However, generative AI presents serious risks. Models trained on unbalanced datasets often reproduce dominant narratives: male, Western, and institutional. Data voracity, opacity, hallucination, and bias are core challenges. For example, generative systems may associate leadership with men or erase women’s pedagogical roles in summaries. HerStory’s

<sup>3</sup> *HerStory* is a research project funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation (PID2023-147673OB-I00).

scoping review of 73 studies (2014–2024) confirms that bias stems from training data, skewed representations, algorithmic decisions, and human oversight lacking inclusion frameworks.

To mitigate these risks, HerStory’s architecture combines curated document retrieval with a dual-layer knowledge graph. The ontology layer aligns and transforms semantic frameworks; the entity layer interconnects individuals and events from multiple databases, Wikidata, and Wikipedia. This structure enables richer, interconnected narratives and supports the automated generation of inclusive Wikipedia entries.

The project is deeply rooted in human-centered design. During development, user experience methods—such as card sorting, personas, and participatory workshops—guide the modeling of both content and user interaction. This ensures that the system reflects not only historical accuracy but also the informational needs and behaviours of diverse users.

HerStory’s methodology unfolds across five iterative phases: (1) conceptualization; (2) design of the AI and knowledge graph components; (3) development and integration; (4) real-world testing in archival contexts; and (5) participatory evaluation through citizen science. This roadmap ensures that the resulting tools are not just technically robust, but socially accountable and collectively shaped.

Crucially, HerStory aligns with and contributes to the Wikidata ecosystem, which increasingly supports nuanced representations of gender and identity. While Wikipedia’s editorial processes often reflect cultural bias, Wikidata allows for structured, scalable, and inclusive knowledge organization. HerStory uses and enriches this infrastructure, fostering interoperability and equity in digital heritage.

In conclusion, HerStory demonstrates how AI—if grounded in feminist epistemologies and participatory design—can shift from reinforcing historical silences to actively surfacing marginalized voices. By embedding explainability, ontological precision, and user-centered logic into generative architectures, the project offers a replicable model for building inclusive, ethical, and sustainable knowledge infrastructures.

## **Conclusion: Into the Spotlight**

The previous sections have shown how gender bias operates through multiple layers of exclusion—ranging from category schemes and metadata to editorial practices and AI architectures. Each project discussed contributes uniquely to addressing these biases, but collectively they also signal a broader epistemological shift: from viewing visibility as a technical challenge to treating it as a matter of justice, infrastructure, and design.

This set of projects exemplifies how intersectional feminist theory provides a critical lens for analyzing structural invisibility, while gatekeeping theory helps explain how knowledge is legitimized—or excluded—within digital and institutional contexts. At the same time, Library and Information Science (LIS) frameworks offer concrete tools for intervening in classification systems and representational technologies. The intersection of these perspectives enables a robust and coherent approach toward building more inclusive and equitable knowledge infrastructures. All five initiatives confront a central problem: the mechanisms by which certain voices are consistently foregrounded while others remain silent or obscured. From authorship metadata to front-page representation, from archival gaps to AI hallucinations, these studies map the terrain of exclusion while proposing actionable models for change.

What emerges is a collective agenda that moves beyond individual interventions. It calls for participatory, transparent, and reflexive systems of memory-making—whether in universities, digital platforms, or AI-driven tools. Feminist-informed design principles, inclusive ontologies, hybrid AI, and metadata ethics are not just technical enhancements; they are foundational to reimagining knowledge systems that truly reflect the diversity of those who contribute to them.

Across these initiatives, one element is clear: moving from silence to spotlight is not a singular intervention, but a multi-layered process. It involves rethinking who and what is considered relevant; how information is described, stored, and retrieved; who gets to decide these things; and which tools and technologies are deployed in the process. It also requires an epistemological shift—from seeing heritage as a static record of the past to recognizing it as a dynamic field shaped by present-day values, power relations, and ethical commitments.

In this sense, the chapter has not only diagnosed the problem of gender bias in academic and digital knowledge systems but also offered an

actionable and theoretically grounded pathway forward. Through the articulation of five research objectives and their respective projects, it has outlined how institutions can move toward more equitable, transparent, and participatory knowledge infrastructures—ensuring that those who have long been silenced are finally brought into the spotlight.

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# *MAKING THE CURRICULUM INCLUSIVE IN TWO EUROPEAN UNIVERSITIES: APPROACHES, CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES*

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## **Introduction**

International policy developments and an incipient scholarship on equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) (Crimmins, Cyr) provide both direction and theoretical justification towards inclusive higher education. As the European higher education student population is increasingly more diverse (Hauschildt et al.), an inclusive curriculum recognises and responds to the different ways in which students engage, access and are represented in the curriculum (Buitendijk et al.). Inclusive curriculum has been defined as “curriculum which takes into consideration and caters for the diverse needs, previous experiences, interests and personal characteristics of all learners. It attempts to ensure that all students are part of the shared learning experiences of the classroom and that equal opportunities are provided, regardless of learner differences” (UNESCO International Bureau of Education).

According to Banks (589), prior to the more contemporary conceptualisation of inclusive curriculum, the concept of curriculum transformation emerged in the late 1960s in the United States to critically examine knowledge in the context of social identities and power relations with a focus on integrating into the curriculum the study of race, gender, class, disability, religion, gender expression, sexual orientation and nationality. Critical pedagogies also emerged to engage with the multiplicity of perspectives in the curriculum, placing the students’ experiences and learning trajectories at the centre of inquiry (590). Fields such as ethnic studies and women’s studies provided the pedagogical base and scholarship for curriculum transformation. Over the years, the consolidation of student services at universities and their commitment to diversity goals have

moved diversity from educational programmes such as ethnic studies to the centre of institutions, with teaching and learning centres becoming sites of centralised resources for inclusive teaching and *inclusive curriculum*.

Critics of curriculum transformation, which strongly resonate with contemporary political developments to the detriment of EDI, argue that the politicised, biased, and speech-coded transformed curriculum challenges academic freedom, while proponents of curriculum transformation defend that the transformed curriculum questions the nature of learning, the meaning of knowledge, basic discipline assumptions and the substance of the curriculum, only enhancing all learning through “cultural plurality and knowledge construction” (Banks 591). The benefit of plurality in knowledge production resonates with Freeman and Huang (305), who found that author teams with multiple ethnicities publish stronger papers, with better quality or reaching a larger number of people or both, are more likely to encompass wider conceptualisation of ideas, more variation in equipment and procedures and a wider range of reference works than papers produced by homogenous groups. However, diversity as a competitive advantage has also been critiqued when representation of diverse populations is decoupled from social justice and fails to consider sources of inequality such as wealth gaps, housing discrimination or incarceration rates for certain populations (Cyr 23).

There is no consistent strategy for developing and implementing inclusive curricula, and little reliable evidence about which models are effective or how they function. This chapter therefore aims to review the approaches, challenges and opportunities to develop inclusive curricula at two Coimbra Group universities, Trinity College Dublin (TCD) in Ireland and Utrecht University (UU) in the Netherlands, which collaborated on the first webinar organised by the Equality and Diversity Working Group of the Coimbra Group in October 2022. The webinar provided a starting point for exploration and discussion of inclusive curriculum projects in universities, showcasing the work of both institutions. Three years later, this chapter captures the development of the projects as each university transitions into the consolidation of their inclusive practices.

The chapter is written by staff who have been centrally involved in aspects of the projects presented herein (e.g., design, implementation, evaluation, institutional embedment). Our positionality shapes our individual and collective experiences as “diverse” university staff and as

authors of this chapter. Four of us have international backgrounds, one staff member has student experience entering university through an access programme for minority groups, five of us are female, three have academic and three professional staff positions. The chapter starts with a brief context on policy, inclusive curriculum and the diversity of the student population in European higher education.

### **Policy Context**

EDI has been promoted by international developments and national legislation and policy. As part of the United Nations 2030 agenda, Goal 4 has set the target of equal access to university for all by 2030. The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations), ratified by Ireland and The Netherlands, makes States Parties accountable for ensuring equal access to general tertiary education for persons with disabilities on an equal basis with others (article 24). In the European context, the renewed European Union agenda for higher education (European Commission) aims to develop inclusive and connected higher education to ensure that the diversity of the European population is reflected in the students entering and graduating from higher education institutions. The Bologna Process of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA, 2020) further recognises that the social dimension of higher education “encompasses creation of inclusive environment in higher education that fosters equity, diversity, and is responsive to the needs of local communities” (3). To achieve EDI within higher education, attention to teaching, assessment and academic supports is crucial (European Commission, European Education Area). The European Accessibility Law (European Commission) also sets a legal obligation for the implementation of accessibility measures in third level education.

Up until 2020, Dutch and Irish universities mainly concentrated on gender balance, tracking gender inequalities and setting ambitious targets for achieving parity in gender representation at all levels (pay, student and staff numbers, percentages in the higher echelons such as full professorships and leadership positions). From 2020, national policy approaches in both countries have further intensified the need for an inclusive curriculum.

## ***Ireland***

Two key developments provide a framework for action, funding, implementation and reporting on inclusivity in the curriculum: the National Access Plan (2022-2028) and ALTITUDE. One of the Higher Education Authority National Access Plan's (2022-2028) key ambitions is that "our higher education institutions are inclusive, universally designed environments which support and foster student success and outcomes, equity and diversity and are responsive to the needs of students and wider communities" (Higher Education Authority). In 2024, ALTITUDE, the National Charter for Universal Design in Tertiary Education was launched, providing a roadmap for the development of universal design in third level institutions through 1) teaching, learning and assessment, 2) student supports, services and social engagement, 3) physical environment and 4) digital environment.

## ***The Netherlands***

Prior to 2020, dimensions of diversity such as race, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, neurodivergence and disability tended to be mentioned in policies but not backed up by concrete actions, nor was the intersectionality of exclusionary factors taken into consideration (Bonjour, van der Brink & Taartmans 2020). A major boost to the mainstreaming and diversification of EDI at Dutch universities was given by the "New National Action Plan for Diversity and Inclusion" (Nieuw nationaal actieplan voor diversiteit en inclusie) issued by the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science with a view to creating an inclusive, diverse and safe learning and work environment. The plan aimed at embedding diversity and inclusion in processes of scientific evaluation and accreditation, enhanced monitoring of diversity in teaching and research, interconnection and centralisation of EDI initiatives and an award system that baked EDI into policy making and funding allocation.

## **Inclusive Curriculum and Diversity Research**

Crimmins (379) identifies various principles to implement inclusion and diversity in higher education, the first two directly concerning the curriculum: learner centredness (i.e., considering students' identities and ex-

periences in the curriculum) and epistemological equity (i.e., involving a multiplicity of sources of knowledge and ways of knowing), adopting a radical approach to inclusivity in universities through legislative or policy enforcement and affirmative action (379). These principles are supported by the importance of updated statistics to monitor inequity across priority groups in relation to race/ethnicity, socio-economic status, disability, and gender.

Data from the 2024 Eurostudent report (Hauschildt et al. 32) highlights the diversity of student population (i.e., half of students are female, more than 1 in 10 students are parents, almost a quarter of students have an international background, more than three quarters of international students hold a foreign citizenship, almost a fifth of students report mental health problems, physical chronic diseases or disability). The report also found that over a fifth of students report having felt discriminated, mostly on the grounds of gender and age. A report on the well-being of the European student population (Muja et al. 13) also identified lower rate of well-being for those who have minority backgrounds (i.e., females, non-binary or who did not want to assign themselves to a gender category, under 30, disabled, from lower socio-economic status and migrant background).

Among the mechanisms to facilitate inclusion of minority groups in higher education, Universal Design for Learning (UDL) has received more attention in the literature. UDL is about creating and implementing instruction that meets multiple learning needs, preferences and circumstances in order to ensure all students have equitable access to learning (CAST). UDL training in higher education improves students' university experiences as regards learning, participation, engagement, accessibility and reducing anxiety (Moriña et al., 10) and has potential for fostering collaboration, innovation, continuous improvement and inclusive learning environments (Dell'Anna et al., 12).

### **Inclusive Curriculum Projects**

This section of the chapter presents two inclusive curriculum projects. The Trinity Inclusive Curriculum Project (Trinity-INC) operated within four pillars of activities (i.e., academic, student, support, and institutional) while the Inclusive Curriculum and Learning Environment Project at

Utrecht University focused on the development of two inclusive teaching tools (i.e., a reflection tool and an inclusive teaching toolbox). Firstly, we provide an examination of the aims, components, activities, and development of each project in their respective context. Each project section was written by authors from the relevant institution. Secondly, and drawing from the authors' discussion of both projects, we identify common challenges and opportunities for the development of inclusive curriculum initiatives.

### ***The Trinity Inclusive Curriculum Project (Trinity-INC) (2020-2025)***

Trinity-INC – The Trinity Inclusive Curriculum Project – was hosted by the University EDI office, established in 2019 to “drive Trinity’s fundamental commitment to leading a boldly equitable community”. An inclusive curriculum to improve the experience of students was a key goal of the Trinity’s Strategy for Diversity and Inclusion 2014-2019. Trinity-INC was commenced in late 2020 with the mission of embedding EDI principles across all teaching and learning at TCD. The project had four equal and interconnected pillars of operation – academic, student, institutional and support. These pillars and results from a project evaluation conducted in 2024 (McConkey & Swift) are presented next.

The *Academic Pillar* focused on the work of academic and teaching staff. A School Champion Programme was instituted inviting membership from each of the 24 Schools in Trinity. The role of the School Champion was to raise awareness and stimulate open debate and discussion in relation to inclusivity among colleagues to address the project’s aim to learn more about and explore the issues at the School level. While inclusive activities can support all students’ learning, barriers and enablers differed across disciplines. Giving deference to these differences was critical for encouraging reflection on the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion as it plays out in one’s own discipline.

The second aim of the School Champion Programme was the piloting of the module in Inclusive Practices, which also involved those working in support services. The module was based on a national UDL Badge, was run once per semester, and evaluated and refined after each iteration, and reached over 300 staff. Key to the module were asynchronous online learning, peer learning, and hybrid seminars. The aim was to empower individuals to make just one change at a time, acknowledging previous

efforts, allowing the process of implementing UDL to become a continuous path of identifying and addressing the areas of greatest learner need. According to an academic who participated in the module:

“I think just getting a community ... all talking about something that ... crosses our desks a lot. In terms of inclusivity access, what do we do when we get a LENS [Learning and Educational Needs Summary] report? What do we do ... when students don't have English as their first language? Everyone comes across this stuff and it [the module] was a collection of people who were venturing into that space first . . . and getting space to make presentations, etc, which I think is kind of real 'on-the-ground' work.” (McConkey & Swift, 22)

The project evaluation showed that the module was successful in encouraging staff to make changes to their teaching practice, such as changes to the course content and enabling multiple perspectives to be heard into the class (McConkey & Swift, 27).

The *Student Pillar* consisted of the Student Partner Programme (SPP) which was developed to ensure that student voices actively shape inclusive teaching and learning at Trinity. The programme engaged a diverse range of students from underrepresented backgrounds from across the university, offering real-time insights into experiences of inclusion and exclusion.

In 2021, the SPP introduced students to key inclusion concepts, such as the social model of disability and UDL. Students were supported to lead on projects<sup>1</sup> that captured their experiences such as a podcast on Black Muslim experiences, a survey on mature students, and a trans ally poster that later evolved into a staff training workshop. These student-led initiatives cemented the student partnership as a core pillar of Trinity-INC.

Building on this success, and with guidance from students, the Student Partner Committee was formed to provide a continuous student voice to the project. Through monthly meetings, students offered feedback on their experiences with the curriculum, co-developed and facilitated staff training workshops, and contributed to resource development aimed at enhancing inclusive practices. The SPP, which involved over 100 students, provided backing to students to shape the curriculum and access to real experiences of marginalisation to academics (McConkey & Swift):

<sup>1</sup> Projects can be seen on Inclusive Curriculum - Equality, Diversity and Inclusion | Trinity College Dublin.

“It is very hard to challenge authority if you are a student of colour. Having [named Trinity-INC staff members] in your corner has been very helpful.” Student (25)

“Having actual people who are impacted by those forms of marginalisation and who were willing to come and say, this is what it means to me, and this is what you can do to make it better. It was really so great, because we are so limited by our own experience.” Academic (24)

Student partners were paid for their work an hourly fee informed by Ireland’s living wage, had flexible engagement options, and contributed based on their own lived experiences rather than being expected to represent entire communities.

The project evaluation indicated that over 90% of students surveyed considered that Trinity had an inclusive curriculum to some extent with 27% of them stating that the curriculum was inclusive to a very large extent (McConkey & Swift, 29). Students indicated as the top barriers to access teaching and learning “access issues due to life/work balance”, “digital access issues”, “lack of access due to costs involved”, and “physical difficulties accessing spaces, facilities or media” (McConkey & Swift, 29). In this context, the SPP provided an opportunity, by positioning students as co-creators, to influence staff training and curricular development, and to transform how teaching and learning evolve in response to student needs.

The *Institutional Pillar* was perhaps the most challenging part of the project. It was not without its successes, however. Trinity-INC was invited to speak to key university teaching and learning committees, leading to rich conversations and agreement on the importance of inclusion. Sections on accessibility / inclusivity were added to the new undergraduate and postgraduate module and course proposal templates and incorporated into examination mechanisms such as course external examination documentation. Trinity-INC contributed its expertise to postgraduate educational development projects and Trinity’s Race Equality Action Plan (2023-2028). While the work was commended, there remained a reluctance to recommend its formalisation into wider academic policy as had also happened with a former version of the inclusive curriculum project in 2008 hosted by the disAbility service and Teaching and Learning (Garvey & Foley). A key challenge identified for mainstream adoption is that there remains no requirement for those teaching in Trinity to undertake any teacher training.

The *Support Pillar* focused on building staff capacity to ensure that support services proactively addressed barriers to inclusion, recognising that students' needs when engaging with services are also diverse and intersecting. This work was structured around three key areas: collaboration, training, and informal individual support.

Collaboration between Trinity-INC and student support services was central to embedding inclusion in institutional structures. One standout example was the UDL audit of the Careers Service, which assessed how accessible and inclusive its services were for students from diverse backgrounds and allowed for concrete recommendations and improvements. The Inclusive Initiatives Funding programme also fostered collaboration through €2,000 grants to academics and professionals to raise awareness/address identified issues related to inclusive teaching and learning or student services and to celebrate diversity in Trinity.

Delivering training to support services across Trinity ensured staff had the knowledge and tools to meet students' needs. One significant initiative was expanding the module in Inclusive Practices across student services, including the Trinity Access Programme which aims to increase access and participation of underrepresented groups at third level in Ireland. This training helped staff understand and implement flexible, accessible, and student-centred approaches in their work, ensuring that students from a wide range of backgrounds could fully engage with services.

Trinity-INC also provided informal, ad hoc support to staff and students. This included offering guidance on accessibility, inclusive practices, and student support strategies. While less structured, this work played a vital role in ensuring that inclusion remained an active, evolving process that could respond to immediate needs as they arose (McConkey & Swift, 23).

The Support Pillar aimed to strengthen the capacity of Trinity's support services to meet the needs of all students, ensuring that inclusion was not just a goal for the classroom, but an embedded practice across Trinity's institutional structures. Students from minority groups but who were uninvolved with Trinity-INC were surveyed for the project evaluation (n=256). Over three quarters reported that they could be themselves at Trinity while only over half of them felt like they belonged at Trinity (McConkey & Swift, 29). Despite the good response to the project, stu-

dents' experiences of inclusion and belonging are a key challenge to be tackled in the next inclusive curriculum implementation phase.

### *Mainstreaming*

At the end of 2024, funding from the Higher Education Authority was allocated for the development of a two-year project on inclusive curriculum implementation across the university. The focus of the project was on developing institutional policy, UDL implementation at faculty and school levels, further training of academic and professional staff in inclusive practices and research. The Trinity-INC project and its evaluation provided relevant context to inform this phase. The Dean of Undergraduate Students and the Centre for Academic Practice took on the lead of the next phase with support from the EDI office.

### ***The Utrecht University Inclusive Teaching Tools***

Internationalisation and the pursuit and implementation of EDI principles at UU have gone hand in hand, the former preceding the latter by a couple of years. UU's vision is to create an inclusive university environment that contributes to a just society by ensuring equal rights and opportunities for all. The UU has a diverse range of Bachelor of Arts (BA) and Master of Arts (MA) specialisations (out of 46 BA degrees, 7 are bilingual Dutch and English, 4 are in English, and 5 in other languages; and 48 out of 78 master's programmes are in English), which in turn attract international students and staff. As of September 2020, a university-wide EDI Strategy<sup>2</sup> and Action Plan were aimed to run for 4 years (2021 to 2025), led by a Diversity Dean and an EDI Steering Committee. The aim was to embed EDI in the everyday running of the university. This type of EDI commitment is also incorporated into UU's 2025 educational model<sup>3</sup>, which prioritizes inclusive, student-centred, and interdisciplinary learning.

Between 2021 and 2024 two projects benefitted from funding from the UU Incentive Fund for educational innovation and consolidation projects: one which designed two twin tools, the Curriculum Reflection Tool and the Inclusive Teaching Toolbox, and a second follow-up project of consolidation seeking to embed these cutting-edge tools into the univer-

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.uu.nl/sites/default/files/UU-EDI-Strategy-and-Action-Plan.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.uu.nl/en/education/educational-vision/the-educational-model>.

sity. In what follows we will be referring to the process and outcomes of these two projects.

*The Inclusive Curriculum Project and Learning Environment Project (2020-2023)*

The *Inclusive Curriculum and Learning Environment Project* aimed to advance UU's EDI goals by providing concrete strategies for lecturers to implement inclusive pedagogies in their classrooms: the Curriculum Reflection Tool and the Inclusive Teaching Toolbox.

*Development of the Curriculum Reflection Tool*

The tool supports lecturers to assess the inclusivity of their courses and identify areas for improvement. It is not an evaluation tool but a resource to guide discussions on making courses more inclusive.

There are three versions of the reflection tool: (1) the programme, (2) the teacher, and (3) the student. The tools are available in Dutch and English and can be accessed<sup>4</sup> by UU staff and external users. The teacher version<sup>5</sup> (the focus of this chapter) can be used by individual teachers or course coordinators or by the teaching team to reflect on the inclusiveness and diversity within the course. Experiences from teachers show that filling out the reflection tool is most useful when it serves as a starting point for discussion. For instance, teachers fill in the reflection tool to focus on teaching materials, assessment criteria or other aspects they wish to improve about their course or programme. Besides teachers, students may fill out the student version of the tool to further aid the reflection on the course. The programme level curriculum reflection tool is usually filled out by programme directors.

The tool consists of *five key curriculum categories* inspired by Van den Akker's curricular spiderweb: learning objectives, teaching and learning activities, learning materials, assessment, and role of the teacher. Questions are rated on a four-point scale, encouraging self-reflection rather than aiming for a perfect score. Based on feedback from pilot sessions with lecturers and students, the tool was refined to include concrete examples, clearer statements, and optional sections to allow flexibility

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.uu.nl/en/education/inclusive-curriculum-and-learning-environment/tools/curriculum-reflection-tools>.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.uu.nl/sites/default/files/Manual-Reflection-Tools.pdf>.

in focus areas. Input from students and educators shaped the tool development. Focus groups with students from three faculties highlighted a lack of diversity in the curriculum and the impact of unintentional stereotypes. Students emphasized that lecturers should take the lead in fostering inclusivity. A pilot study with lecturers showed that the tool effectively encouraged reflection on diversity and inclusion. However, lecturers needed more guidance on certain statements. In response, the tool was refined with clearer phrasing, student examples, and optional sections to allow flexibility.

### *Development of the Inclusive Teaching Toolbox*

The toolbox addresses a range of topics related to diversity and inclusivity in higher education, organised according to the five categories that are also included in the reflection tool. Within these areas, topics were selected based on issues that most frequently arose in focus groups with students, discussions with lecturers, and in the literature.

For each topic, relevant examples and (practice-oriented) literature were collected:

- *The classroom examples and quotes* were primarily based on focus groups with students, discussions with lecturers, and literature on the subject. These examples have sometimes been slightly adjusted to ensure anonymity and/or simplified for readability.
- *Basic literature* was selected and combined relevant information per topic. A Master's student in Educational Sciences interned at UU to update the literature and tools.

Analytics from 2024 show that monthly page views increased from approximately 3,500 to 7,500 views, marking a 120% growth over 12 months. This shows that the tools attracted increasing interest from UU staff and possibly beyond. It may also reflect the increased visibility of the tools during their consolidation.

Concerning international reach, while the tool seemed to be initially serving primarily local users, international visitors accounted for around 40% of the viewers in 2025. The most visited section, besides the home page was “teaching and learning activities” (504 visitors), followed by “learning materials” (279 visitors), “role of the teacher” (265), “assess-

ment” (169) and “learning objectives” (166). Visitors were more interested in the subtopics “creating a safe and positive classroom environment” (208), “trigger warnings” (227), “inclusive language” (200), “diversity of learning materials” (213) and “handling micro-aggressions in the classroom” (147).

### *Cross-University Feedback*

Within the *Pedagogical Sciences* Programme at UU, the reflection tools were used to determine available starting points to strengthen the diversity and inclusion of courses, teachers and the entire curriculum. In several compulsory courses, teachers and/or students completed the reflection tools (course and student versions, respectively) and discussed the results. This led to meaningful insights, for example that there was still room for improvement in the diversity of the examples in case studies, but also that students experience our lecturers as sensitive and respectful. The project team also organized joint sessions during which teachers explored the Inclusive Teaching Toolbox to examine the strategies, guidelines and tips provided in the toolbox and, if possible, to apply these to their own education. The general conclusion was that, from the perspective of the Pedagogical Sciences programme, it would be particularly useful if both the Reflection Tool and the Inclusive Teaching Toolbox continued to be supported.

Within the *Humanities*, the tools have been popularized as part of teaching innovation presentations, as items or training sessions of annual BA and MA program coordinators’ meetings and workshops, with the result that, at the time of writing, individual teachers were interacting with them on an *ad-libitum* basis. The History, Art History and Media and Culture Studies Departments hosted such sessions with the explicit goal of achieving an inclusive curriculum, which was a point of action in their departmental strategic plans. Given the existing work pressure and the strictures of curricular structure, no mandatory form of embedding was adopted for using these tools and the initiative for their implementation was left up to teachers’ good citizenship, desire and availability for absorbing pedagogical innovation.

At the *Faculty of Law, Economics and Administration*, a dozen workshops were delivered to raise awareness and provide tips for teachers on how to address inclusivity in their curriculum. However, even this phase

was a challenge, as teachers had many demands on their time. One approach they adopted was to find structural mechanisms tailored to each department in which to embed attention to inclusivity. For example, in Economics they approached this via the annual course audit procedure, and in Law via learning objectives and student evaluations.

Pilot questions on curriculum inclusivity were developed for Caracal, UU's student feedback portal, to help teachers receive regular input on inclusive teaching. Initially tested in a small number of courses at the Law Faculty, the questions were revised with faculty policy advisers and successfully piloted in eight courses in 2024/2025. The pilot was expanding at the time of writing to additional programmes and larger bachelor courses. The questions became available on Caracal but must be manually selected by teachers. If the extended pilot proves successful, they may become part of the standard feedback asked of all students. Additionally, the Inclusive Teaching Tools are embedded in the mandatory modules that all teachers must complete as part of the University Teaching Qualification (UTQ) at Utrecht University.

During a strategy day at the *Faculty of Medicine*, the Reflection Tool was used in a World Café session to encourage discussion on diversity and inclusion in the work and learning environment. In a final plenary session, groups shared takeaways and prioritized three concrete follow-up actions, such as improving team diversity by reviewing job vacancy texts. This interactive format helped pinpoint practical steps for enhancing diversity and inclusion in everyday work.

### *Structural Adoption of the Inclusive Curriculum Tools*

In 2023/2024, a second consolidation project was launched to ensure the long-term adoption and upkeep of the Inclusive Curriculum Tools at UU, preventing them from becoming obsolete. The project addressed: the need for ongoing maintenance of the Teaching Toolbox and the automatization of the Curriculum Reflection Tool<sup>6</sup>. The project followed three key phases: (1) identifying stakeholders among academic staff, leadership, and policy makers who could take ownership of the tools;

<sup>6</sup> The Consolidation Project of the Inclusive Curriculum Tools involved consulting all relevant stakeholders such as Directors of Education, program coordinators, support staff, to develop a maintenance plan for the tools. Both tools require a designated person for coordination, update and further development. In the case of the Reflection Tool, this also includes supervising the automation process, so that access requests can be handled automatically rather than manually.

(2) defining the work packages needed for continued development and implementation; and (3) engaging with the Centre for Academic Teaching and Learning (CAT) at UU as the most likely and most qualified potential “owner” of the tools. Important stakeholders, including the Head of Education, actively supported the embedding and continuation of the Inclusive Curriculum Tools, recognising their value in facilitating the implementation of UU’s new educational model.

### **Challenges and Opportunities to Embed EDI in the Curriculum**

At the time of writing, both universities were in the process of institutionally embedding inclusivity into teaching, learning and assessment and into the wider fabric of education. This section expands upon the two cases presented with a brief analysis of the cross-cutting challenges of embedding EDI into the curriculum and identifies opportunities to further develop this work in the future. The challenges are presented separately but are intricately related.

1. *Limited reach of the inclusive curriculum projects within the university.* The optional adoption of inclusive practices has limited the scope for mainstreaming them across the curriculum, resulting in heterogeneous implementation of the inclusive practices across faculties, schools, and departments. Limited adoption has been often exacerbated by pressing demands on academics and teaching support staff who experienced increasingly higher workloads within set work schedules, leaving staff motivated towards inclusion to champion these initiatives. This limited reach manifests a disconnect between the strategic university goals of implementing an inclusive curriculum and inclusion work on the ground.

2. *Shifting ownership and leadership of the projects.* Changes in the ownership and leadership of the inclusive curriculum projects have been evident at both universities, with both projects now moving to the respective university centres for Academic Teaching and Learning under the leadership of Deans of studies and/or EDI. Transferring inclusive curriculum projects between units has disrupted their development, implementation, and the upkeep of tools and resources, affecting the continuity of project activities and the involvement of key personnel—both internal team members and university inclusion champions. Trinity’s inclusive curriculum started as a collaboration between Academic Practice

and disAbility services in 2008, a new version was based in the EDI office in 2020, and at the time of writing, it is transitioning to Teaching and Learning. The Inclusive Teaching Tools at UU were developed through a three-year funding project by educational scientists with funding by the Utrecht Education Incentive fund and after a second project of consolidation, they are being partly adopted by the Centre for Academic Teaching and Learning.

3. *Short term funding has limited the continuity of staff and projects.* While university long term goals of inclusion and diversity are enshrined in strategies and plans, both projects have been funded through short term schemes. Lack of long-term financial commitments to inclusive curriculum projects has limited the scope for growth within the universities. In addition, foreseen drastic financial cuts are likely to cripple EDI initiatives if long-term financial commitments are not established. At UU, the tools have been offered university-wide to support faculties and programmes in implementing the EDI component of the new educational model. This is a promising step forward in ensuring the sustainability and relevance of the tools. However, explicit support—such as from diversity experts—still needs to be integrated into existing structures, as no extra financial resources are expected to be available.

4. *Limited research and evaluation on the dynamic nature of diversity and inclusion.* The nature of diversity is dynamic and inclusion strategies to enable equity in the experience of higher education requires continuous evaluation of project activities, outcomes and impact, cross-sectional as well as longitudinal research to shed light on inclusion trends and underlying issues that create social inequality (Cyr). Trinity's first evaluation of the inclusive curriculum project took place in its fourth year and the inclusive teaching tools have not been systematically evaluated at UU. While there is a lack of empirical evidence on the impact of an inclusive curriculum on staff and students in the wider literature, lack of data on the projects has limited opportunities to make adjustments and improvements as the projects develop.

This analysis also sheds light into the opportunities to develop a curriculum that embeds EDI. There is evidence of commitment towards EDI at both university leadership level (i.e., through strategies and plans) and ground level (i.e., inclusion champions, faculty and school local projects), structures are in place (i.e., inclusive practices module, inclusive teaching tools) and projects have been implemented and started to be evaluated.

Teaching and learning centres seem to be ideal to embed inclusive curriculum knowledge and skills into standard training for all staff, moving inclusion from the EDI remit into the core of teaching and learning practice. Communities of inclusive practice, involving staff and students, have been created at both universities that can be leveraged to support and facilitate the next phase of mainstreaming. Long term funding commitments for these projects should be aligned with the strategic goals of the university. As leading research universities, research should be supported to advance equality, diversity and inclusion in the curriculum—both through practical approaches and by engaging with deeper social justice issues.

## **Conclusion**

While the EDI agenda is widely recognised in third level education in European universities, its incursion into the curriculum has not yet been consolidated. In this chapter, we have argued that curricula that responds to the increasing diversity of the student population through inclusive approaches has the potential to promote equity among the student population. Inclusive curricula not only help policy ambitions but also have the potential to enrich all students' educational experiences and capacity to live in a global world as well as teachers' pedagogical approaches.

To address the scarce evidence in the literature in this area, we have examined two approaches to develop inclusive curricula. Both projects have been successful raising awareness about diversity, developing inclusion strategies and tools relevant to their respective contexts, and creating inclusive education exemplars and communities of practice. Common challenges have also been identified to the implementation and long-term adoption of these initiatives: limited reach among staff due to optional adoption of inclusive curriculum practices, shifting ownership and leadership, short-term funding and limited research and evaluation. As both universities are transitioning into mainstreaming their inclusive curricula, the identified challenges need to be recognised in tandem with the opportunities to advance universities' curricula that embeds EDI.

Despite the differences, the approaches to inclusive curricula presented in this chapter could work complementarily. Universities could build on their successes supporting staff and learning from the limitations experienced, engaging in periodic reflection on lessons and challenges with other universities and sharing resources among them, such as the

UU inclusive teaching tools and the Trinity-INC inclusive practices module. An established network such as the Coimbra Group could provide a working platform for the continued development of inclusive curriculum initiatives, which are still incipient but promising to meet the EDI ambitions of European universities.

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*EQU(AL)ITY, DIVERSITY, AND INCLUSION IN HIGHER  
EDUCATION: TEACHING GENDERS, KNOWLEDGE,  
AND SOCIAL JUSTICE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF PADUA*

ANNALISA OBOE, CHIARA XAUSA

In recent years, the field of gender studies in Italy has seen both significant progress and considerable obstacles, mirroring broader social, cultural, and political changes that have influenced academic thought as much as public discourse. The introduction of a general course titled *Genders, Knowledge, and Social Justice* (GKSJ) at the University of Padua in the academic year 2020-21 represents a pioneering initiative aimed at filling a gap in university curriculum programmes, by offering a transdisciplinary framework that not only presents theoretical insights but also focuses on the practical applications of gender analysis in contemporary society. From the very beginning, GKSJ's innovative project has proven to be extremely powerful and resilient, considering that it has developed against an institutional backdrop where gender studies have traditionally struggled for institutional recognition, and have lived on the margins of academia despite their crucial role in addressing social inequalities. In what follows, we provide a description of the cultural contexts in which the course was conceived, its impact and institutional reception, and its potential as a best practice model. We also explore opportunities for its replication across Coimbra Group universities and European Universities Alliances – reinforcing the importance of transdisciplinary education in advancing equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) within European higher education institutions.

The integration of gender studies into Italian higher education has long been hindered by a lack of institutionalisation and a reluctance to embrace paradigmatic shifts that challenge traditional notions of knowledge. In recent years, these tensions have intensified, with an increasing backlash against gender studies and equality discourse across the nation, and many far-right leaders arguing that the focus on gender and equal-

ity issues is not only ideologically driven but also divisive. If this pattern is indicative of a broader trend across Europe (Apperly 2019), Donald Trump's recent erasure of EDI initiatives and discourses in the United States further underscores a broader global shift away from progressive changes in education (Mahdawi 2025), highlighting the growing challenges faced by efforts to integrate diverse perspectives into mainstream academic discourse.

Italian journalist Annalisa Camilli's article for the weekly magazine *Internazionale* (April 1, 2024)<sup>1</sup> offers a compelling analysis of the ongoing debate around feminist and gender studies in Italian universities, showing how these discussions are deeply intertwined with broader cultural and political tensions. Camilli highlights the persistent scarcity of dedicated feminist and gender studies programs, despite significant global progress in these fields. While scholars like Italo-Australian philosopher Rosi Braidotti played a pivotal role in establishing women's studies internationally - most notably at Utrecht University in the mid-1990s - Italy has struggled to achieve comparable integration. Although prominent feminist theorists such as Adriana Cavarero and Luisa Muraro have made substantial contributions within philosophy departments, their work has not led to the widespread inclusion of feminist and gender studies in academic curricula.

One of the key obstacles is the rigid structure of the Italian university system: academic programs are required to fit into a set of fixed scientific-disciplinary categories established by the Ministry of Education, which does not recognise feminist or gender studies as an independent scientific field of investigation and knowledge production. With 370 recognised disciplinary fields divided into 14 disciplinary areas, this bureaucratic framework makes it difficult to create dedicated programmes in feminist and gender studies. As a result, scholars in these fields must operate within pre-existing disciplines, often limiting the scope and institutional support for their research. The marginalisation of gender studies is also part of a larger pattern of academic exclusion: many scholars working on feminist and gender-related topics remain outside of permanent faculty structures and lack formal recognition within the academic system. Despite the identification of approximately a thousand scholars across Italy engaged in these areas, their contributions are often ignored or un-

<sup>1</sup> Annalisa Camilli is an Italian journalist, specialized in reportage and investigation, immigration, humanitarian crises, and gender policies.

derappreciated. These systemic barriers not only hinder the development of gender studies programmes but also contribute to broader gender inequalities within Italian higher education.

A pilot report on gender, intersex, feminist, and transfeminist studies in Italy, published in 2022 by the GIFTS network – a Gender, Intersex, Feminist, Trans-feminist and Sexuality studies network established at the University of Verona in June 2018, during a congress on gender and sexuality studies in Italian universities – reveals the fragmented state of these fields across the country. The report identifies 63 entities involved in this area, including research centres, academic programmes, associations, and scientific journals, and highlights that GIFTS network activities are primarily concentrated in major urban centres such as Milan, Rome, and Naples, with a particularly strong presence in northern Italy. Similar to Camilli's article, the GIFTS report also points out that these fields lack formal recognition within the Italian academic system and are instead dispersed across various disciplines. This lack of institutional recognition creates significant barriers for researchers, making career progression and institutional acknowledgment more challenging. Additionally, the strict framework of the Italian university system limits opportunities for scholars pursuing interdisciplinary research.

Nevertheless, student interest in gender studies is visibly and steadily growing, with many actively seeking courses and thesis topics that address the time and the society they live in. In response to this increasing demand, the University of Bari recently launched a national PhD program in Gender Studies, which marks a significant step forward, at least in and for academic institutions. Beyond the academic sphere, however, the backlash against gender studies in Italy increasingly reflects wider societal anxieties over cultural change.

In this climate, the University of Padua's general course emerges as an educational model built on inclusivity, critical thinking, and social responsibility. By exposing students to a diverse range of disciplinary perspectives, GKSJ allows participants to engage with complex social, cultural, scientific issues in a multifaceted and informed manner. The course design combines strong theoretical frameworks with real-world analyses of the category of gender across multiple domains, such as knowledge, power, work, health, money, time, and space, providing a thorough approach to understanding the workings of contemporary society. GKSJ underscores the significance of EDI in higher education, not

only by responding critically to the historical neglect of gender studies, but also by setting a precedent for future curricular innovations, in Italy and abroad.

### **Genders, Knowledge and Social Justice**

Education is a necessary answer to our unequal world, if we want to create an informed critical attitude, produce awareness of the impact that gender issues have in the different areas and moments of people's lives, and promote a change of perspective that is essential to building a society that we want to be more equal and inclusive. GKSJ is a general course for students of all undergraduate and graduate degree courses at the University of Padua, that may be attended also by the administrative staff. By 'general course' we mean an educational initiative that exceeds the boundaries of specific subjects and of three-year or master's degree courses, and is meant to open up pathways of knowledge in disciplinary fields other than those provided for within them. They are also aimed at acquiring transversal skills and delving into scientific-cultural aspects that concern us closely, and that contribute to widening our horizons.

The project of a major formative intervention for students and administrative staff of the University of Padova started in 2016, when academics from different departments, who were producing relevant research and educational activities in the area of gender studies, were called to gather around a table to share experiences and views, in the context of a policy of gender mainstreaming promoted by the university governance. The ensuing dialogue acknowledged the wealth of research and commitment that women scholars had produced starting from the late 1970s, but revealed historical discontinuities, a substantial fragmentation within the field, and the isolation of university researchers working on what was long considered a 'marginal' subject.<sup>2</sup> Developed within the

<sup>2</sup> The end of the effervescent period of 'historical feminism' in Italy (1970s-1980s) was followed by a 'softer' kind of feminism in the early 1990s, which in turn gave way to a real caesura in time and vision with the onset of the Berlusconi era (1994-2014). Over the next two decades, a critique of the excesses of feminist movements and a sort of amnesia in Italian civil society silenced that season of empowerment. Historical and cultural revisionism drew attention to the errors and failures of feminism, and contributed to the fading and forgetting – together with the words 'feminism' and 'feminist' – of one of the greatest revolutions of the 20th century. In Italian culture, the struggles for the vindication of rights and the powerful birth of a public discourse that revolutionised the place of women in history and society, were sidelined. It was against this backdrop of oblivion that the

context of Cultural studies and in dialogue with Women's studies as well as Sexuality, Queer and Feminist studies, Gender studies in Italy have been prevalent in Sociology, Modern Languages and Literatures (especially English) and History. These were the disciplinary areas in which the academics who gathered in Padova in 2016 were mostly engaged.

Over the following two years the working group developed an intersectional and transdisciplinary approach to gender-related research and teaching activities that aimed at including not only the Humanities and Social Sciences, but also the Natural Sciences and the Life Sciences. This inclusive evolution in approach and commitment was welcomed by the ELENA CORNARO UNIVERSITY CENTRE FOR GENDER KNOWLEDGE, CULTURES AND POLICIES – the first of its kind in Italy promoting the interaction of socio-political and humanistic knowledge with scientific knowledge, technology and medicine – and was supported by the governance of the University of Padova's political will to turn the institution into a fairer and more inclusive place of learning. The GKSJ project thus became the first educational initiative of the Elena Cornaro Centre and marked a longstanding cultural shift in the work of both teaching staff and students.

Today the course is one of the most important positive actions supported by the University of Padua, aimed at fighting gender-related discrimination and promoting equal opportunities between women and men: two issues of no small importance, to be addressed with urgency and conviction, in the context of a vision of social justice that concerns not only all of us, here and now, but also the next generations. Social justice in relation to gender involves creating a society where individuals are treated equitably regardless of their gender. It means addressing and dismantling the systemic barriers, stereotypes, and power imbalances that have historically privileged certain genders over others.

The main structure of the course consists of two teaching blocks: the first includes introductory teaching modules aimed at framing the conceptual and theoretical orientation and the transdisciplinary dimensions of studies that take gender as a privileged point of view for the analysis and production of knowledge. The second teaching block analyses the relationships between genders in seven domains, to investigate how gen-

recovery of the word 'feminist' in the 21st century revealed the need for its reawakening, also thanks to the growth of Gender studies as a productive field of inquiry.

der enters and inflects the spheres of knowledge, power, work, health, money, time and space.<sup>3</sup>

Hence, this general course deals not only with historical, theoretical-philosophical, or epistemic research on the specific differences in how we approach the world and the construction of knowledge (i.e. gender studies as a category of analysis), but also and in a very concrete way, it addresses the persistent imbalances in the access to and enjoyment of rights, which still exist between women and men, as well as in the experience of those who do not recognize themselves in the binary system of female and male. For this reason, we look at the social, political, economic and psychological motives that prevent the full realization of the subject – in other words, we probe those preclusions that exist but remain invisible until we bump into them (e.g. Glass ceiling).

GKSJ therefore talks about equ(al)ity and difference: the first understood as equal rights and enjoyment of rights, as equal opportunities; the second as a perspective that is rooted in the valorisation of a gendered view of the world – a partial perspective, which does not intend to produce a single narrative of universal knowledge, but a knowledge that gains awareness and opens up to new dynamics in relationships, including power relations, precisely thanks to its observational partiality. Donna Haraway, a highly authoritative American philosopher who has long studied the relationship between science and gender identity, reminds us that, even in science, “the only way to find a larger vision is to be somewhere in particular.”<sup>4</sup> The course proposes this type of work and vision, starting from *situated knowledge*: each teaching module uses different scientific and disciplinary languages to make visible the interconnections and the complexity of the cultural and social construction of genders, in the contexts in which people live, move, and act.

The first edition of the GKSJ was inaugurated in March 2021, in pandemic times, when Covid-19 continued to powerfully influence the lives of everyone, even as regards the topics dealt with in the course. As teachers and students, we were experiencing a momentous crisis, but we

<sup>3</sup> The first six domains coincide with the constitutive areas analysed by the **Gender Equality Index**, created and monitored by the European Union’s Knowledge Centre on Gender Equality (EIGE). GKSJ has added ‘space’ to the six original domains, and focuses also on gender-based violence and intersecting inequalities, which EIGE’s *Gender Equality Index 2024: Sustaining momentum on a fragile path* has appropriately included.

<sup>4</sup> Donna Haraway, *Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective*, 1988.

decided to give a chance to our new project by operating in a blended learning mode, with some activities on the Moodle platform. The in-person classes were held by teachers and experts, and included moments of debate and laboratory activities. The online activities mostly delved into the educational aspects of the covered topics through the lens of gender, discussed the non-neutrality of knowledge and its transmission, and promoted a culture of respect for differences.

Times of crisis can shake an institution, a culture, or a society at its foundations. Responding to the critical moment, the GKSJ teaching staff opened a public space of discourse – cultural, scientific, political – in which new questions would be asked, urgent issues addressed and fresh answers provided. Given the high number of students who freely decided to attend, and the commitment of over twenty teachers over a forty two-hour experimental syllabus, the course proved a groundbreaking experience for all, allowing the initiative to live successfully through the following years.

### **The Course Design**

GKSJ offers a comprehensive exploration of gender as a critical lens through which to understand contemporary society. It engages students in a reflection on how gender shapes power dynamics, social relations, cultural practices, institutional frameworks, and knowledge production. Grounded in feminist, queer, and intersectional theories, it aims to equip participants with analytical tools to recognize, question, and address systemic inequalities. The course opens with foundational concepts, examining how gendered stereotypes and representations are formed and reproduced in everyday language and media. It emphasizes the importance of participatory and interactive pedagogical methods, encouraging students to reflect on their own perspectives and positionalities.

From this base, the syllabus moves into a historical dimension, mapping the evolution of gender roles from ancient times and the medieval period through modern revolutions and the developments of industrial society to late modernity, highlighting key moments of transformation and resistance, including the legal status of women and shifting domestic/public spheres. Time is then devoted to the plurality of gender experiences by introducing queer theory and the concept of intersectionality.

Students critically examine how gender interacts with race, class, sexuality, and other axes of identity to produce complex experiences of privilege and marginalization. Drawing on thinkers such as Judith Butler, bell hooks, Kimberlé Crenshaw and Patricia Hill Collins,<sup>5</sup> these sessions unpack how identities are not fixed but socially constructed and politically charged.

A key part of the course focuses on power and knowledge: how epistemologies, sciences, and technologies are or should be themselves gendered. This includes an investigation of the male-dominated foundations of traditional knowledge systems and the emergence of feminist and inclusive approaches in fields like STEM and AI. Relatedly, the syllabus interrogates gender and political representation, problematizing both underrepresentation and tokenism in democratic systems, and asking what true inclusion might look like. The media's role in producing and challenging gender norms is another major theme, exploring how both traditional and digital media shape perceptions of power and gender, affect access to leadership roles, and contribute to phenomena such as online abuse. These issues are then linked to structural concerns in the labour market, from the invisibility of unpaid care work to occupational segregation and workplace harassment. National and international legal tools, such as ILO Convention No. 190, are studied as frameworks for intervention. The course continues with a critical look at economics, questioning the gender neutrality of public budgets and highlighting feminist economic theories that focus on care work and embodied labour. Cross-cutting themes are the management and experience of time and space. The gendered distribution of time between paid labour, care duties, and personal life, alongside the effects of job precarity and demographic shifts is analysed, while multiple spatial inequalities are investigated, from personal space and urban planning to environmental sustainability and the call to 'decolonize' space. Health and medicine are also reconsidered through a gender lens, with a focus on how sex and gender influence medical research, diagnostics, and treatment. The intersection between engineering and gender-specific medicine is presented as a promising frontier for innovation and inclusivity.

The final module situates all of these discussions within institutional frameworks, reviewing European and international commitments to

<sup>5</sup> See Works Cited.

gender equality. It invites students to evaluate the effectiveness of gender mainstreaming, policy instruments, and monitoring tools, such as the Gender Equality Index, while also considering local practices in contexts like Padua and the Veneto region. Throughout, the course maintains a dual focus: to understand the mechanisms of gender inequ(al)ity and to imagine and support pathways toward inclusive and sustainable societies. Students are encouraged not only to analyse structures but also to envision alternatives, rooted in care, equity, and transformation.

The use of innovative, participatory teaching methods is key to the pedagogical aims of the course. We employed a range of participatory teaching methods – both digital and in-person – to engage students in collaborative learning. As for interactive technologies, we integrated Wooclap, a platform that allows instructors to pose real-time polls, quizzes, and word-cloud questions at the beginning, midpoint, and close of each lecture; students submit responses anonymously via their smartphones or laptops, and the aggregated results appear instantly on screen, stimulating discussion and formative feedback. We also used Padlet as a shared online bulletin board for collective brainstorming and resource curation, as well as Moodle’s built-in forum to sustain asynchronous dialogue around key course themes. Complementing these digital tools, in the first two years the final exam took the form of small-group projects presented at a dedicated end-of-course symposium, thereby fostering teamwork and peer evaluation. In the third year, each student assembled a reflective portfolio that wove together insights from every session, creating a unifying *fil rouge* across the curriculum. Finally, in the fourth year we redesigned lectures into shorter units capped by a group activity or plenary discussion - for example, in the session on how traditional and digital media frame gender, we asked groups of students to select a single media artifact (an article, film clip, social-media post, advertisement, influencer content, or similar) addressing topics such as gender-based violence, LGBTQ+ representation, pinkwashing or rainbow-washing,<sup>6</sup> or online sexual practices, and collaboratively re-write or re-frame that artifact to explore alternative, equity-centered narratives.

<sup>6</sup> Pinkwashing, also known as rainbow-washing, is the strategy of deploying messages that are superficially sympathetic towards the LGBTQ+ community for ends having little or nothing to do with equality or inclusion.

## The Syllabus

Through multi-voiced lectures, case studies and participatory workshops, students are invited to collectively learn, discuss, and contribute to the following 12-week transdisciplinary journey:

1. **Foundations & Stereotypes** Introduce core concepts (stereotype, representation) and engage with innovative, collaborative teaching technologies.
2. **Historical narratives** Trace gender roles from the Early Middle Ages through revolutions and the rise of “separate spheres” in modern times, examining legal reforms (e.g. dowry) and female agency.
3. **Gender Cultures & Queer Theory** Survey philosophical paradigms (from Hesiod to Immanuel Kant) alongside first-person writings (from Mary Wollstonecraft to Judith Butler) and critical queer readings of power in society.
4. **Intersectionality** Chart the evolution of intersectional analysis—from Sojourner Truth through to Kimberlé Crenshaw—to unpack how overlapping identities (race, class, gender) shape experience.
5. **Knowledge & Power** Critique of “neutral” knowledges via Michel Foucault, Stuart Hall, Gayatri Spivak; explore feminist epistemology, gendered Innovations in science, and bias in AI.
6. **Political Representation** Debate the persistent under-representation of women and other social groups; analyse how women and men in positions of power are represented; ask what genuine change in democracy would look like.
7. **Media & Language** Analyse how traditional and digital media frame gender, from managerial roles to online abuse, and strategise inclusive communication.
8. **Work & Economy** Examine paid/unpaid labour, occupational segregation, ILO Convention No. 190 on harassment, and the economics of care, with a spotlight on STEM careers.
9. **Health & Engineering** Present ‘gender-specific medicine’ foundations, sex differences in cardiology, and engineering models that incorporate gendered innovations.
10. **Money & Budgeting** Unpack feminist economic theory and gender-responsive budgeting (including university case studies) as tools for equity.

11. **Time & Space** Explore work–life balance, flexible policies, temporal inequality; and spatial stereotypes, from personal territory to environmental sustainability and indigenous women’s land struggles.
12. **Institutions & Policy** Map European and global gender-equality frameworks (EIGE Index, SDG 5), evaluate tools and best practices, and reflect on regional experiences in Padua and the Veneto region.

### **Intersections with the 2030 AGENDA FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**

GKSJ aligns with several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the UNITED NATIONS 2030 AGENDA, foregrounding gender equality as a cross-cutting issue that shapes global sustainability, equity, and justice. Through its multidisciplinary intersectional approach, the course profitably engages with a number of the proposed goals.

First of all, GKSJ provides inclusive and equitable education by offering a gender-aware curriculum that challenges dominant knowledge frameworks. At the same time, it fosters critical thinking about the gendered dimensions of curricula, especially in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics), and encourages reflective learning for social transformation (SDG 4 – Quality Education). At its core, the course directly addresses gender issues by interrogating the persistent structural inequalities, gender-based violence, and institutional barriers that affect women and marginalized gender identities (SDG 5 – Gender Equality). Moreover, by scrutinising how intersecting forms of discrimination (due to, *inter alia*, gender, race, class, sexual orientation, education) shape access to resources, rights, and representation, GKSJ aims to provide tools for understanding and reducing systemic inequalities within and among societies (SDG 10 – Reduced Inequalities).

Attention to physical, psychological, socio-economic and environmental wellbeing is present in teaching modules dealing with health, the distribution of labour and ecological issues from a gendered perspective. GKSJ invokes a more equitable approach to health and healthcare through gender-specific medicine, underlining how sex and gender differences are essential in diagnosing and treating diseases, and how neglecting these differences perpetuates health disparities (SDG 3 – Good Health and Well-being). Traditional economic paradigms and unequal-

ities are also questioned, as they negatively affect the life of both individuals and communities. The issue of unpaid labour and gender pay-gap are thus addressed, and gender-responsive economic policies, such as gender budgeting, highlighted (SDG 8 – Decent Work and Economic Growth). As the spaces and environments in which people (of all genders) live influence their health and wellbeing, GKSJ explores through the lens of gendered spatial practices, environmental justice and waste management, the ways in which women, particularly in marginalized communities, are agents of sustainable urban transformation. It also supports gender-sensitive urban planning and community-based sustainability (SDG 11 – Sustainable Cities and Communities).

The module on institutions for equal opportunities looks at international, European, and local frameworks in view of promoting gender equality and equal opportunities. By assessing policies and legal instruments, students are encouraged to envision and contribute to transparent, accountable, and inclusive institutions (SDG 16 – Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions). The course models intersectoral cooperation, academic-practitioner dialogue, and global-local linkages, especially in interventions that explore international case studies, grassroots feminist resistance, and the role of civil society in policy monitoring and implementation (SDG 17 – Partnerships for the Goals).

As this brief survey shows, GKSJ clearly embodies the 2030 Agenda's overarching commitment to 'Leave No One Behind' by focusing on invisibility, marginalization, and the redistribution of power in all spheres of life. We believe that the transdisciplinary thinking and learning offered by the course are key in the process of achieving the SDGs in a holistic and impactful manner.

## **Challenges and Achievements**

So far GKSJ has proved to be a successful collective endeavour for both staff and students. The commitment of researches and professors has hardly wavered over the years, if anything it has increased, specifically in leading a broader movement towards knowledge renewal and transdisciplinarity.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Teaching has a transdisciplinary approach and relies on the close collaboration of faculty members from the departments of Historical, Geographical and Ancient Sciences (DISSGEA), Language and

The renewal mostly stems from and is an answer to the needs and questions of our students (from a variety of BA and MA courses), which change as times change, and pose new challenges. For example, the initial focus on women has been tempered and interwoven with attention to all genders, and a focus on men and masculinities has also become urgent. Students in class react to the proposed topics intellectually, critically, curiously, but above all personally: they are there to learn how to negotiate a borderline between getting to know the world and getting to know themselves. That they actively embrace the situated perspective the course encourages, and then follow their own experimental pathways, is visible in the work they produce during and at the end of the course, as a final test practice.

The diversity of student deliverables vividly illustrates how course learning objectives translate into creative, practice-oriented outcomes. For instance, one team authored a comprehensive peer-to-peer guide for undergraduates that addresses identity, sexual orientation, pleasure, prevention, and consent through thematic group activities. Another group devised GenerAzione, a team-based game prompting players to engage with digital media, violence, gender and sexuality, language, and culture - thereby fostering dynamic, active learning around topics often deemed 'taboo'. A third group produced a digital handbook of "Practical Tips for Intersectional Film and Television Production," denouncing the absence of intersectionality in standard vocabularies and proposing concrete strategies to eliminate stereotypical, racist, homophobic, transphobic, ableist, classist, and Islamophobic tropes. Similarly, a team created a series of short YouTube videos exploring how women and LGBTQ+ communities are represented on Netflix, as well as unpacking ageism and Islamophobia in digital and popular culture. In parallel, one project examined gender bias in artificial intelligence, reflecting on AI's ethical dimensions and the persistence of human prejudices in algorithmic decision-making. Educators were also a focus: another team created a teaching guide for instructors to explore consent, sexuality, and gender identity in media, complete with crossword puzzles and branching-narrative

Literary Studies (DISLL), Philosophy, Sociology, Pedagogy and Applied Psychology (FISPPA), Developmental and Socialization Psychology (DPSS), Political Science, Law and International Studies (SPGI), Economic and Business Sciences "Marco Fanno" (DSEA), Information Engineering (DEI), Civil, Construction and Environmental Engineering (DICEA), Mathematics (DM), Cardio-thoracic-vascular sciences and public health (DSCTV).

case studies. Finally, students produced an informational campaign addressing male violence against women and even developed a Wikipedia entry to counteract the threat of gender stereotyping online. Together, these varied outputs demonstrate not only mastery of theoretical concepts but also a commitment to applying critical frameworks in tangible, socially engaged formats. We invite our readers to browse through the kinds of works produced in different years, which are online and can be found at this [link](#).

### **A Replicable EDI Pedagogical Experience?**

The course was originally conceived for Italian students and has so far been held in Italian. However, our classes are becoming more and more international, and the idea of using English as the course's lingua franca is becoming a real possibility, that would welcome cultural diversity and enrich both local and global participants. The use of English would also allow GKSJ to become a compelling model for replication in different contexts from the original one, and reinforce the broader significance of integrating equ(al)ity, diversity, and inclusion into university life.

We also believe that GKSJ has the potential of serving as a template across other European higher education institutions, within networks such as the Coimbra Group or the European Alliances, in all the different languages of the EU. Starting from the proposed theoretical/cultural framework down to practical activities and methods of assessment, the project would be easily shareable. In particular, GKSJ was conceived as 'international' right from the beginning, is inspired by research that stems from various European institutions, such as EIGE and other research centres, and may serve as a ground of comparison for different national experiences. Of course, contents would have to be adjusted to local cultures and histories, and not all places of higher learning may be able to count on the wealth of knowledge of a 'universalist' institution such as Padova, but GKSJ is firmly grounded in and partly stems from the European vision of EDI: a European platform is a good reason for assuming that GKSJ may turn into a joint pedagogical endeavour in various continental contexts.

In many ways, the present chapter is not only a description and a reflection on what may be done through education to address the ine-

qualities, discriminations, and injustices of our times: it is a call to collaboration, which starts from sharing the GKSJ project and develops as an earnest proposal to all interested scholars, researchers, academics, students to join hands and prove that equ(al)ity, diversity, inclusion and social justice do matter.

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# *THE GENDER PERSPECTIVE IN MEDIA AND INFORMATION SCIENCE: A CASE STUDY FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF BARCELONA*

ANNA VILLARROYA, JUAN JOSÉ BOTÉ-VERICAD, MARIA-JOSÉ MASANET

## **Introduction**

At a time when there is a pressing global need to address gender inequalities in the cultural and creative industries (and particularly in the fields of information and media), the introduction of a gender perspective in study plans has been acclaimed by UNESCO (Conor 35) and other international (Baltà and Marcolin) and national (Barrios and Villarroya 975) organizations as an effective measure to combat discrimination within the sector. Building on this, educational institutions in general and universities in particular are a key setting for expanding opportunities for women and underrepresented groups to participate fully in cultural life. According to the “European Strategy for Universities” issued by the European Commission (2), promoting diversity, inclusiveness, and gender equality in the higher education sector is more critical than ever. The document underscores the active role universities play in preparing graduates to become well-informed and engaged European citizens. Through education and awareness-raising initiatives, universities are key actors in fostering active citizenship, tolerance, equality, diversity, openness, and critical thinking—contributing to greater social cohesion and trust, and ultimately strengthening European democracies.

In line with these statements, Spanish and Catalan laws have established the inclusion of the gender perspective in teaching as a starting point for guaranteeing equality. The Catalan university system agenda and, particularly at the University of Barcelona (UB), which approved its III Equality Plan in 2020, has set up the mandate to mainstream gender into education. In a decentralised academic context as regards equality and diversity issues, in May 2020 the Faculty of Information and Audiovisual Media (FIMA) approved its Action Plan on Gender

Equality, which includes gender perspectives in university teaching as one of the main strategies to be applied in the following two years. To facilitate this, in 2020, the *Gender Perspective in Information and Media Studies (GENDIMS) project* was proposed (Villarroya et al.; Villarroya and Boté-Vericad, 4).

This chapter aims to present the project, its conception, the development of its methodology, its results, and its subsequent impact. For the purposes of this study, gender is conceptualized as a set of socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities, and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for women and men. Gender, therefore, is understood as a learned and socially acquired identity, one that varies significantly both within and across cultures. The acronym LGBTQ refers collectively to lesbian (L), gay (G), bisexual (B), transgender (T), and queer (Q) individuals, with the addition of the “+” symbol encompassing other identities that fall between or outside these categories. Both definitions are drawn from the glossary included in the University of Barcelona’s Third Equality Plan, which seeks to integrate gender and diversity perspectives across institutional policies.

While the plan continues to prioritize gender inequalities, it also introduces a new strategic axis: “Diversity and Intersectionality with Gender.” This axis aims to recognize and address other forms of diversity—whether partially or wholly intersecting with gender—and to provide visibility to the experiences and challenges faced by LGBTQ individuals.

### **What Does Integrating the Gender and LGBTQ Perspectives in University Teaching Mean?**

Integrating the gender perspective, or gender mainstreaming, in teaching is a transversal strategy that implies that the nature and implications of gender are “‘incorporated in the curriculum of all the courses, avoiding a separate treatment as a specific problem within the courses” (Verge and Cabruja 7).

On the one hand, introducing a gender perspective in university teaching means subjecting the different aspects that make up teaching at the university to a reflective analysis that identifies possible gender biases and eliminates them (Mora and Pujal 1); on the other hand, it facilitates students’ ability to problematise the underlying gender norms

in society as well as their intersection with other axes of inequality (e.g.: ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, or functional diversity).

The effectiveness of incorporating a gender perspective in academic courses depends largely on how it is operationalized through specific tasks and teaching activities (Mora and Pujal 1), such as:

- The design of the course, which involves considering the gender perspective in defining competencies, the formative activities designed for their achievement, and in their implementation.
- The development of the contents of the units and/or teaching blocks. That is, the type of examples used, the models and theories that explain the phenomena, the language, the forms of evaluation, and the sources used (also considering the scientific production of women and men).
- The way of relating to students, such as the attention given to them, the composition of work teams, observing who regularly takes notes in these teams or the use of tutorials.

While gender mainstreaming offers long-term benefits for promoting equality, its success relies on a supportive institutional environment (Villarroya and Boté-Vericad). Recent years have seen new developments based on the need for equality policies in universities to adopt an intersectional approach (Mehra 187) and a broad understanding of the sex/gender system that includes LGBTQ-phobic violence and discrimination. Some universities have partly addressed these issues by developing, for example, LGBTQ inclusive approaches into the higher education curriculum (Coll-Planas et al. 7-9).

As part of the implementation of Law 11/2014—which protects the rights of LGBTQ people and aims to eliminate discrimination—the Catalan government supported the creation of a guide to help universities include sexual and gender diversity. The guide identifies teaching as a central area for intervention and outlines a series of recommended actions to embed LGBTQ perspectives in higher education. These include updating academic content to incorporate LGBTQ topics and viewpoints; integrating LGBTQ issues into official teaching materials and study programs; adopting intersectional approaches across curricula; bringing LGBTQ personal narratives into the classroom; and offering targeted training for academic staff on LGBTQ issues and anti-discrimination practices.

The guide also encourages more academic research in related fields—such as queer theory, feminism, masculinity, and sexuality—and calls for more resources and support for inclusive teaching practices.

In light of the above, it follows that incorporating gender and LGBTQ perspectives as transversal competencies within university curricula offers an ethical framework for the future professional practices of graduate students. Furthermore, it fosters heightened sensitivity in their interpersonal relationships and awareness of the discriminatory structures present in society. In sum, this integration contributes to the formation of personal identity, the development of critical thinking, and informed decision-making.

### **Research Design and Methodology**

The GENDIMS project was conceptualized within the framework of REDICE-20 University Teaching Research Program, as a participatory-action-research carried out at the Faculty of Information and Audiovisual Media with a double main objective:

- Provide a baseline understanding by gauging students' and teachers' experiences and positions towards the integration of gender and LGBTQ perspectives in the bachelor's degrees of the FIMA; specifically, in the Audiovisual Communication bachelor's degree (CAV) and the Information Management and Digital Documentation bachelor's degree (GIDD), along with the factors that might influence their levels of comfort and confidence in applying them.
- Promote the incorporation of gender and LGBTQ perspectives in courses through the design and development of teaching instruments and materials together with teachers.

This methodological option was particularly appropriate because it gave a voice to the research participants to understand their own needs, demands and difficulties (related to the object of the research), share them and propose lines of action to address these needs. Therefore, the project was organized into two phases. The first, the diagnostic phase, involved conducting focus groups with both teachers and students to assess the current state of incorporating gender and LGBTQ perspectives

in the two bachelors' degree programs at FIMA. The second, the change planning phase, was based on a participatory creation workshop with teachers, during which specific actions were defined to facilitate the implementation of change.

Given the participatory design, the research had an ethnographic approach that included the participants throughout the process and combined two different qualitative techniques: focus groups and field diaries, to contribute to a better understanding of the research problem.

### ***Sample selection and data gathering***

The selection of the courses involved in the study was carried out considering several criteria: teaching course, semester duration, themes (long tradition in the field or innovative), nature of the contents (theoretical/practical), newly created courses and consolidated courses, among others. It was always ensured that the groups' participation (students and teachers) was diverse in terms of gender. Focus groups were conducted between May and October of 2021 and were only held one time with each group of participants.

Scripts and work guidelines were designed for the focus groups and workshops, which were reviewed and validated by a scientific advisory committee. Although different instruments were designed for students and teachers, both were structured in the same three blocks: a) knowledge; b) experiences; and c) proposals, challenges, advantages, disadvantages and/or difficulties.

For students, the activity began with a participatory activity designed to foster a welcoming and inclusive environment. This was followed by the introduction of three thematic blocks: "Knowledge": to explore participants' understanding of the concepts of gender and LGBTQ perspectives, including the scope and components of these concepts. "Experiences": to delve into participants' experiences with the integration of gender and LGBTQ perspectives within FIMA. "Proposals, challenges, advantages, disadvantages and/or difficulties": to examine students' perceptions of incorporating gender and LGBTQ perspectives, highlighting perceived challenges, advantages, disadvantages, etc.

The faculty groups also followed the same three thematic blocks: "Knowledge": to explore their familiarity with the topic. "Experiences": to delve into the faculty's experience regarding the integration of this

perspective into their own courses. “Proposals, challenges, advantages, disadvantages and/or difficulties”: to examine faculty perspectives on incorporating gender and LGBTQ perspectives into their teaching practice, highlighting challenges, advantages, and disadvantages, as well as identifying examples of good practices within FIMA.

The methodological guides, however, were conceived as flexible documents, with questions that evolved over time.<sup>1</sup>

Focus groups were performed by two researchers; while one acted as moderator, the other took observational notes. The moderator had the function of mediating, guiding, and stimulating the discussion among participants. The other researcher, without intervening in the session, took notes of the opinions that were expressed, making a synthesis that would serve to support the analysis to be done. Both researchers also recorded, just after the session, in field diaries what was perceived to be relevant to the research project, so that there was a record that could be used later in the analysis and writing process.

<b>Diagnostic Phase</b>	2 <i>focus groups</i> Teachers CAV (03/05/2021–17/06/2021) 2 <i>focus groups</i> Teachers GIDD (11/05/2021–11/06/2021) 2 <i>focus groups</i> Students CAV (07/06/2021–18/10/2021) 2 <i>focus groups</i> Students GIDD (21/06/2021–21/10/2021)	6-8 people in each <i>focus group</i> . 6-8 courses CAV, 6-8 courses GIDD 60-90 minutes.
<b>Change Planning Phase</b>	1 creative workshop with teachers CAV & GIDD (03/11/2021)	6 participants 3 hours

Table 1. Sample selection and data gathering

The creative workshop was addressed exclusively to teachers who had participated in the diagnostic phase (focus group) and its objective was to co-design useful instruments in their daily teaching activities. Joint activities and small-group work (in pairs or trios) were proposed with the

<sup>1</sup> Focus groups lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. A total of six hours of interviews were voice recorded with the written permission of participants. The files were then transcribed verbatim into Microsoft Word, with a total of 160 pages of text. All focus groups were conducted in classrooms. The University of Barcelona ethics committee approved the study.

aim of fostering a creative, open, comfortable, and participatory environment. It lasted three hours and included the participation of six teachers. Three project researchers participated in the workshop: one assumed the role of coordinator, being the main interlocutor of the teaching staff who guided the activities; the other gave support to the proposed activities, solving doubts of the participants and assisting when necessary, and the third oversaw and recorded (notes and photos) the process.

### ***Data analysis***

Qualitative analysis software Atlas.ti.9.1.7 was used for data analysis, which facilitated the development of descriptive and interpretive hierarchies through a system of nodes that represent themes, concepts, ideas, opinions, or experiences.

The primary data was the information provided by the students and teachers (statements), but also that which arose in the workshops (actions). To this end, two phases of analysis were carried out: in the first phase the literal and descriptive meanings were collected and coded and, in the second, the inductive and interpretive segment of the analysis was carried out. In the inductive phase, the data were explored following the principles of grounded theory (Charmaz 5) and Glaser and Strauss's work.

The analysis procedure was based on inductive coding, letting the categories emerge from reading the transcripts. Similar parts of text were grouped into categories. The categorized themes were developed based on the authors' understanding of the big picture of research on women and gender studies. As a result, theory was originated and developed according to this field of study and emerged from the empirical data obtained from it.

This information was complemented by personal reflections collected in field diaries that served to follow-up the qualitative analysis and improve the analysis of data. These data were useful for understanding the relationship among participants and their roles in the activities.

## Results

### *Diagnostic phase. From ‘recognition’ to ‘incorporation’*

A general analysis of the data allowed the researchers to observe how practically all participants in the focus groups had a general idea about what the “gender perspective” is, linked to feminist ideals and the visibility of women in different spheres of life. However, certain conflicts and doubts were observed when expressing what is understood or how the gender perspective is incorporated into teaching.

From the perspective of students in both bachelor’s degree programs, it was considered that the first step toward training and awareness should be taken by the teaching staff, as this is where the greatest difficulty is perceived in implementing the gender perspective in the classroom. However, it is also important to note that a significant group of students—mainly from the early years of the bachelor’s program—highlighted and positively evaluated the gender perspective training they were currently receiving. It indicates that the student body was positively valuing the steps that the faculty is taking to integrate the gender perspective in its studies.

Results also revealed a greater awareness of the gender and LGBTQ perspectives among the student body than among teachers. This could highlight a generational gap. In some cases, students demonstrated specific knowledge, discussing key concepts such as “hegemonic masculinities” or “intersectionality,” among others. By “hegemonic masculinities,” students referred to the dominant social position of men and the cultural ideals of manhood that uphold male dominance not only over women but also over less dominant forms of masculinity (Connell 1). In using the term “intersectionality,” they referred to the ways in which various social identities—such as gender, race, class, sexuality, and disability—intersect and overlap, shaping distinct experiences of both discrimination and privilege (Crenshaw 139). Students’ awareness often stemmed from personal experiences—such as firsthand encounters with discrimination or violence—rather than formal academic instruction. It was also evident that there are technical and historical-theoretical courses in which either the gender perspective is not justified, or it involves an additional exercise of searching for resources where history has made the scientific production of women invisible.

Regarding teaching staff, results show greater knowledge and in-

volvement on the part of the younger teaching staff. A few participants stated that they had no knowledge or experience in this regard. In GIDD studies, newly recruited teachers seemed to have an open mind to incorporating the gender perspective, with some resistance on the part of more established teachers, especially in relation to the treatment and understanding of the LGBTQ perspectives. This may be due to the fact that none of the groups analysed had received prior training in gender perspectives, which they perceived as a challenge to be addressed in the coming years.

Among CAV teachers, a greater degree of self-education was observed when it comes to incorporating the gender perspective, with female teachers being the ones who tend to incorporate this perspective more. For the most part, the gender perspective was usually incorporated through personal experiences within the audiovisual sector, already very masculinized and with important gender biases in terms of roles and activities.

### ***Phase of change: Addressing reluctance and concerns***

The creative workshop facilitated collaboration between researchers and teachers with the aim of understanding and improving the incorporation of gender and LGBTQ perspectives in teaching. It also supported the design and development of materials to be uploaded to the repository on the project's website.

The session was structured around small-group activities (2–3 participants), with the aim of fostering a creative, open, comfortable, and participatory environment. The structure of the session was as follows:

- Introduction (15–20 minutes): Overview of the workshop, including its structure and planned activities.
- “Getting Ready to Begin” (20–25 minutes): Introductory activity to familiarize participants with the workshop and the concept of gender perspective. Videos on gender perspective and its role in higher education were shown to stimulate a collective discussion. This provided an opportunity for faculty members to express doubts or concerns and to begin considering ways of integrating this perspective into their courses.
- “Hands-On Work” (80–95 minutes): Group activity focused on design-

ing teaching materials and activities that incorporate gender and LGBTQ perspectives.

- “Sharing” (30 minutes): Presentation session where participants shared their developed materials and discussed them collaboratively.
- Session Closing (10 minutes): Joint reflection and evaluation of the experience and activities carried out.

During the session, examples of activities used in some courses emerged that could be easily extrapolated to others. The combination of teachers from both bachelor’s degrees, CAV and GIDD, enriched the session by allowing the sharing of experiences between disciplines.

However, the workshop confirmed a trend that had already been observed in the previous phases of the study: the existence of basic gaps (training, practical examples, etc.) that should be worked on beforehand so that teachers could feel comfortable when generating activities for their own courses.

### **GENDIMS’ Impact**

The GENDIMS project, along with the conferences held within its framework (see the website: <https://www.ub.edu/gendims/es/gendims-es-panol/>), facilitated a process of raising awareness within the FIMA community regarding the importance of incorporating gender and LGBTQ perspectives into their bachelor’s degree programs. The project also revealed the convenience of continuing to work in this line and expanding the time horizon of the project with new initiatives that facilitate the incorporation of the gender and LGBTQ perspectives in FIMA studies.

### ***Gender Perspective Mentoring Program in Information & Media Studies (GEMPIMS)***

One of these initiatives has been the *Gender Perspective Mentoring Program in Information & Media Studies* (GEMPIMS) project, aimed to equip teachers with the tools and confidence necessary to integrate gender and LGBTQ perspectives into their daily professional practice. The GEMPIMS project was financed by the REDICE-22 University Teaching Research Program and launched in September 2022.

Teachers from the two bachelor’s degrees (GIDD and CAV) were invit-

ed to the mentorship program, which was designed in three phases. First, the initial phase, during which an informative meeting was conducted for teaching staff who had applied to participate in the mentorship program as mentees. This session introduced the concepts and relevance of incorporating the gender and LGBTQ perspectives in academic teaching, particularly in Library and Information Science and Media Studies. Since the courses are semester-based, this meeting took place twice, at the beginning of each semester<sup>2</sup>. During the teaching application phase: regular follow-up meetings were convened between mentors and mentees. These meetings provided a platform for discussion, sharing experiences, and mutual learning. As a part of this process, mentees were encouraged to maintain field diaries to regularly document their mentoring experiences, challenges, drivers and strategies employed. In the closing phase, at the end of each semester, an individual semi-structured interview was conducted with mentees to understand their progress and perceptions. These interviews were aimed at gathering detailed insights into the experiences of the mentees, their application of learned strategies, and the impact of the program on their day-to-day life.

Participants were volunteer teachers from both bachelor's degrees. They had all participated in the GENDIMS project, and they had expressed their interest in receiving advice on the application of the gender and LGBTQ perspectives in their courses. Participants were selected to ensure representation across all courses and semesters of each bachelor's degree, as well as to reflect a gender-diverse composition in the sample. The final sample consisted of 15 teachers: 9 mentees and 6 mentors.

Qualitative analysis software ATLAS.ti 23 was used for data analysis, which facilitated the development of descriptive and interpretative hierarchies through a system of nodes that represent themes, concepts, ideas, opinions, or experiences.

The initial outcomes of GEMPIMS are promising. Mentees have reported gaining not only the tools and knowledge necessary for incorporating gender and LGBTQ perspectives into their teaching, but also a higher level of confidence in doing so. Furthermore, the program has positively influenced their professional practices, enabling them to create more inclusive and gender-sensitive educational environments.

As a result of this mentoring programme, the past three academic

<sup>2</sup> (1st semester: September 2022 - January 2023; 2nd semester: January 2023 - June 2023)

years (2022–2023, 2023–2024, and 2024–2025) have seen an increase not only in course content but also in Final Undergraduate Theses that incorporate gender and LGBTQ perspectives.

As a result of all these initiatives, in July 2022, the group was officially recognised as a Teaching Innovation Group by RIMDA (Research and Innovation Programme for the Improvement of Teaching and Learning) at the University of Barcelona.

### ***A new research area and MA program***

Another initiative that has emerged from the GENDIMS project is the creation of the research area entitled: Gender, Inclusion and Diversity in Information, Communication and Culture. It is a new area within the Research Centre on Information, Communication and Culture (CRICC) of the FIMA. In the last two years, the CRICC has organised several training actions aimed at promoting the incorporation of the gender and LGBTQ perspectives in all research carried out by the Centre's researchers. In the area of studies, since the 2024-2025 academic year, the faculty offers an official master's degree in Research in Communication and Diversity, designed to train researchers in the field of communication and media, with a particular focus on their interrelation with the integration of sociocultural diversity in a pluralistic world.

Specifically, the master's degree seeks:

- To provide advanced training in research for the understanding of communication phenomena from a perspective that addresses social diversity and encourages the inclusion of all groups and perspectives.
- To teach how to use a wide range of sources, tools and methodological techniques of a quantitative, qualitative and fieldwork nature to be able to deal with the study of communication and diversity.
- To detect the challenges and needs posed by the management of interculturality and social inclusion in a complex and changing communication environment.
- To provide practical experience for the preparation, development and management of research projects that allow students to work in networks and in transdisciplinary teams in the areas of communication, the reduction of inequalities and the inclusion of social plurality.
- To efficiently communicate the results and conclusions of the research

carried out to general and specialized audiences in different contexts, formats and academic and non-academic platforms.

- To stimulate reflection, critical analysis and commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals and gender equality, to promote the design of creative responses to the challenges that social, cultural, political and economic diversity present in the communication field.

Furthermore, at the beginning of 2025, the GENDIMS project jumped into the international sphere. Building upon the success of the GENDIMS initiative and expanding its scope to an international context, the new project, GEDIS (Gender Diversity in Information Science: Challenges in Higher Education), is an innovative Erasmus+ initiative that brings together a diverse consortium of universities across Europe to promote gender diversity and equality within the field of Library and Information Science (LIS).

Coordinated by the University of Barcelona (Spain), GEDIS represents a collaborative effort involving six more universities: Universität Hildesheim (Germany), FH Kärnten – gemeinnützige Gesellschaft mbH (Austria), Univerzitet u Sarajevu (Bosnia and Herzegovina), Sveučilište Josipa Jurja Strossmayera u Osijeku (Croatia), Sveuciliste u Zadru (Croatia) and Slezská Univerzita v Opavě (Czech Republic).

This transnational partnership is rooted in the shared goal of embedding gender diversity as a key competence in LIS education, fostering inclusivity, and promoting innovative teaching practices. By expanding its scope to an international context, this new project leverages the collective expertise of its partners to drive meaningful change in teaching, learning, and professional practice.

GEDIS is guided by four key objectives. First, it seeks to integrate gender diversity into Library and Information Science (LIS) curricula by raising awareness and deepening understanding of gender issues among students, faculty, and librarians, thereby promoting more inclusive teaching practices. Second, the project aims to develop practical tools and resources, such as open educational materials, toolkits, and case studies, to support the effective integration of gender perspectives in educational contexts. Third, GEDIS promotes collaboration and networking by bringing together educators, researchers, and librarians from diverse cultural and educational settings, fostering a dynamic learning community committed to gender equality. Finally, the project is designed

to ensure long-term impact by equipping participants with the knowledge and skills necessary to continue advancing gender diversity well beyond the project's duration.

The GEDIS Project employs a comprehensive approach that combines research, training, and collaboration. It foresees curriculum analysis; expert consultations and focus groups; training workshops with faculty staff and librarians; development of open-access resources; student engagement through two summer schools and collaborative activities that will empower students to become active participants in promoting gender equality within their institutions, and dissemination events that will showcase project outcomes and encourage broader adoption of its findings and tools.

In the international implementation of this project, we adopt an intersectional analytical lens, considering diverse population samples and cultural contexts to enhance the relevance and depth of our findings. Recognizing the complexity of addressing gender and diversity across different settings, we aim to foster mutual understanding and learning. To achieve this, we will share the expertise developed in the GENDIMS project with our international partners, with the goal of building an expanded learning.

## **Conclusion**

To the best of our knowledge, GENDIMS is a pioneering initiative in the field of Information and Media studies at the Spanish state level. The project, initiated in 2021, has provided a diagnostic assessment of how teachers and students perceive and value the gender perspective and has highlighted initiatives that, while not included in the course curricula, incorporate a gender perspective in their design and implementation and can serve as an example for other courses. The collaborative work between researchers and participants (teachers and students) facilitated a better understanding of the gender perspective.

Over time, the original GENDIMS project has evolved into a community of teachers and researchers who create research and teaching projects, collaborate and support each other in their day-to-day academic work, with the aim of building a more inclusive and diverse world.

Building upon the success of the GENDIMS initiative, the GEDIS pro-

ject has expanded its scope to an international context, by embedding gender diversity as a core element of education. The project prepares students to challenge discriminatory practices and contribute to a more equitable society. Its emphasis on collaboration and innovation aims to ensure that the tools and strategies developed will continue to inspire educators and professionals across Europe and beyond. By addressing the challenges of gender inequality in a comprehensive and collaborative way, GEDIS reinforces the role of higher education as a driver of social change and inclusion.

It is important to highlight that this project comes at a timely moment in which despite the progress achieved in recent years, such as the #MeToo movement, current trends arising from the growth of right-wing parties, the persistence of old wars and the unleashing of new ones, as well as the worsening of economic, social, climate and health crises in many parts of the world have exacerbated gender inequalities. The fact that gender inequalities in the cultural industries sector are persistent (Conor 44; Villarroya Planas, 2022) and particularly important in the information and communication, confers special relevance to these initiatives. In this regard, despite women being the majority of students enrolled in bachelor's degree programs related to these disciplines, female professionals in the world of library, information science and communication encounter insurmountable obstacles when it comes to joining certain professions, progressing professionally, and achieving visibility and recognition for their works and projects (Villarroya and Boté-Vericad).

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# *OVERLOOKED BY DESIGN: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF INCORPORATING HUMAN-CENTRED PERSPECTIVES AND EDI IN IT DEVELOPMENT DURING THE AI BOOM*

ÅSA CAJANDER, BENI SURANTO, TONY CLEAR, RAMESH LAL

## **Introduction**

Over the past decades, Information Technology (IT) has transformed nearly every aspect of daily life, changing how people communicate, learn, work, and socialise. IT systems are now deeply embedded in everyday routines, from widespread internet access and social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram to essential tools such as Gmail, WhatsApp, and online shopping services (Campbell-Kelly et al.). However, a problem remains: the frequent oversight of Human-Centered Design (HCD) in IT development. Historically, IT development has focused more on technical performance, efficiency, and rapid deployment—often at the expense of considering user perspectives (Cajander). Integrating Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) principles into IT development amplifies these challenges. In this chapter, “integrating EDI into AI” refers to the deliberate embedding of equality, diversity, and inclusion considerations throughout data design, algorithm development, stakeholder engagement, and governance, to ensure that AI systems mitigate bias and serve diverse communities fairly. And yet, integrating EDI is vital to prevent technology from perpetuating or exacerbating structural inequities, particularly for marginalised communities.

The recent rapid advancements in Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) technologies, exemplified by popular platforms like ChatGPT, Google’s Gemini, and various AI-driven creative and analytical tools, have intensified ongoing discussions around the ethical, social, and inclusion-related implications of AI in society. These AI systems are celebrated for their unprecedented capabilities, including generating human-like text, automating complex tasks, enhancing productivity, and providing

personalised experiences in fields ranging from education and healthcare to customer service. However, the widespread adoption of AI also brings substantial risks related to EDI. For instance, AI-driven facial recognition systems frequently show biases against people of colour, leading to potential misidentification and unjust treatment (Varsha). Similarly, automated evaluation systems can unfairly penalise non-native English speakers or culturally diverse students due to implicit linguistic biases in the training data (Agarwal et al.). Such scenarios emphasise the necessity of intentionally integrating inclusive and user-centred approaches into AI systems. In the global higher education landscape, the rapid advancement of AI technologies is increasingly transforming academic environments and institutional processes (from assessment systems to student support services), making it imperative to integrate inclusive and human-centered approaches that ensure equitable, transparent, and culturally responsive learning experiences for all students.

Addressing the challenges of HCD and EDI in IT development requires more than just good intentions. It calls for a fundamental shift in how technology is designed, implemented, and governed. This chapter examines how the rise of AI has not only exacerbated existing barriers but also introduced new risks, reinforcing biases, and making inclusivity even more challenging to achieve. While highlighting the problems, the chapter also focuses on practical solutions, advocating for approaches such as Human-Centred AI and policy reforms that can help make technology fairer, more accessible, and genuinely user-focused. Looking ahead, Coimbra Group universities are uniquely positioned to lead collaborative, cross-sector efforts that advance ethical, inclusive, and human-centred digital transformation. By fostering interdisciplinary research, innovating curricula that address the societal and ethical implications of AI, and shaping institutional policies rooted in EDI, these universities can serve as vital agents of change across academia and beyond. Importantly, their contribution extends to engaging with the IT industry (particularly those developing AI systems) by offering critical insights, ethical frameworks, and evidence-based recommendations that support the creation of responsible and inclusive technologies. Through research-industry partnerships, policy advocacy, and public engagement, Coimbra institutions can help ensure that the rapid pace of AI innovation is guided by human values, mitigates systemic bias, and genuinely empowers all users.

## **AI and Society**

### ***AI trends and impacts***

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is a branch of computer science focused on creating computers and machines capable of imitating human intelligence. These intelligent machines are designed to perform tasks typically associated with human cognitive functions, such as learning, problem-solving, decision-making, and adapting to new situations (Stryker and Kavlakoglu). Unlike traditional machines, which operate strictly within predefined rules and explicit instructions, AI systems can understand, predict, and respond to complex patterns, even when provided with incomplete or ambiguous information (Ertel). Rather than viewing the world in black-and-white terms, AI operates within the nuanced grey areas, allowing it to interpret and navigate uncertainty.

AI plays a transformative role in contemporary society, profoundly influencing various sectors through capabilities including data mining, image recognition, natural language processing (NLP), and decision-making support (Spangler et al.; Holmström et al.; Cajander et al.). In data mining, AI enables organisations to analyse extensive datasets, revealing insights that inform personalised user experiences, such as Amazon's tailored product recommendations or Netflix's content suggestions (Hallur et al.). In image recognition, AI technology enhances security systems through facial recognition, improves healthcare accuracy by interpreting medical images, and is fundamental to autonomous vehicles, as demonstrated in Tesla's self-driving systems, enabling them to navigate real-world environments (Alnaggar et al.; Bathla et al.). Additionally, AI supports decision-making processes across various sectors. Financial institutions utilise AI to predict market fluctuations, while healthcare providers rely on AI-driven predictions to personalise patient treatments (Cao and Zhai; Cao et al.; Li et al.).

### ***The AI era: accelerating exclusion***

While AI offers benefits, it presents ethical, operational, and societal risks. These challenges demand careful attention from researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to prevent unintended harm.

A primary ethical concern is AI bias, which can reinforce systemic discrimination. For example, a widely used healthcare risk prediction algorithm was found to underestimate the medical needs of Black patients

compared to white patients, due to biased cost-based proxies in its training data (Obermeyer et al.). Similarly, AI-driven hiring tools have been found to favour specific demographics over others (Tilmes). These biases stem from the historical data on which AI models are trained, reflecting societal inequalities and perpetuating them in automated decision-making.

Additionally, the opacity of AI-driven decisions raises concerns about security and privacy. Many AI models operate as “black boxes,” making it difficult for users and regulators to understand how decisions are made. This lack of transparency increases the risk of malicious exploitation and reduces public trust in AI systems.

Moreover, organisations that adopt AI face several operational challenges, particularly in decision-making processes. The complexity of AI analytics can lead to flawed business strategies when leaders rely on opaque or biased models without a thorough understanding of their limitations (Rana et al.). Over-reliance on AI in business-to-consumer (B2C) settings can create trust issues, as customers may feel uncomfortable with automated decisions. Similarly, in business-to-business (B2B) environments, power imbalances can deepen when access to AI technologies is unevenly distributed (Keegan et al.).

AI’s scalability presents challenges for equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI). Unlike traditional IT systems, AI operates across vast datasets and diverse user bases, making it challenging to implement nuanced, context-specific adjustments. This scalability often prioritises efficiency over inclusion, leading to the marginalisation of underrepresented groups. For example, academic institutions implementing AI chatbots for student support may unintentionally exclude users with non-standard queries or communication styles. Similarly, automated hiring platforms may disadvantage applicants who do not fit predefined patterns, reinforcing existing inequalities.

Level of Social Analysis	“Equity & Access” Issues Individual Domain	Professional Domain
<b>Individuals</b>	<p>Personal biases or privileges may remain unnoticed, resulting in limited awareness of how AI systems fail to serve underrepresented users.</p> <p>Lack of accessible feedback channels can prevent individuals from raising concerns about exclusive design choices.</p>	<p>AI developers may inadvertently overlook subtle user needs when pressed by tight deadlines, contributing to incomplete accessibility features.</p> <p>Maintaining fair data collection can be challenging, as it risks underrepresentation of specific demographics.</p>
<b>Communities &amp; Groups</b>	<p>Community members often lack adequate training or resources, which can deepen existing tech gaps when introducing AI solutions.</p> <p>Early input on local constraints is rarely gathered, limiting the community’s influence on design decisions.</p>	<p>Project coordinators often struggle with budget and time constraints, which reduces opportunities for in-depth community engagement.</p> <p>Variations in language, literacy, or cultural norms within a group complicate uniform AI design and deployment.</p>
<b>Organisations</b>	<p>Employees may fear reprisals for spotlighting how AI tools disadvantage certain staff or customers.</p> <p>Workers with limited influence often cannot effectively advocate for thorough EDI reviews during procurement or implementation processes.</p>	<p>Leadership often prioritises cost or efficiency over inclusive design, overlooking marginalised user segments.</p> <p>Inconsistent internal standards create confusion about what level of EDI compliance is acceptable.</p>
<b>Cultures</b>	<p>Individuals from minority cultures risk stereotyping or exclusion if AI defaults reflect only a dominant language or worldview. Data sets lacking cultural nuances can misinterpret behaviour or values outside mainstream norms.</p>	<p>Design teams may rely on monolingual or culturally narrow test sets, yielding suboptimal performance in multicultural contexts. Collaborations with cultural experts can be underfunded or disregarded, resulting in culturally tone-deaf AI outputs.</p>

<b>Institutional Sectors</b>	Students, patients, or customers from low- resource settings can find premium AI-driven services inaccessible or unsuitable. When healthcare or educational support is already minimal, digital-only processes can further exclude vulnerable users.	Sector-wide guidelines for EDI often conflict with internal policies, resulting in minimal or inconsistent enforcement of these guidelines. Partnerships to standardise equitable AI may stall due to competition, limited budgets, or reluctance to share resources.
<b>National</b>	Citizens in rural or disadvantaged areas may face slow broadband rollouts, which can hinder the adoption of AI and skill development. Negative perceptions or fears of AI can discourage certain groups from advocating for better digital infrastructure.	Policymakers and organisations often encounter industry lobbying that resists broad accessibility requirements. National AI initiatives may omit minority languages and local contexts if data is not systematically localised.
<b>Global</b>	Individuals in underrepresented regions face minimal influence on global AI products built for wealthier markets. Linguistic barriers hinder collective action across borders in addressing shared equity issues.	Multinational companies may opt for one-size- fits-all solutions, aggravating digital divides between nations. International frameworks for digital equity are experiencing fragmented adoption, with some regions lacking the necessary resources or political will to implement them effectively.

Table 1. Multi-Level Challenges of AI Exclusion and Equity Gaps, adapted from (C. Dianne Martin et al.)

### **Why Central to Human-Centred Design Matters in IT Development**

Central to Human-Centred Design (HCD) in IT development emphasises creating technologies that understand, prioritise, and adapt to users’ needs, experiences, and limitations. HCD is ensuring that technology is intuitive, accessible, and beneficial to users. Key principles include clearly understanding user requirements, recognising their context, and enabling systems to evolve dynamically based on continuous user feedback and environmental factors (Giacomin). Additionally, HCD highlights the importance of effective human-machine teaming – balancing human

judgment and machine efficiency to enhance system usability and outcomes. Particularly in interactive intelligent systems, achieving the right balance between human and machine ensures minimal human effort while keeping performance and quality. This user-focused approach is essential for developing technologies that align with real-world expectations and effectively support human activities (Xu).

Adopting HCD in IT development offers substantial benefits by enhancing usability, accessibility, and overall user satisfaction, ultimately leading to broader adoption and greater success of technological products. For instance, Apple's renowned emphasis on intuitive and user-friendly design in products such as the iPhone and macOS has significantly contributed to widespread user adoption and brand loyalty. Similarly, Google's consistent application of HCD principles in platforms like Gmail and Google Maps prioritises simplicity and user engagement, enabling billions of users to interact effortlessly with complex functionalities. Government services have also benefited notably from HCD. The UK government's redesign of its website (<https://www.gov.uk/>) significantly improved accessibility and usability for millions of citizens by prioritising clarity, ease of use, and user feedback throughout the development process. Another powerful example is Wheelmap (<https://wheelmap.org/>), a platform developed by the German non-profit Sozialhelden e.V. This platform exemplifies user-centred innovation by enabling wheelchair users to collaboratively map and share accessibility information, illustrating how participatory and inclusive digital solutions can effectively address the needs of marginalised communities.

In the gadget and hardware domain, adopting HCD principles has notably enhanced accessibility and inclusivity, effectively addressing the diverse needs of users, including those of elderly individuals and people with disabilities (Giaccardi and Redström). For instance, Amazon's Echo smart speakers, equipped with Alexa voice technology, provide crucial assistance for elderly or visually impaired individuals, allowing for effortless interaction through intuitive voice commands for tasks such as reminders, home automation, and easy communication (Amazon). Apple's introduction of accessibility-focused features in gadgets such as the Apple Watch, which includes fall detection and emergency alerts, directly supports elderly users in maintaining their independence and safety. Additionally, Microsoft's Xbox Adaptive Controller demonstrates an exceptional commitment to diversity and inclusion by enabling gam-

ers with limited mobility or physical disabilities to participate fully in gaming experiences that were previously inaccessible to them (Warren).

The experiences of Prague, Zurich, Barcelona, and Stockholm demonstrate how Human-Centered Design (HCD) serves as a foundational strategy for successful digital innovation in urban environments. Across these cities, HCD principles (i.e., participatory design, contextual awareness, inclusivity, and long-term usability) are embedded not just in individual projects but in broader smart city frameworks. Citizen engagement platforms, inclusive digital policies, and the integration of social and environmental concerns into design processes demonstrate a shared commitment to aligning technological development with the lived realities, values, and aspirations of diverse communities (Carboni; Dashkevych and Portnov; Calzada et al.).

The relevance of HCD principles in academic environments is also becoming increasingly evident. For example, the University of Leeds in the UK has applied human-centred design approaches in developing its digital education systems to ensure accessibility and inclusion across diverse student populations. By actively involving students and faculty in the iterative design of platforms like its Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), the university improved usability for learners with disabilities and those from varying digital literacy backgrounds (Lonsdale). Similarly, the Open University has adopted inclusive design practices by co-creating course materials with students from underrepresented groups, ensuring that content delivery methods accommodate varied learning preferences, socioeconomic circumstances, and cultural contexts (The Open University). These cases demonstrate how embedding HCD in university digital infrastructures can promote equitable access to learning, foster student engagement, and enhance educational outcomes, contributing directly to institutional efforts to uphold EDI values in both pedagogy and technology.

These examples show that HCD is more than a design method—it's a key strategy to ensure IT systems serve diverse groups equitably and meaningfully. By embracing values such as inclusion, empathy, adaptability, and iteration, HCD steers IT projects away from narrow, top-down solutions that overlook real user needs. Instead, it promotes systems rooted in the social, cultural, and practical realities of their users.

## Challenges in Adopting HCD

### *Structural challenges in human-centred IT design*

Adopting HCD in IT projects involves substantial complexities, primarily due to the difficulty of integrating human factors into established technology development practices. One of the most persistent challenges is managing collaboration across large, interdisciplinary, and multi-stakeholder environments. Effective HCD necessitates clear communication, aligned objectives, and seamless collaboration among technologists, researchers, policymakers, and end-users. However, competing priorities and communication barriers often lead to inconsistencies in applying user-centred design principles (Larusdottir et al.). For instance, in academic-industry partnerships, businesses may prioritise profitability and efficiency, whereas researchers focus on user engagement and long-term usability. These misalignments can result in IT solutions that, despite their technical sophistication, fail to meet the actual needs and expectations of users.

Cultural and organisational barriers further complicate the adoption of HCD, particularly in industries where technological adaptation is expected of users rather than the other way around (Van der Bijl-Brouwer and Dorst). In healthcare, for example, electronic health record (EHR) systems are often designed for administrative efficiency rather than clinical usability, leading to workflow disruptions, increased cognitive load for healthcare professionals, and potential risks to patient safety (Hertzum et al.). Similarly, digital learning platforms in education often struggle with low adoption rates because they are developed without sufficient input from teachers and students (de Souza Rodrigues et al.; Greenhow et al.). This persistent disconnect between developers and end-users highlights how IT solutions that do not actively incorporate user feedback risk becoming ineffective and underutilised.

Despite the abundance of methodologies developed to integrate HCD into systems development, a persistent challenge remains in their limited scope and application. Many of these frameworks focus narrowly on individual IT projects, overlooking the broader organisational, institutional, and legal dimensions required to sustain meaningful Human-Centred Design (HCD) practices. As a result, while iterative prototyping, usability testing, and continuous user feedback are widely advocated, their consistent implementation is often hindered by a lack of organisational support, leadership commitment, and policy integration.

Emerging evidence suggests that the inherent complexity of AI-driven systems can obscure their decision-making processes, often leaving even expert users uncertain about the rationale behind autonomous decisions. Designing AI systems that align with human needs requires a deep understanding of human cognition and AI's evolving capabilities. However, the lack of standardised guidelines for AI-human interaction often leads to the development of opaque, inscrutable systems that users struggle to trust. This detachment of HCD from AI development can lead to biased algorithms, ethical concerns, and the exclusion of marginalised user groups that are disproportionately affected by AI-driven decision-making (Riedl). To better visualise and summarise these interconnected structural barriers to adopting HCD in IT projects, see **Figure 1**.

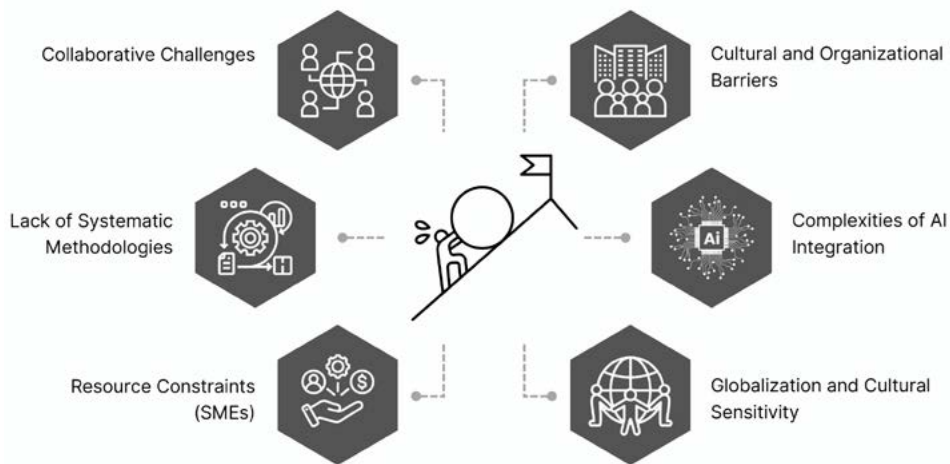


Figure 1. Structural Challenges in HCD (Graphic created by the author using Canva Pro).

Resource constraints further exacerbate the challenges of implementing Human-Centred Design (HCD), particularly for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Unlike large corporations with dedicated research teams, SMEs often lack the financial and technical resources to invest in extensive user research, usability testing, and iterative design. AI-driven systems, for example, require significant investments in

data quality management, explainability tools, and ethical AI frameworks costs that are often prohibitive for smaller organisations. Moreover, a lack of awareness and understanding of HCD principles among SME leadership frequently results in the undervaluation of user-centred design, leading to systems that fail to accommodate diverse user needs effectively (Gorichanaz).

In an era of globalised systems, cultural sensitivity remains another crucial yet often overlooked aspect of Human-Centred Design (HCD). Culture influences user behaviour, preferences, and interaction styles, but many IT projects fail to incorporate cultural concerns unless explicitly requested by clients. In regions such as India, HCI designers have reported that including cultural considerations in digital product development largely depends on the awareness and commitment of project leadership rather than being an inherent part of the design process. IT solutions risk alienating or being ineffective in diverse markets without cultural adaptability, limiting their global reach and adoption.

Another critical issue is balancing human and technical factors in automation. While automation is often introduced to enhance efficiency and safety, poorly designed automation systems can lead to user frustration, reduced trust, and even catastrophic failures. Studies have shown that systems that fail to account for human behaviour and cognitive limitations can result in over-reliance on automation, making human intervention ineffective when needed (Xu). A collaborative approach to automation is crucial for enhancing, rather than diminishing, human capabilities. This method considers cognitive processes, emotional responses, and the patterns of interaction between humans and systems. By integrating these elements, automation can be designed to work in tandem with human abilities effectively.

User-centred design must be an organisation-wide commitment, not just an initiative within development teams. However, many organisations resist change, particularly those with deeply ingrained technical or engineering-focused cultures, lacking executive buy-in and structured governance models, which can reinforce the notion that HCD, user-centred design, risks becoming an afterthought rather than an integral component of IT development. Overcoming these barriers requires a cultural shift that prioritises human needs alongside technical objectives, ensuring that IT systems are functional, equitable, accessible, and aligned with the diverse needs of their users.

### ***Why EDI presents an even greater challenge***

Integrating EDI into IT development is vital not only for ethical and social justice reasons but also as a strategy for inclusive, sustainable innovation. As societies and universities grow more diverse, technologies must reflect and support that diversity. EDI-driven approaches align with global goals, such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly those focused on equity and inclusive growth. Including EDI helps technologies meet demands for fairness, sustainability, and responsibility, boosting long-term acceptance and effectiveness. It also enhances an organisation's reputation, user satisfaction, and societal impact, supporting sustainable development goals.

Despite its importance, integrating EDI into IT projects is challenging due to systemic barriers that exist within the organisation. A key issue is the lack of diversity within tech teams, limiting awareness and representation of varied perspectives. Homogeneous teams often struggle to understand and address the experiences of marginalised groups. Institutional resistance and cultural inertia further impede meaningful change. Developers also face structural hurdles, such as rigid procurement, tight budgets, and short timelines, that deprioritise EDI. As a result, even when its value is recognised, organisations find it difficult to embed EDI into existing tech frameworks, highlighting the depth of these challenges (Aleem and Ahmed).

Integrating EDI principles into IT projects often encounters significant practical barriers. One prominent challenge is the deeply ingrained biases in historical data, which AI systems use for learning and decision-making. For instance, a widely publicised case involving Amazon's recruitment algorithm revealed how the system unintentionally discriminated against women, as it was trained on historical hiring data dominated by male applicants (Iriondo). Despite good intentions, attempts to correct these embedded biases often prove complex and resource-intensive, requiring deliberate adjustments in data selection, system retraining, and continuous oversight (Belenguer; Nazer et al.).

Additionally, cultural and institutional resistance presents substantial hurdles to incorporating EDI effectively. Organisations frequently prioritise rapid technological deployment, cost-efficiency, and immediate results over inclusive and participatory design processes, leaving limited resources for comprehensive diversity assessments or iterative user

testing involving diverse populations (Shams et al.). For example, facial recognition technologies deployed in law enforcement have been criticised for their poor accuracy in identifying people from racial minority groups, resulting in wrongful arrests or misidentifications globally (Bragias et al.).

Several initiatives demonstrate significant efforts to integrate EDI into IT development, particularly in Europe and North America. The Athena SWAN Charter, launched in the UK and internationally recognised, promotes gender equality in STEM by addressing systemic inequities through inclusive policies (Advance HE). Corporate efforts, such as Microsoft's Xbox Adaptive Controller, demonstrate how accessible technology can empower individuals with disabilities to participate in gaming. Google's AI principles emphasise fairness, transparency, and accountability, guiding rigorous evaluation to reduce bias. Its "Fairness Indicators" toolkit offers developers practical tools for embedding fairness in machine learning, proving that inclusive technology is both achievable and essential (Xu and Doshi).

While these efforts highlight notable progress, substantial challenges persist across both academic institutions and the broader IT industry. In academia, despite growing awareness, the integration of EDI principles into curricula, research design, and institutional governance often faces resistance due to deeply embedded traditions, limited resources, or lack of institutional incentives. Similarly, in the IT industry, many organisations remain hesitant to fully integrate EDI principles due to entrenched cultural norms, budgetary constraints, ethical blind spots in the perspectives of IT professionals (Vardi; Pant et al.; Ozkaya), or rigid project management practices. As a result, genuine inclusivity and fairness are inconsistently addressed across the IT sector (Aleem and Ahmed; Kamasak et al.)

### **Opportunities: Human-Centred AI**

The concept of Human-Centred AI (HCAI) presents opportunities to address the intricate challenges associated with integrating Human-Centred Design (HCD) and Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) principles into IT projects. At its core, HCAI advocates for developing artificial intelligence systems that prioritise human values, well-being, transparency,

and fairness. For example, IBM has adopted a human-centred approach by developing explainable and trustworthy AI systems, ensuring their products are transparent and understandable to users, thus strengthening trust and usability.

HCAI inherently aligns with HCD principles, particularly through its emphasis on continuous user involvement, adaptability, and iterative design (Shneiderman). AI systems grounded in HCAI practices prioritise user feedback, which helps developers understand how end-users interact with technology in real-world scenarios. Companies like McKinsey emphasise the importance of prioritising people, ensuring that AI systems respond to user needs and adapt dynamically to changing contexts. This user-centred focus improves usability and accessibility, enhancing technology acceptance among diverse populations.

Additionally, HCAI directly addresses critical EDI issues by actively embedding these values into the AI lifecycle. HCAI minimises biases and promotes equitable outcomes through practices involving diverse representation and inclusive stakeholder participation (Régis et al.). For instance, IBM's AI Fairness 360 toolkit provides practical tools for detecting and mitigating bias in AI applications, directly addressing racial and gender biases embedded within training datasets. Similarly, initiatives from Microsoft and Amazon emphasise inclusive design practices, actively involving diverse user groups during the development of AI-powered products, thereby ensuring technology serves marginalised and traditionally underrepresented communities more effectively.

Adopting HCAI principles requires substantial organisational and cultural shifts, particularly within industry and academia. Best practices involve interdisciplinary collaboration, fostering diverse teams capable of addressing broader ethical and social considerations (Auernhammer). Stanford University's Human-Centred Artificial Intelligence (HAI) initiative exemplifies this interdisciplinary approach, bringing together experts from diverse academic fields, including ethics, technology, social sciences, and humanities, to develop AI solutions aligned with societal values. These collaborative environments help ensure that AI technologies are sensitive to social contexts, transparent in their operations, and accountable for their impacts, making them more trustworthy and acceptable across various user demographics.

In Europe, efforts have been undertaken to address HCAI through comprehensive ethical guidelines and policy frameworks. The European

Union's publication of the Ethical Guidelines for Trustworthy AI underscores Europe's commitment to embedding human dignity, fairness, and inclusivity within technological innovation. These guidelines emphasise that AI systems should respect human rights and democratic values, ensure transparency, provide accountability, and prioritise user-centric approaches, making explicit the critical connection between ethical AI and societal well-being (European Commission). Moreover, the EU AI Act, proposed as the world's first legal framework dedicated specifically to AI governance, further solidifies Europe's stance by categorising AI applications according to their potential risks and mandating rigorous assessments and oversight, particularly for systems posing high ethical or societal risks. By enforcing transparency, accountability, and fairness through stringent regulatory measures, the AI Act aims to mitigate bias, protect vulnerable groups, and ensure that AI benefits all segments of society (European Parliament). However, its real-world impact will depend on consistent implementation, effective oversight, and adaptability to rapidly evolving technologies. Nonetheless, the Act marks a significant legislative step toward aligning AI development with ethical, inclusive, and human-centred principles. Collectively, these European initiatives represent steps toward integrating EDI and HCD principles into AI, establishing a clear global benchmark for the development of ethically responsible and inclusive technology.

The six major challenges of HCAI provide a comprehensive roadmap for developing AI systems that are ethical, inclusive, and aligned with human well-being (Ozmen Garibay et al.). These challenges were identified through a global collaboration of experts from academia, industry, and government, emphasising the need for AI systems that respect human values and prioritise user needs. The first challenge highlights the importance of centring AI development around human well-being, ensuring that technologies enhance, rather than undermine, the quality of life. The second and third challenges focus on responsible AI design and privacy, addressing concerns related to bias, transparency, and data protection. Without these foundational principles, AI systems risk exacerbating existing inequalities and failing to uphold ethical standards. The fourth and fifth challenges highlight the need for robust human-centred design (HCD) frameworks and governance mechanisms. Lastly, the sixth challenge calls for AI-human interaction models that align with human cognitive processes. This acknowledges the complexities of human-AI

collaboration and highlights the necessity for AI systems that support, rather than replace, human decision-making (Ozmen Garibay et al.).

Figure 2 illustrates the critical intersection between the six grand challenges of HCAI and EDI concerns, reinforcing the need for AI systems that uphold fairness, inclusivity, and ethical responsibility. *AI-Human Interaction* is crucial for accessibility and adaptability, ensuring that AI accommodates diverse user needs, including those with different languages, disabilities, and cognitive abilities. *Human Well-Being* must also be a central focus, ensuring that AI benefits all demographics equitably, particularly marginalised and underrepresented groups, rather than exacerbating social disparities. To achieve *Responsible AI Design*, eliminating biases that disproportionately impact specific racial, gender, or socioeconomic groups is essential, ensuring AI-driven decisions remain fair and just.

Additionally, *Privacy* protections are critical for safeguarding vulnerable populations, such as marginalised communities or individuals with disabilities, from risks related to surveillance and data misuse. *Human-Centred Design* emphasises the importance of inclusive participation by involving diverse stakeholders in AI development, ensuring that perspectives from traditionally underrepresented groups inform the usability and functionality of AI. Lastly, strong *Governance* frameworks provide the accountability necessary to align AI with ethical and legal standards, preventing discriminatory practices and promoting transparency. Together, these interconnected elements form the foundation for AI systems that are not only technologically advanced but also socially responsible and genuinely inclusive.



Figure 2. The Intersection of HCAI Grand Challenges and EDI Issues in IT Projects. Concept inspired by (Ozmen Garibay et al.).

### **Suggested Actions for Advancing EDI through Human-Centred AI Within the Coimbra Group**

Based on our analysis and examples from member universities and European policy work, we suggest the following seven actions as ideas for discussion. They are meant to inspire debate, encourage local solutions, and help Coimbra Group universities share good practice in promoting equality, diversity, and inclusion through Human-Centred AI.

1. **Design for Inclusion by Default.** Human-Centred AI (HCAI) begins with intentional inclusivity, to design systems that serve diverse communities from the outset, particularly those that have been historically excluded. Inclusion should not be a patch; it must be the blueprint.
2. **Make Data Justice a Strategic Priority.** HCAI demands scrutiny of the data that feeds AI. Coimbra universities must lead in auditing training data for bias, diversifying sources, and building fair data infrastructures. Data justice is foundational to the development of ethical and equitable AI.
3. **Institutionalise Interdisciplinary Collaboration.** No single discipline can develop truly human-centred AI. EDI-aligned HCAI requires

teams that integrate technical expertise with deep competencies in gender studies, disability studies, race and migration research, and broader social sciences and humanities. Include those with relevant lived experience alongside designers and engineers. Build structures where this collaboration is not only encouraged ad hoc, but institutionally embedded across research, teaching, and governance.

4. Centre the Human in AI Interaction. In HCAI, humans are never passive users. Teach and develop systems that support human decision-making, rather than overriding it. Prioritise explainability, usability, and user control, especially in education, healthcare and governance.
5. Resource HCAI as Core Digital Infrastructure. Ethical and inclusive AI cannot run on goodwill alone. Allocate sustained funding to HCAI research, education, and implementation. Integrate HCAI into existing governance structures and review processes, ensuring it becomes part of the institution's long-term responsibilities.
6. Embed HCAI and EDI Literacy Across the University. AI literacy must be broad, critical, and inclusive. Coimbra Group universities should strive to integrate HCAI and EDI literacy into multiple curricula, spanning from engineering to the arts. This empowers students and staff to become thoughtful users, designers, and critics of the digital systems shaping society.
8. Build Coimbra Group Coalitions for Accountable Innovation. The Group universities can lead Europe in operationalising HCAI. Collaborate across institutions to share best practices, create shared governance models, and hold one another accountable. Collective action is essential for transforming AI into a tool for equity.

Taken together, these ideas show ways that Coimbra Group Universities can share knowledge and take practical steps towards more ethical and inclusive AI development.

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# *EDI, CARE AND SOCIAL JUSTICE: WELCOMING REFUGEES AND STUDENTS AT RISK AT THE UNIVERSITY OF PADUA*

ELISA GAMBA

*Let me tell you about how the feeling of a refugee looks like.  
Being a refugee itself is a challenge because as a refugee,  
I am between the past, which I lost,  
and the future, which is unclear, which is unknown.  
The past is clear because I know what I lost.  
And for example, I lost my friends, my language, my  
culture,  
and finally, my country.  
But the future is not clear.  
And what keeps me moving forward is that  
I compensate for my past in the future,  
like I am learning a new language to compensate for  
my language,  
making new friends to compensate for my friendship,  
and so on.*

(Refugee student in Padua, 2024)

## **Introduction**

In an era where pushbacks, denial of rights, and increasing isolation seem to be gaining ground, investigating concrete examples of EDI practices is more necessary than ever. Universities, as spaces of culture and knowledge dissemination on one hand, and as public institutions deeply embedded within their communities on the other, have a duty to actively contribute to improving the very societies they inhabit. If we aim to elevate young minds and spirits, the most effective way to do so is by setting an example. In this case, that example lies in making a tangible effort to address the injustices of our time, and one of the most pressing injustices is undoubtedly the global refugee crisis. On a worldwide scale, the latest UNHCR reports (UNHCR 2024) present alarming figures: 120 million people have been forced to flee their homes in search of refuge elsewhere.

Providing this refuge also means ensuring access to education systems, and this chapter specifically examines EDI practices for refugees and students at risk<sup>1</sup> welcomed by the University of Padua.

Starting with an overview of the Italian university landscape and the country refugee reception system, the chapter then introduces the University of Padua and its EDI initiatives. The university's support programmes for refugee students are analysed with the aid of data, and insights gathered both from students and staff during informal meetings.<sup>2</sup> The chapter concludes with reflections on potential improvements and suggestions for future research on the topic.

### **Refugees in Higher Education: the Italian Context**

Education plays a crucial role in addressing marginalisation and abuse, offering individuals the opportunity to improve their circumstances and take on leadership roles within their communities or upon returning to their home countries (Martin and Stulgaitis 2022). This importance is underlined in the 2030 Agenda, particularly within Sustainable Development Goal 4,<sup>3</sup> which seeks to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.” While UNESCO and UNHCR are central to driving this agenda forward, the primary responsibility for ensuring that refugees can access education falls to national governments, international NGOs and, specifically in the case of higher education, charities, the private sector, and specialised university initiatives across the Global North.

Academic interest in refugee studies within universities in the Global North<sup>4</sup> saw a significant rise in 2015, largely in response to the Syrian crisis (DAAD 2015; Crea 2016; Cremonini 2016). This focus was reignited towards the end of 2021 with the crisis in Afghanistan and again in early

<sup>1</sup> Unlike refugees, *students at risk* are individuals coming from persecutory environments or from situations that make it currently impossible for them to return to their home countries. Nevertheless, for a range of personal reasons, they decide not to apply for asylum. Consequently, they are not officially recognised as refugees.

<sup>2</sup> Students and staff have asked to remain anonymous and the author has gladly accepted this request.

<sup>3</sup> Source: <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal4> (accessed: 22/03/2025).

<sup>4</sup> This article focuses on reception in the Global North; however, it is important to recognise that the true refugee burden falls on the shoulders of developing countries (Ergin 2020). It is crucial to remember that 85% of the world's displaced population is hosted by low- and lower-middle-income countries (World Bank and UNHCR 2021).

2022 following the outbreak of conflict in Ukraine. Western universities, supported by the European Union, launched an extensive range of solidarity-driven initiatives to assist Ukrainian students, establishing an unprecedented network of support.<sup>5</sup> In the meantime, UNHCR launched the 15by30 campaign, aiming to raise refugee enrolment in universities to 15% by 2030. This goal was set with the recognition that, globally, over 40% of individuals aged 18 to 24 pursue higher education, while among refugees, the figure drops to just 7%.<sup>6</sup>

Within this broader international scenario, what is Italy's position? The Italian university system consists of approximately 100 institutions spread across the country.<sup>7</sup> However, despite this extensive network, enrolment rates among Italian students paint an alarming picture. While the global higher education enrolment average for the 15by30 target is 42%, in Italy it barely reaches 27%.<sup>8</sup> This challenge is further compounded by a declining birth rate, which has already begun to impact primary schools, leading to class consolidations and school closures. These demographic changes have yet to affect universities on a large scale, but it is only a matter of time before they do. To mitigate this, Italian universities have prioritised attracting international students<sup>9</sup> – not only to bridge the enrolment gap with other European nations but also as a strategic response to the shrinking student population. Despite these international recruitment efforts, little attention is given to foreign nationals already

<sup>5</sup> The reference for Italy is Law No. 28 of 5 April 2022, which contains urgent provisions regarding the crisis in Ukraine, with Article 5 addressing initiatives related to the academic sector.

<sup>6</sup> Source: <https://www.unhcr.org/media/15by30-roadmap-expanding-higher-education-skills-and-self-reliance-refugees> (accessed: 22/03/2025).

<sup>7</sup> The system comprises 54 general universities, 7 specialized universities (Polytechnic University of Ancona, Polytechnic University of Bari, Polytechnic University of Milan, Polytechnic University of Turin, "L'Orientale" University of Naples for non-European foreign languages, University of Rome "Foro Italico" for sports sciences, and IUAV University of Venice for architecture), and 7 universities with a special statute (the Gran Sasso Science Institute (GSSI) in L'Aquila, the Scuola Superiore Meridionale (SSM) in Naples, the International School for Advanced Studies (SISSA) in Trieste, the Institute for Advanced Studies (IUSS) in Pavia, the IMT School for Advanced Studies in Lucca, the Scuola Normale Superiore in Pisa, and the Sant'Anna School of Advanced Studies in Pisa). In addition, there are approximately twenty non-state universities. Source (Italian language): <https://www.mur.gov.it/it/aree-tematiche/universita/le-universita> (accessed: 22/03/2025).

<sup>8</sup> Sources (Italian language): <https://dati-ustat.mur.gov.it/dataset/iscritti> (accessed: 28/01/2025) and [https://www.infodata.ilssole24ore.com/2023/03/22/e-vero-che-i-giovani-italiani-vanno-meno-al-luniversita-dei-coetanei-europei/?refresh\\_ce=1](https://www.infodata.ilssole24ore.com/2023/03/22/e-vero-che-i-giovani-italiani-vanno-meno-al-luniversita-dei-coetanei-europei/?refresh_ce=1) (accessed: 22/03/2025).

<sup>9</sup> Official website of the Ministry of Universities and Research aimed at promoting the Italian higher education system abroad: <https://www.universityitaly.it/> (accessed: 22/03/2025).

residing in Italy, who tend to have even lower university enrolment rates than their Italian counterparts.<sup>10</sup>

Another relevant factor in this discussion is the presence of refugees in Italy. Due to its geographical location and extensive coastline, Italy is a primary point of entry<sup>11</sup> for many migrants seeking to reach Europe. Between 2020 and 2023, arrivals increased each year, with figures rising from 34,154 in 2020 to 157,652 in 2023. However, this trend reversed in 2024, with 63,417 arrivals via the Mediterranean recorded as of 8 December. By 30 November 2024, a total of 140,248 refugees and migrants were registered in the Italian reception system.<sup>12</sup>

### **The Local Context: Padua**

With a population of just under 210,000, Padua is a major city in the Veneto region, in the north-eastern part of Italy. With 32 Departments and over 70,000 enrolled students, the University of Padua, founded in 1222, is one of the oldest universities in Europe.<sup>13</sup> In its 803 years of history, the University of Padua has consistently stood out as a place of refuge for exiles and rebels, since its very founding by a group of students and professors who left Bologna in search of greater freedom. During World War II, the University upheld this tradition: in 1943, the then-Rector, Professor Concetto Marchesi, delivered a famous inaugural speech for that academic year and, before beginning his address on labour and freedom, he personally expelled the fascist militia present in the hall. It is therefore unsurprising that the University of Padua is the only one in Italy to have been awarded the Gold Medal for Military Valor, with the following motivation: “During the last great conflict [...] Padua’s University became

<sup>10</sup> Source (Italian language): the 2024 Report about foreign citizens residing in Italy, specifically p.63, retrieved from <https://www.cnel.it/Comunicazione-e-Stampa/Notizie/ArtMID/1174/ArticleID/4645/PRESENTATO-RAPPORTO-CNEL-CITTADINI-STRANIERI-IN-ITALIA> (accessed: 22/03/2025).

<sup>11</sup> In Europe, Italy remains among the top destinations for asylum seekers. In October 2024, Germany received the highest number of applications within the EU, with 22,000 (22% of the total). Spain and France followed closely, each receiving around 16,000 applications (17% and 16%, respectively). Italy ranked fourth, receiving 14,000 applications, accounting for 15% of the EU total. Together, these four nations processed 70% of all asylum applications lodged within the EU. Source: <https://euaa.europa.eu/latest-asylum-trends-asylum> (accessed: 22/03/2025).

<sup>12</sup> Source (Italian language): <https://www.unicef.it/emergenze/rifugiati-migranti-europa/> (accessed: 22/03/2025).

<sup>13</sup> Retrieved from: <https://www.unipd.it/en/university-padua> (accessed 22/03/2025).

a temple of civil faith and a bastion of heroic resistance”.<sup>14</sup> This rebellious yet welcoming spirit is reflected in the University’s motto, *Universa universis patavina libertas*, which means approximately “universal and for all is Padua’s freedom”. Moreover, the University of Padua has decided to give great importance to its commitment to defend human rights, writing it into the first article of its statute: “*The University promotes the development of a culture founded on universal values such as human rights, peace, environmental protection, and international solidarity.*”

This commitment is reaffirmed through the establishment of the Antonio Papisca University Centre for Human Rights,<sup>15</sup> founded in 1982 by the then Dean of the Faculty of Political Science, Professor Antonio Papisca. As a research, training, and dissemination hub within the University of Padua, the Centre focuses on issues related to human rights, democracy, and peace. The Centre’s work is closely linked to the UNESCO Chair in “Human Rights, Democracy and Peace”, established in 1999 through a specific agreement between the Director-General of UNESCO and the Rector of the University of Padua. Its strategic objective is to promote, both nationally and internationally, an integrated system of research, education, information, and documentation in the fields of human rights, democracy, and peace. The Chair is part of the Network of Italian UNESCO Chairs (ReCUI), created in 2022 as an evolution of the project “Dialogues of UNESCO Chairs: A Laboratory of Ideas for the World to Come”.

The university’s welcoming spirit aligns with that of the city that hosts it, which was named the European Capital of Volunteering in 2020.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, within the municipal administration, the Office for Peace, Human Rights, and International Cooperation actively promotes a culture of peace, human rights, and international collaboration. Working in synergy with associations, institutions, and organisations, it carries out various initiatives aimed at schools and the wider community. Its activities include establishing partnerships, supporting cooperation projects, participating in national and international networks, and engaging in awareness-raising and information campaigns.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Source: <https://800anniunipd.it/en/storia/medaglia-oro/> (accessed 24/04/2025)

<sup>15</sup> Website: <https://unipd-centrodirittiumani.it/en/activities/university-human-rights-centre> (accessed: 17/03/2025).

<sup>16</sup> Website (in Italian language only): <https://www.comune.padova.it/padova-capitale-europea-del-volontariato-2020> (accessed: 17/03/2025).

<sup>17</sup> Website (in Italian language only): <https://www.comune.padova.it/pace-diritti-umani-e-cooperazione-internazionale> (accessed: 17/03/2025).

In this favourable context, an agreement between the Municipality of Padua and the University of Padua, signed in July 2024, stands out as a key initiative to facilitate access to higher education for refugees. The agreement formalises collaboration between the two institutions, strengthening their commitment to supporting refugees interested in enrolling at the university. Under this framework, the Municipality pledges to disseminate information about the university through its websites, events, and meetings with refugees, while the University undertakes to assist refugees and asylum seekers by providing informational materials and organising promotional events about enrolment procedures. Both institutions also commit to promoting the agreement and encouraging other organisations and civil society representatives to join the initiative. While it may seem straightforward, the formalisation of such a commitment between two large and structured entities required months of dedicated effort, involving numerous offices, driven by the determined work of the Municipality's Department for Integration and Social Inclusion.

### **The University Initiatives**

Drawing upon its long-standing tradition of welcoming individuals, the University of Padua has undertaken a series of comprehensive initiatives to support refugees and students at risk, reinforcing its commitment to social responsibility and inclusivity.

The first initiative was called “*Cultura e accoglienza*” – the English translation would be “Culture and Hospitality”. The *Cultura e Accoglienza* project was launched by the University of Padua in 2016, with the aim of promoting the integration and education of international protection seekers by offering them tailored linguistic and academic pathways. The initiative, developed on an experimental basis, involved the Student Support and Tutoring Office, the University Language Centre (CLA), the ESU,<sup>18</sup> and various university services, with the objective of ensuring equal opportunities in education and encouraging the active participation of guest students in academic life. The project welcomed approximately thirty asylum seekers, offering them a structured educational programme that included Italian language courses at the CLA, the

<sup>18</sup> ESU is the regional authority for the right to education, responsible for managing university campuses and student residences. Website: <https://www.esu.pd.it/en/home-en/> (accessed: 22/03/2025).

opportunity to attend a single university course, and access to university facilities such as libraries, study rooms, and laboratories. Individual tutoring, a key element of the initiative, was provided through the support of volunteer students, administrative staff, and academic personnel, coordinated by three dedicated tutors. In the first experimental edition of a.y. 2016/2017, thirty-one students took part, coming from countries such as Nigeria, Gambia, Mali, Syria, Libya, Egypt, and Pakistan. Twelve students chose to attend a single university course in subjects such as Anglo-American Literature, European Union Law and Human Rights, and Social Psychology and Health, while twenty-five attended Italian language courses at the CLA, with eighteen successfully passing the final test. In addition to their studies, students had access to self-learning spaces such as the CLA's Media Library and language laboratories, took part in cultural initiatives such as *Process Drama*, a theatre-based course aimed at improving linguistic and sociolinguistic skills, and participated in orientation activities and bureaucratic support to facilitate their integration into the academic environment. The ESU also provided a daily meal for each student.

Following the positive outcomes of the first year, the University of Padua launched a second edition of the project in the a.y. 2017/2018, involving another thirty students. The long-term goal was to transform *Cultura e Accoglienza* from an experimental initiative into a structured programme, expanding the educational offer with English language courses and basic IT skills, while facilitating access to higher education for refugees and asylum seekers. Regrettably, the initiative was not renewed, not as a result of low student enrolment, but due to changes in the organisational structure of the administrative offices and governance. These changes prompted a redefinition of strategic priorities and a reallocation of available resources, notwithstanding the project's positive evaluation.

Fast forward to 2021, when the University of Padua reaffirms its commitment to the right to education and the academic inclusion of individuals in vulnerable situations through specific measures dedicated to refugee students. Firstly, students who have already been granted refugee status or subsidiary protection by the Italian authorities are entitled to a full exemption from the comprehensive tuition fee, including the pre-en-

rolment fee.<sup>19</sup> They are only required to pay the revenue stamp and the regional tax for the right to university education.

Secondly, since 2023, individuals holding a residence permit for asylum or international protection application<sup>20</sup> are eligible to enrol in Bachelor's, Master's, or single-cycle degree programmes offered by the University. However, enrolment and the awarding of the degree are conditional upon the formal recognition of refugee status or subsidiary protection. The student must provide a copy of the residence permit (or the official decision by the competent Territorial Commission recognising refugee status) before the conclusion of their studies.

Moreover, responding to international crises in regions such as Afghanistan, Ukraine, and Myanmar, the University launched several targeted support programmes. In September 2021, in response to the sudden collapse of the Afghan government and the resulting deterioration of civil liberties, the University of Padua launched the *Unipd 4 Afghanistan* programme. The initiative represents a pioneering act of social responsibility, funded by the University itself<sup>21</sup> and reinforced by a fundraising campaign involving both public and private institutions. Through two successive calls (a.y. 2021/22 and a.y. 2022/23), a total of 48 scholarships were awarded to Afghan students. Each scholarship was worth €12,000 per year and included an exemption from university tuition fees. The scholarships covered up to two academic years for Master's degree programmes and up to three years for Bachelor's degree programmes. Managed by the International Relations Area, the programme selected beneficiaries based on academic merit, language proficiency, and motivation, with preference given to female applicants and younger candidates.

Unfortunately, in the first edition of the call, around half of the students chose to withdraw. It thus became evident that goodwill alone is not sufficient if it is not accompanied by a rigorous selection process and consistent, long-term support. By contrast, the second edition yielded significantly more positive outcomes: adopting a more pragmatic rather than purely humanitarian approach, and focusing on identifying candidates with a real chance of success, that is, with a stronger personal and academic background, proved to be a winning strategy. Equally crucial was the continuous monitoring, aimed at tracking progress, encouraging

<sup>19</sup> Approved with Board Resolution n. 37 dated 23 February 2021.

<sup>20</sup> Approved with resolution of the Academic Senate n. 114 dated 12 September 2023.

<sup>21</sup> Approved with Board resolution n. 225, dated 9 September 2021.

commitment, and providing reassurance during challenging moments: the students felt encouraged to give their best, being accompanied in moments of difficulty. The results clearly show that this caring approach is effective, since all students are either regularly enrolled or have already graduated.

Following the outbreak of war in Ukraine in February 2022, the University of Padua activated several initiatives to support Ukrainian<sup>22</sup> students and citizens. For the academic year 2021/22, the University awarded 50 scholarships worth €3,100 each to Ukrainians who wished to enrol in individual courses. These scholarships also included an exemption from enrolment fees for such courses. For the academic year 2022/23, up to 75 scholarships were made available to Ukrainian students; each scholarship provided €6,200 per academic year and full exemption from university tuition fees.<sup>23</sup> Unfortunately, of the 75 scholarships made available to Ukrainian students, only 33 were actually taken up: during the period in question, the large number of scholarships on offer led to a dispersion of applications, since Ukrainian students received numerous offers from different universities across the Global North. An additional critical issue was that the scholarships were limited to financial support (cash grants), with no accompanying assistance from the universities in terms of guidance, logistical help, or psychological support. These shortcomings were partially addressed through spontaneous acts of solidarity from students, citizens, and local associations, whose contribution proved essential in providing meaningful support to the scholarship recipients.

As part of its long-standing commitment to safeguarding the right to education and promoting global inclusion, the University of Padua launched the *Unipd 4 Myanmar*<sup>24</sup> programme for the 2023/24 academic year, aimed at Burmese students facing vulnerability due to the political and military crisis that erupted in Myanmar following the coup d'état of 1 February 2021. At the invitation of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, the University responded with concrete action by offering two scholarships to Burmese nationals wishing to continue their university studies in a safe environment. Funded by the proceeds of the event *The Academy Night. Freshers & Students Welcome Concert* held on 4 October 2022, each scholarship provided

<sup>22</sup> Approved with Board resolution n. 68, dated 22 March 2022.

<sup>23</sup> In all scholarship programmes, the tuition fee waiver excludes the regional tax and stamp duty.

<sup>24</sup> Approved with Board resolution n. 8, dated 24 January 2023.

an annual grant of €8,000 and a full tuition fee waiver. Unfortunately, the scholarship covered one academic year only -- a decision that surprised the students and led to a debate in the university. The selection process, managed by the International Relations Area, evaluated candidates based on academic merit, language proficiency, and motivation. In the case of a tie, preference was given to female applicants and younger candidates. Scholarships were primarily reserved for those applying to English-taught programmes or open-access Italian-taught Master's degrees. This case is of particular interest as it was not originally part of the university's plans but rather initiated following an invitation from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (MAE-CI). Equally noteworthy is the fundraising initiative organised by the university's Communication Area, which demonstrated strong strategic coordination and engagement.

Building on these experiences, in 2023 the University established the *UNIPD 4 People at Risk*<sup>25</sup> working group, coordinated by the Vice-Rector for Third Mission and the Vice-Rector for International Relations. The group, composed of around ten academic and administrative representatives from various areas of the University, met over several sessions with the aim of defining selection criteria and expanding the pool of potential beneficiaries beyond those holding formal refugee status or international protection. As a result, two calls for applications were issued: *Unipd 4 Scholars at Risk*<sup>26</sup> and *Unipd 4 Students at Risk*<sup>27</sup>. Unlike previous initiatives that focused on specific nations, these new programmes expanded its reach globally, consolidating financial support for both students and scholars.<sup>28</sup>

Since 2023, the *UNIPD 4 Students at Risk* programme has been aimed at students from vulnerable and at-risk backgrounds who wish to continue their academic journey in a safe and inclusive environment. This initiative builds on the University's experience with previous projects for Afghanistan, Ukraine, and Myanmar, and marks a significant evolution: it moves beyond a focus on individual countries and broadens the definition of "at risk" to include not only refugees, but also those facing violence, discrimination, armed conflict or political repression. For the

<sup>25</sup> Approved with Rectoral Decree n. 166, dated 20 January 2023.

<sup>26</sup> Approved with Board resolution n. 32, dated 28 February 2023.

<sup>27</sup> Approved with Board resolution n. 32, dated 28 February 2023.

<sup>28</sup> Website: <https://www.unipd.it/en/opportunities-scholars-risk> (accessed 17/03/2025).

academic year 2025/26, the University is offering 15 scholarships,<sup>29</sup> each worth €12,000 per year, which include full exemption from university tuition fees and coverage of travel costs to Italy. The scholarships, renewable for the standard duration of the study programme, are available to applicants enrolling in Bachelor's, Master's or single-cycle degree programmes taught in Italian or English. The selection process, managed by the International Relations Area, similarly to the previous ones, evaluates candidates based on academic merit, motivation, language proficiency, and risk status, giving priority to female and younger applicants.

Through these wide-ranging initiatives, the University of Padua continues to reaffirm its commitment to supporting refugees and students at risk, fostering a truly inclusive academic environment that values diversity and ensures equal opportunities for all.

### National Projects

The initiatives conceived and carried forward by the University of Padua are part of a broader framework of national networks and projects that the university has chosen to join. In 2019,<sup>30</sup> the University signed the *Manifesto on an Inclusive University*,<sup>31</sup> an initiative by UNHCR Italy to facilitate access to higher education for refugees, while promoting their social inclusion and active participation in academic life. The *Manifesto* was conceived as a response to the pressing need to ensure equitable access to higher education for refugees, acknowledging the immense cultural, intellectual, and technical contributions they can offer to host communities; it embodies the commitment of academic institutions to fostering a more inclusive and diverse educational environment. By adhering to this initiative, universities not only uphold their fundamental mission of teaching and research but also embrace their Third Mission, which emphasises engagement with society to drive social, cultural, and economic development. Universities subscribing to this vision pledge to ensure that no student or academic is excluded on the basis of nationality or legal status, fostering an atmosphere of hospitality where refugee students, researchers, and lecturers are fully supported in their academic and pro-

<sup>29</sup> Website: <https://www.unipd.it/en/students-at-risk> (accessed 21/03/2025).

<sup>30</sup> Approved with resolution of the Academic Senate n. 111 dated 12 November 2019.

<sup>31</sup> Website: <https://www.unhcr.org/it/manifesto-on-an-inclusive-university/> (accessed: 17/03/2025).

fessional aspirations. Moreover, beyond ensuring access, the initiative also seeks to enhance the scientific and cultural understanding of forced migration, international protection, and asylum, thus encouraging informed discourse and fostering a more inclusive academic dialogue.

A fundamental aspect of this commitment is the recognition that integration is not a unilateral process but a dynamic interaction between refugees and the host academic community. Universities are called upon to develop policies that support this mutual adaptation, encouraging exchanges that allow both refugees and local students to benefit from diverse perspectives and experiences. To this end, institutions subscribing to the *Manifesto* pledge to take concrete action in several key areas, including providing guidance and support services tailored to the specific needs of refugee students, ensuring transparency in the recognition of foreign qualifications, and offering scholarships and financial assistance to mitigate economic barriers. Furthermore, universities play a crucial role in facilitating safe and legal access to education for refugee scholars through humanitarian corridors, allowing students and researchers residing in third countries to continue their academic journey in a supportive environment. Participation in university life is also actively encouraged, with institutions committing to involve refugee students in governance, research projects, and public discussions, thus reinforcing their role as active members of the academic community.

Following the signature of the *Manifesto* in 2020,<sup>32</sup> the University joined the University Corridors for Refugees (UNICORE)<sup>33</sup> project, also promoted by UNHCR. Now in its seventh edition (2025), the project involves over 30 Italian universities and aims to offer refugees residing in African countries the opportunity to safely and legally continue their higher education in Italy through access to Master's degree programmes. Through this initiative, the University of Padua has welcomed nine refugee students in total, ensuring they receive the necessary academic and social support to facilitate their integration. The success of the project is underpinned by an extensive support network (national and local) which includes financial aid, accommodation, psychological support, language training, mentoring programmes, and tailored student services. This multidimensional approach has proven effective not only in academic achievement, but also in fostering social inclusion and long-term pro-

<sup>32</sup> Approved with Board resolution n. 118, dated 26 May 2020.

<sup>33</sup> Website: <https://universitycorridors.unhcr.it/> (accessed: 17/03/2025).

fessional development. For the 2025/26 academic year, the University of Padua is offering two fully funded scholarships in collaboration with UNHCR and several local partners such as Diaconia Valdese,<sup>34</sup> Associazione Popoli Insieme,<sup>35</sup> Associazione Migranti,<sup>36</sup> Fondazione IRPEA,<sup>37</sup> Refugees Welcome Italy,<sup>38</sup> Orizzonti Società Cooperativa Sociale.<sup>39</sup> The support is conditional to the signing of the cooperation agreement between the parties.

Applicants must hold refugee status as recognised by UNHCR and have completed a Bachelor's degree between 1 January 2020 and 2 May 2025, with a minimum GPA of 3.0/4.0 (or 24/30 in the Italian system), and at least a B2 level of English proficiency. The programme covers full tuition fee exemption, free accommodation in university or affiliated residences, two free meals per day during weekdays, and an annual scholarship of €3,600 paid in four instalments, with an additional €1,800 available for students graduating by March 2028. It also includes reimbursement of travel and residence permit expenses, health insurance coverage, free Italian language courses, psychological support, and ongoing academic and social integration assistance. Selection takes place in two phases: an initial assessment of submitted documents (degree certificate, CV, motivation), followed by an online interview in English to evaluate motivation, preparedness, and academic fit. To renew the scholarship for the second year, students must obtain at least 30 ECTS credits by September 2026. In case of delays, it is possible to request an extension of support until July 2028, provided the student has acquired at least 90 credits. Given its holistic approach, the UNICORE programme stands as a concrete example of international solidarity and equitable access to higher education for individuals facing vulnerability.

## Conclusions

This chapter has highlighted the significant commitment of the University of Padua to promoting Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) in sup-

<sup>34</sup> Website (Italian language only): <https://www.diaconiavaldese.org/> (accessed: 17/03/2025).

<sup>35</sup> Website: <https://www.popolinsieme.eu/en/> (accessed: 17/03/2025).

<sup>36</sup> Website (Italian language only): <https://migrantonlus.it/> (accessed: 17/03/2025).

<sup>37</sup> Website (Italian language only): <https://www.irpea.it/newsite/> (accessed: 17/03/2025).

<sup>38</sup> Website (Italian language only): <https://refugees-welcome.it/> (accessed: 17/03/2025).

<sup>39</sup> Website (Italian language only): <https://www.orizzonticoop.it/> (accessed: 17/03/2025).

port of refugees and students at risk. Through various initiatives, the university has sought to create a more inclusive academic environment that enables displaced students to rebuild their lives, access higher education, and develop the skills needed to feel part of their new society, despite not being formally guaranteed citizenship. These efforts reflect a growing awareness of the role that universities must play in responding to global humanitarian challenges and ensuring that education remains accessible to all, regardless of their circumstances.

However, while these initiatives demonstrate a strong commitment to EDI principles, there is considerable room for improvement in both their scope and implementation. The complexity of forced displacement requires more than just access to education; it demands comprehensive support structures that address the academic, financial, psychological, and social needs of refugee students. Limited financial resources, bureaucratic barriers, and gaps in institutional coordination can hinder the effectiveness of existing programmes. Therefore, further efforts are needed to refine and expand current strategies to provide a more sustainable and impactful model of inclusion.

First and foremost, a holistic approach is needed: one that ensures meaningful and lasting support for these groups of students. A truly inclusive educational framework should go beyond tuition waivers and scholarships, incorporating measures such as mentoring programmes, career counselling, language support, and mental health services. Additionally, fostering partnerships between universities, local governments, NGOs, and the private sector can enhance the reach and effectiveness of these initiatives, ensuring that students receive support not only within the academic sphere, but also in their transition to employment and full social participation.

Another crucial aspect to consider is the long-term impact of these efforts: providing access to education is only the first step; universities must also ensure that refugee students are equipped with the tools necessary for long-term stability and professional success. In this regard, the Canadian model<sup>40</sup> stands out as particularly effective, as it not only offers financial support, but also incorporates long-term resettlement strate-

<sup>40</sup> Started in 1978 with just one student, the WUSC Student Refugee Program has since helped more than 2,600 young refugees access higher education in Canada. Its success is largely due to its distinctive youth-to-youth sponsorship model and its focus on long-term stability and sustainable solutions, rather than solely on academic achievement. Website: <https://srp.wusc.ca/> (accessed: 17/03/2025).

gies, facilitating pathways to citizenship and employment opportunities. Exploring similar approaches in the European context could significantly enhance the outcomes of existing programmes and contribute to the broader goal of refugee integration.

Future research could play a key role in assessing the replicability of Padua's initiatives in other Italian and international universities. Comparative studies across different institutional and national contexts could provide valuable insights into best practices and potential challenges in implementing EDI-focused policies for refugees. Additionally, gathering qualitative data on the experiences of refugee students themselves would be essential in shaping policies that truly respond to their needs and aspirations.

Defending and appropriately expanding EDI for refugee students is not just a moral imperative but a commitment to a more inclusive and resilient society, one where opportunity knows no borders and potential is never left behind. By taking decisive action today, universities can help shape a future in which education serves as a powerful tool for social mobility, integration, and global solidarity. If not now, when?

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# *FROM DISPLACEMENT TO BELONGING: BUILDING INCLUSIVE UNIVERSITIES THROUGH BESPOKE REFUGEE EDUCATION PATHWAYS*

MARY DEMPSEY, ANDREW FLAUS, AIDAN HARTE

## **Introduction**

UNHCR, the United Nations Refugee Agency, estimates that over 110 million people have been forcibly displaced globally (UNHCR RefugeeData-Finder). In 2019, it was estimated that only 1% of refugees were enrolled in higher education in stark contrast to the global average of over 40% among non-refugees (UNHCR15by30). In response, UNHCR launched the '15by30' roadmap, a global initiative aimed at increasing refugee enrolment in higher education to 15% by 2030. This focused effort has already produced progress and by 2024 had enabled 7% of refugees to gain access to higher education (UNHCR15by30).

An effective approach to expanding access to higher education for refugees is the development of education pathways/corridors combining academic achievement, personal development, and integration into new communities. These establish a safe and supportive route enabling refugees to move from the country of first asylum to a higher education institution (HEI) in a host country.

Several countries have established education pathways to support refugee access to higher education including Student Refugee Programme (SRP) led by World University Service of Canada (WUSC), University Corridors for Refugees (UniCoRe) Italy, UNIV'R France, APGES and NEXUS Portugal, and initiatives co-ordinated by the Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst (DAAD) Germany. While these pathways differ in their coordination models and the national immigration structures they operate within, they share common features including formal commitments by host universities and the provision of campus-based support networks that aid both the social integration and academic ambition of participating refugees.

The Government of Ireland operates the Irish Refugee Protection Programme (IRPP) facilitating the resettlement of refugees from countries hosting large, displaced populations. The programme prioritises vulnerability over educational background and offers financial assistance, accommodation, and social and integration services. In contrast, international protection applicants (IPAs)<sup>1</sup> who arrive in Ireland independently, often undertaking a perilous and costly personal journey to reach Ireland, can access higher education through the same Central Applications Office and postgraduate application systems used by Irish/European Union (EU) citizens.

Ireland operates the successful Ireland Fellows Programme<sup>2</sup> through Irish Aid, enrolling over 200 students annually from 40 countries in postgraduate degrees. The programme is country specific rather than refugee targeted and eligibility criteria require applicants to have two to three years relevant professional experience in their field. IPAs can also be supported through Universities of Sanctuary (UoS) programmes established by HEIs across Ireland, to access higher education if resident in the State for under 36 months or eligible to apply for State-provided maintenance grants after 36 months. In addition to these pathways, IPAs/refugees can be eligible to apply for campus and community support once registered as students.

More than 25,000 international students enrol in Irish universities annually by meeting the academic entry criteria, paying substantial tuition fees, and providing evidence of their ability to cover living costs. In 2020, fee-paying international students were estimated to contribute €2.4 billion to the Irish economy, highlighting the significance of international education as an export industry which is actively promoted and targeted for further growth as part of Ireland's national higher education and economic strategies (Indecon International Education Strategy).

However, these international routes have created a humanitarian gap as Ireland has not offered an education pathway for refugees residing in countries of first asylum outside the EU to access higher education. To address this, UNHCR Ireland and Nasc,<sup>3</sup> the Migrant & Refugee Rights Centre partnered with other non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and universities in Italy and Belgium to develop the EU-Passworld pro-

<sup>1</sup> Also known as asylum seekers.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.irishaidfellowships.ie/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://nascireland.org>

ject. Funded by EU Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) from 2022-2024, the project aimed to design, pilot and implement nationally co-ordinated refugee education and labour pathways in each of the three participating countries for up to 200 refugees living outside the EU. The education pathway was designed to combine academic opportunities with community-based support and promote long-term refugee integration. The project was supported by the Government of Ireland's Departments of Justice, and Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth.

This chapter describes University of Galway's role in piloting Ireland's first Education Pathway for refugees residing outside the EU as an Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) initiative and highlights the extent of internal and external collaborations essential to the pathway's implementation. It also offers perspectives on how embedding targeted supports can facilitate a smoother transition for students from education to employment and broader societal integration ultimately transforming lives and driving meaningful social and cultural change.

### **Engagement of University of Galway in Education Pathways**

University of Galway (Ollscoil na Gaillimhe) is a publicly funded research university located in Galway, Ireland on the western edge of Europe. Established in 1845, it is ranked among the top universities globally. It enrolled around 19,700 students, including international students from over 120 countries in 2024.

In 2021, the University was already collaborating with UNHCR Ireland on an EDI project led by the Vice Dean for EDI in the College of Science and Engineering<sup>4</sup> that highlighted the refugee journey and academic achievements of a Professor in the College of Science and Engineering, including the production of a short film.<sup>5</sup> Building on this partnership, UNHCR Ireland invited University of Galway to act as the lead university for Ireland in piloting a refugee education pathway for the EU Passworld<sup>6</sup> project. This invitation reflected the strategic value of universities

<sup>4</sup> A College is equivalent to a Faculty.

<sup>5</sup> From Tehran to Galway

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.eupassworld.eu>

cultivating strong networks with NGOs and government agencies and enabling them to participate in broader EDI initiatives.

Refugee education pathways are defined by UNHCR as programmes that facilitate the movement of persons in need of international protection to a safe third country for the purpose of higher education, while also having their protection needs met (UNHCR *Complementary-pathways/education-pathways*). The implementation of this vision rests on a complex set of interactions involving a host university in multiple partnerships both externally with agencies, NGOs, companies, and the local community, and internally between colleges and professional services support units. Four critical features for successful implementation included the support of senior leadership, forging of rich collaborations, smooth integration into existing processes and structures, and a pathway design that emphasises a transition through education to employment and social integration.

### **The Importance of Senior Leadership Support**

Recognising the urgent need for action to pilot an education pathway for Ireland, the Vice Dean for EDI in Science and Engineering made a compelling case to University of Galway leadership, including the President, Vice President for EDI, Vice President for Engagement and the Executive Dean of Science and Engineering. Following this engagement, the University leadership agreed to support a pilot project. The financial support that made the project possible was generously provided by a University of Galway alum through a philanthropic contribution to the UoS initiative and directed to support the pilot with the support of the UoS Officer.

The Education Pathway project aligned closely with University of Galway's Strategic Plan<sup>7</sup> which is based on four core values of Respect, Openness, Sustainability and Excellence. These values, including a commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion, drive every aspect of the work that defines the University's purpose and priorities. It also aligned with the Race Equality Action Plan and UoS Programme as well as UN sustainable development goals specifically for inclusive and equitable quality education opportunities for all (SDG4), for promoting inclusive

<sup>7</sup> University of Galway Strategic Plan

and effective institutions and societies (SDG 16) and for creating global partnerships to achieving sustainable development (SDG 17).

This commitment was reinforced by the Vice President for EDI in a subsequent interview:

The project really emulates and fosters those principles and those practices. It starts from the principle of non-judgement and says there is a place for people from all backgrounds across the globe who belong in higher education. That we fully believe and support that you will have the capacity to achieve your potential given the opportunity and given the right environment and the right community of support around you on that journey.<sup>8</sup>

A core group comprising the Vice Deans of EDI and Internationalisation in the College of Science and Engineering and the UoS Officer<sup>9</sup> collaborated with UNHCR Ireland and Nasc to implement a new education pathway for Ireland, linked to Community Sponsorship, aimed at creating new opportunities for refugee students to rebuild their lives through higher education opportunities. To formalise the collaboration, the partners signed a Letter of Understanding outlining the roles and responsibilities of each partner, and a data sharing agreement was issued. The initiative is reported through the College of Science and Engineering's EDI committee and the UoS programme structures. In 2023 in support of the Government of Ireland pledge as part of the Global Refugee Forum in Geneva<sup>10</sup>, UNHCR Ireland invited University of Galway to also make a pledge to actively support other HEIs in establishing refugee education pathways.<sup>11</sup> These early commitments, reporting structures and ongoing support were grounded in a clear alignment with Government policy and University of Galway's strategic values with a clear agenda to recruit refugee students from outside the EU and decrease the humanitarian gap.

### **Collaboration with a Network of External Partners**

While HEIs have internationalisation experience and many have dedicated International Offices, their networks, efforts, and knowledge are often oriented on countries that are education peers, sources of fee-paying

<sup>8</sup> Safe Sanctuary: Belonging at the University of Galway

<sup>9</sup> The Sanctuary Officer is based in the Office of the Vice President for EDI (OVPEDI).

<sup>10</sup> Ireland pledges support at Global Refugee Forum | Ireland.ie

<sup>11</sup> University of Galway pledges support at Global Refugee Forum

students or scholarship partnerships. Universities are natural anchors for refugee education pathways but lack the expertise to manage the process independently. They require external assistance in areas such as outreaching and recruiting within refugee communities in countries of first asylum, navigating complex documentation and travel protocols for refugee transit along with supporting the successful integration of students from displaced backgrounds into campus life. The successful implementation of University of Galway's education pathway has depended significantly on four key external partnerships.

### ***UNHCR as a global partner and leader in education pathways***

UNHCR is a global organisation that coordinates United Nations refugee responses globally through a network of over 18,000 staff in 136 countries. This extensive presence positions UNHCR as a primary source of scholarship information for refugees, especially through their operations in refugee camps and urban communities. Additionally, UNHCR data on demographics, educational backgrounds, and settlement patterns informs the selection of countries most in need of an education pathway.

For the 2023-24 pilot,<sup>12</sup> UNHCR Ireland assumed responsibility for outreach targeting refugees in Nigeria as the country of first asylum followed by Uganda for the 2024-25 and 2025-26 cohorts. Their role included distributing information to promote the availability of scholarship places in Ireland through the UNHCR Scholarship Opportunities for Refugees database using content provided by University of Galway. Following the pilot, they have also co-ordinated a national application system for education pathways scholarships across Ireland. Additionally, UNHCR Ireland and their field offices verify the refugee status of shortlisted applicants and arrange Convention Travel Documents (CTDs) that serve as functional travel equivalents for refugees. A strong partnership with UNHCR is essential for the effective implementation of a refugee education pathway. The recent visit by UNHCR Deputy High Commissioner to Ireland highlighted the growing international recognition of Ireland's leadership as a role model for inclusive education.

<sup>12</sup> Launch of the inaugural scholarships

### ***NGO, Nasc as a partner providing vital national expertise***

In parallel with international coordination, national expertise in refugee immigration procedures and integration is essential for the successful implementation of the education pathway. This role has been fulfilled by Nasc, an Irish NGO based in Cork, Ireland whose name means “link” in the Irish language. Nasc specialises in refugee and migrant support, legal assistance and policy advocacy. Working closely with UNHCR Ireland, Nasc negotiated a visa arrangement with the Government of Ireland’s Department of Justice that both merges the international protection and integration needs of refugees for their education pathway and provides a structured pathway towards long-term residency and employment. A key component of this visa included the provision of a medical card.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, with 25 years’ experience, Nasc was uniquely positioned to provide mentorship and guidance on refugee integration into Irish society as well as the development of support networks on university campuses.

### ***Community Sponsorship Group as a key integration partner***

A key feature of refugee education pathways implementation is an active Community Sponsorship Group (CSG), sometimes referred to as a ‘local committee’. The concept of ‘sponsorship’ in English comprises both social support in the form of mentorship and community integration and financial support through contributions to living and educational expenses. The CSG undertakes fundraising activities to help meet the students’ financial needs. The role of the CSG is to foster refugee integration by ensuring they have access to essential resources and community connections that enable them to thrive in their new environment.

This means that CSG members commit to providing mentorship and guidance to the education pathway scholars from the point of arrival at the airport, throughout their time as students residing on campus and post-graduation transitioning into private rented accommodation and employment. The CSG is responsible for preparing the annual Integration and Support Plan, which is necessary for the visa application process. The CSG also links refugees with migrant support organisations

<sup>13</sup> Medical cards are issued by the Irish State to provide access to a wide range of free or subsidised healthcare services in Ireland for socio-economically disadvantaged individuals.

in Galway city strengthening the student's social safety net and raising community awareness.

“Pobal na Gaillimhe” (“Community of Galway” in the Irish language)<sup>14</sup> was established as the CSG for the University of Galway refugee education pathways initiative in November 2022. It has been supported by the UoS in close partnership with Nasc which has provided formal training to a diverse group of volunteers, including members of the Galway community as well as university students and staff.

The CSG sponsors the education pathway scholars by providing financial assistance through fundraising efforts and plays an active role in promoting integration, ensuring the scholars have access to the necessary resources and community connections to thrive in their new environment. Chair of Pobal na Gaillimhe has remarked that:

It has probably been one of the most rewarding activities I've taken part in ... seeing [the refugees] grow, seeing them settle, seeing them become part of university life and flourishing as a result of it ... That's just been wonderful.<sup>15</sup>

### ***Engagement with Aerogen as an industry partner to scaffold the pathway to employment***

The fourth external partnership pillar for the implementation of the education pathway has been the collaboration with Aerogen,<sup>16</sup> a small-medium sized enterprise (SME) in the medical device technology sector. Founded in 1997 as a spin-off from University of Galway, Aerogen has maintained strong ties with the university through collaborative research, student placements and long-standing professional relationships.

MedTech is a vital contributor to Galway's economy employing over 15,000 people in a city of 80,000. As part of the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations in 2023, Aerogen committed to funding 25 initiatives that reflected its core values. They selected the refugee education pathway in recognition of the significant barriers refugees face in accessing higher education. Aerogen made a financial contribution to the CSG and offered paid research internships and professional mentoring for two students, providing them with valuable industry exposure and guidance in an Irish context whilst demonstrating their corporate social responsibility. These

<sup>14</sup> Pobal na Gaillimhe

<sup>15</sup> Safe Sanctuary: Belonging at the University of Galway

<sup>16</sup> Aerogen support for Refugee Education Pathways

internships were integrated into the student's MSc programmes. The success led Aerogen to continue its support into 2024-25. The combination of industry experience and one-to-one mentoring enhances the employability of refugee students post-graduation and adds momentum to the sustainability of the pathway.

Collaborating with the four partners UNHCR Ireland for global reach, Nasc as a local refugee NGO, Pobal na Gaillimhe as the CSG and Aerogen as a supportive SME has created a national framework for education pathways implementation. University of Galway has played a pivotal role as the first HEI in Ireland to design and pilot an accessible and inclusive education pathway including a link to employment experience of this kind.

### **Internal Integration with Campus Operations: Programmes, Recruitment and Support**

Student education and support at a university are co-ordinated through a complex network of formal academic and administrative structures. At University of Galway, the successful implementation of the education pathway relies on the co-ordinated efforts of key internal 'touch points' including the Offices of the Vice-Presidents for EDI and Engagement, Accommodation & Welfare Office, the Chaplaincy, the Counselling Service, Admissions and Fees Offices, host academic programmes, and Career Development Centre (CDC).<sup>17</sup>

The University of Sanctuary (UoS) represents one of the foundational pillars of the Places of Sanctuary movement<sup>18</sup> which advocates for a culture of welcome and inclusivity across society. Originating in the UK in the early 2000s, it was established in Ireland in 2015 through the expansion of the UoS network to include formal affiliations and regular accreditation of all seven universities and several HEIs under a national committee structure. At University of Galway, UoS provides a guided framework and campus identity that drives a more welcoming and inclusive environment for marginalised groups such as refugees, undocumented immigrants, and the Irish Traveller community.

The UoS at University of Galway originated through collective student

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.universityofgalway.ie/career-development-centre/>

<sup>18</sup> <https://universities.cityofsanctuary.org>

activism. In 2019, University of Galway appointed a part-time researcher, who was also a founding member, to coordinate the programme. The role was made full-time and permanent in 2021, reflecting the university's sustained commitment to the programme. The UoS officer now oversees a range of activities including scholarships, orientation programmes and mentoring for sanctuary scholars. The programme is strategically guided by the Vice President for EDI. This dedicated level of investment highlights a strong and ongoing commitment to embedding EDI values and principles in the support of sanctuary students.

The UoS Scholarship Programme supports marginalised groups resident in Ireland and was developed with input from local and national refugee advocacy groups, refugees, Irish Traveller organisations and Irish Travellers as well as university staff and students. UoS scholars are involved in the development of all UoS activities and play a key role in the development of the flagship scholarship programme which has welcomed 71 students from 24 countries across undergraduate and post-graduate programmes in just over six years. Indeed, UoS has provided an ideal EDI framework for implementing refugee education pathways with the expertise of the UoS Officer.

Refugee education pathway scholarship students have been recognised as UoS Scholars, meaning they have benefited from the UoS portfolio of support. The smooth integration with UoS provided immediate credibility for the refugee education pathway. One student on the education pathways programme stated:

I am incredibly grateful for the support I have received from Community Sponsorship, the University of Galway, and the University of Sanctuary programme. At first, it was challenging to make friends due to the significant cultural and social differences, and I often felt out of place. However, with the kindness and encouragement and positivity of the Community Sponsorship team, who have become like family and friends, I now feel truly at home.<sup>19</sup>

At University of Galway, formal validation and student registration is managed by the Admissions Office as part of the central registry system. A guiding principle in implementing the refugee education pathway has been to adhere to standard academic processes. This approach reinforces the integrity of the pathway and affirms refugee scholars' merit-based selection. To support this, the application and selection process for ref-

<sup>19</sup> Safe Sanctuary: Belonging at the University of Galway

ugee scholars is conducted prior to the admissions process. This ensures that once a scholarship offer is accepted, the registration process remains standardised.

Recruitment begins with an advertising campaign in the target country co-ordinated by UNHCR Ireland.<sup>20</sup> A structured academically focused selection process follows where applications are filtered and ranked based on criteria including undergraduate grades, degree relevance and English language capability. The grade transcripts and cover letters of the most suitable students are then provided to the relevant programme directors for academic assessment and ranking. A unique challenge in this process is that countries of origin and first asylum for refugee applicants fall outside the University's traditional recruitment base for fee paying international students. As a result, a careful analysis of academic standards and qualification equivalences from these regions is conducted, and this information is provided to programme directors as part of the academic due diligence. Additionally, assurances regarding minimum English language proficiency are provided. Programme directors agree in advance that any student ranked can be selected by the interview panel.

This separation of academic evaluation from EDI considerations ensures that admissions are based on academic merit while broader EDI goals are addressed elsewhere in the process. The candidates ranked by the programme directors are then evaluated alongside EDI considerations to create a final shortlist for interviews. At this stage, UNHCR verifies shortlisted applicant's refugee status, and candidates are invited for online interviews. University of Galway worked closely with the DAFI Scholarship Coordinator to develop the interview process. WUSC provided a rubric and interview questionnaire as a reference, which University of Galway adapted for the selection process. Chaired by the Vice Dean for Graduate Studies, the interview panel consists of academics and also includes the UoS Officer, and a representative from the Galway City Partnership, a community development organisation. The panel completes relevant UNHCR training to ensure a refugee sensitive and contextually appropriate approach.

The interviews assess candidates on motivations for study, educational background, English language level and potential for integration and

<sup>20</sup> <https://services.unhcr.org/opportunities/>

reaches a collective agreement on the ranking of candidates for scholarship offers. All stages of this upstream process are formally documented to ensure transparency, uphold academic standards, and reflect best practices in EDI.

Refugee students who accept education pathway scholarship offers are then guided and mentored through the international student application process. The Admissions Office awareness of the refugee context is particularly valuable as applicants may present atypical documentation. Once the application is processed and approved, the applicant receives an Unconditional Letter of Acceptance which is required for the visa application process managed by UNHCR Ireland and Nasc. Subsequently, the Fees Office completes the last step of the registration process, enabling the refugees to enrol as students.

All academic programmes at University of Galway are overseen by a programme director who is responsible for maintaining academic standards and coordinating student support and mentorship. In the first two years of the pilot, five MSc programmes in the College of Science and Engineering participated. The 2025-26 offering was streamlined to three MSc programmes as part of a national agreement designed to simplify implementation across three universities. All programme directors have demonstrated strong support for the refugee education pathways, and the programmes typically include 20-80% of international students, which can also support integration for refugee students. Anecdotally this stems from a shared appreciation for classroom internationalisation as well as a deep personal and professional to EDI initiatives. As a result, programme directors have shown flexibility in areas such as the special context of the undergraduate qualifications of refugees, provision of additional mentoring, and integration of pre-arranged industry placements.

A common challenge for students from all backgrounds is developing a clear understanding of the practical realities and expectations of the employment market they intend to enter after graduation. Many arrive with limited awareness or preconceived ideas. For refugee students on the education pathway significant support has been the Career Development Centre (CDC), the primary unit for employability training and career development. Refugee students are actively encouraged to complete the CDC Employability Award, which is a self-guided certificate offered to all students to help them build essential employability skills and mar-

ket awareness. CDC also recently established a dedicated section focused on global employability specifically designed to support international students keen to build careers in Ireland. This section has made special efforts to support the refugee students by providing personal mentoring in areas such as CV writing, interview skills, and employment opportunity awareness.

Internal CDC support has been complemented by an external employability platform offered to refugee students by the Global Mentorship Initiative (GMI).<sup>21</sup> GMI pairs students with experienced industry professionals in a structured mentoring programme providing valuable perspectives from mentors with real world experiences. This connects refugee students to global networks and career guidance beyond the university setting.

In addition, Aerogen has played a key role by providing professional mentoring during the student's placement, meaning that the education pathway students benefit from multiple diverse mentoring channels. Together these supports enhance student's understanding of long-term career opportunities and help them develop employability skills essential for success after graduation.

## **Designing a Pathway from Education to Employment and Integration**

Successful implementation must prioritise providing a durable solution for refugees on the education pathway. To support this, Ireland offers a particular visa status for refugees on education pathways granting them access to a range of social support and rights including health-care. Also, the visa anticipates graduates transitioning to employment as the next phase of integration. To support this goal, the University of Galway pilot was designed to align closely with employment opportunities.

The pilot for 2023-24 offered five taught Master of Science programmes, hosted across the five schools within the College of Science and Engineering, in Biomedical Engineering, Biomedical Science, Biotechnology, Computer Science (Data Analytics) and Occupational & Environmental Health & Safety ensuring a broad distribution of EDI impact across schools and the directors were highly supportive and enthusiastic about

<sup>21</sup> <https://globalmentorship.org>

the EDI initiative. These programmes were selected from the College of Science and Engineering portfolio of over 40 one-year full-time Masters programmes due to their strong links with Ireland's high-tech industries including; biopharmaceutical, medical device technology and information technology where there is demand for qualified graduates from both SMEs and multinational companies. Each programme also incorporates capstone research projects and offers industry internship options so that refugee students can gain relevant experience in an Irish context to enhance their CVs when competing in the job market after graduation. The internship opportunity for the education pathway was made possible through an external partnership with Aerogen.

As part of the national streamlining efforts for the 2025-26 intake, a review was conducted to reduce the number of programmes while preserving the graduate career opportunities. An analysis showed that the MSc Biomedical Science overlapped broadly with the MSc Biotechnology programme and few applicants met the mathematical and technical requirements for the MSc Biomedical Engineering programme. The offerings were refined to focus on three programmes: Biotechnology, Computer Science (Data Analytics) and Occupational & Environmental Health & Safety. Employability considerations are integrated into the formal curricula, and active engagement with employability awareness and skills is promoted early. This early prompt addresses a common oversight among students from all backgrounds who often delay career planning until graduation is near. The selection process also evaluates personal motivation in cover letters and interviews. It has been interesting to observe that many applicants express a clear long-term vision of using their acquired skills and knowledge to contribute to their home communities. Targeted support for refugee students includes 'nudges' such as introductory appointments with CDC, enrolment in the external GMI programme, and pre-placement engagement with Aerogen. To further support career transitions, CDC provides continued access to its services for at least one year after graduation to all University of Galway students, helping to ensure a smooth entry to employment.

An unexpected challenge encountered by the first two refugee graduates during hiring processes was employer's uncertainty regarding the employment rights of graduates holding the education pathway visa status. This issue was quickly addressed by Nasc who provided a formal letter of explanation including a contact point that students could in-

clude with their job applications. Additionally, Nasc and CDC offered targeted coaching to help the graduates respond to visa questions at job interviews. This active monitoring and response are an example of the strong commitment of the partnership network to identify and resolve challenges during the education pathways pilot.

### **Refugee Education Pathways Matter as EDI Opportunities for the University Community**

Education pathways offer refugees a safe pathway and supported route to access higher education, free from conflict and persecution. These pathways include financial and social supports that create a safe and stable environment and a means to begin rebuilding their professional careers despite the challenges of displacement.

These education pathways contribute directly to the UNHCR “15by30” goal, which seeks to improve equity in access to higher education for refugees. They also serve as a viable and supportive route to employment and social integration, enabling talented individuals to reach their full potential. Equally important, these pathways offer the university community an opportunity to learn, empathise and act in solidarity with refugees which demonstrates a deep commitment to EDI while embodying the University’s core values of respect, openness, excellence and sustainability.

University of Galway’s strategic plan 2020-25 was founded on four core values of respect, openness, sustainability and excellence. The recently launched strategic plan for 2025-2030 builds on this foundation by introducing a fifth value of belonging. These five values are consciously aligned with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)<sup>22</sup> and serve as key institutional performance indicators (KPIs). By recognising and providing academic opportunities for talented refugee students, the University actively advances SDG 4 ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education for all. Additionally, delivering those opportunities through a safe and supported pathway to employment and integration enabled by collaborative networks contributes to SDG 16 which promotes inclusive and effective institutions and societies, and SDG 17 which emphasises

<sup>22</sup> <https://sdgs.un.org/>

the importance of global partnerships in achieving sustainable development.

The implementation of the refugee education pathways pilot in Ireland enabled University of Galway to demonstrate its commitments to EDI through a novel initiative. This opportunity has been formally recognised and actively supported with enthusiastic engagement from many individuals across the university community including students, academic and administrative staff, and senior leadership.

Universities are progressive institutions grounded in academic values and a strong ethos of public service. The refugee education pathways initiative offers a practical avenue for individuals to act in support of EDI principles and values. The initiative has enabled meaningful contributions across the campus. For example, programme directors demonstrate flexibility by recognising atypical academic credentials, students in civil society degrees join the CSG to fundraise and support refugees peers while putting their values into practice, administrators adapt processes to reflect the reality of refugee contexts, careers advisors mentor refugees on navigating and explaining complex visa situations, and academic staff volunteer their time on interview panels helping to identify and support talented displaced. The Interim President of University of Galway recently remarked that:

Participating in Education Pathways has enriched our campus in profound and unexpected ways. Refugee students bring invaluable perspectives from diverse backgrounds that broaden our understanding and deepen our collective empathy. This initiative has been integrated into our College of Science and Engineering's Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Action Plan, and embraced wholeheartedly by students, staff, and extended to the Galway community, ensuring its sustainability and alignment with our broader institutional goals.<sup>23</sup>

In addition to fostering internal engagement with EDI, the refugee education pathways have provided a way for University of Galway to enrich and diversify its EDI activities through strategic partnerships at local, national and international levels. For example, University of Galway works with the CSG and Galway City Partnership to promote EDI values and provide a visible and positive example at a time especially at a time when some voices on the societal margins are questioning Ireland's long-standing tradition of welcoming newcomers.

<sup>23</sup> Safe Sanctuary: Belonging at the University of Galway

A central pillar in implementing the education pathway has been the rewarding and collaborative partnership with UNHCR Ireland and Nasc, representing international and national NGOs perspectives and has significantly expanded mutual understanding among all parties. For example, the College of Science and Engineering has gained valuable insights into the operations of aid agencies in Africa, the concepts and terminologies that underpin migration and displacement responses, and how to mobilise civil society groups such as a CSG.

The collaboration has positioned University of Galway to contribute at national level. The University has engaged with Government of Ireland ministers and the Department of Justice to advocate for the value of refugee education pathways, demonstrating leadership and supporting UNHCR Ireland and Nasc in expanding HEI participation and building sustainable national structures for coordination and funding. Building on the success of the pilot, University of Galway was well positioned to support University College Dublin and University College Cork in implementing similar pathways. They enrolled three students from Uganda for the 2024-25 academic year with plans to welcome an additional three students in 2025-26. Demand for education pathways places is significant, with over 500 applications received in 2024 for just five available places across Irish universities. A second area of external collaboration partners include Aerogen who provide industry internships and Global Mentorship Initiative, which links refugee students with inspiring mentors from large companies.

At the international level, the University has taken an active role in global discussions and initiatives. It participated at the Global Refugee Forum in Geneva in 2023 where it pledged to share its expertise on education pathway implementation. It has also contributed to multiple meetings of the Global Task Force on Third Country Education Pathways where University of Galway has been an advocate for inclusive education on the international stage engaging in dialogues across Europe, Japan, Thailand and the United States. University of Galway also leads a work package in the Erasmus+ funded Higher Education for Refugees and Newcomers (HERCoN)<sup>24</sup> community of practice that promotes collaboration and peer learning amongst HEIs and NGOs in the EU.

Together, these multifaceted examples illustrate how refugee edu-

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.share-network.eu/erasmusplushercon>

cation pathways can enable universities to become community participants and contributors by extending the reach and impact of their EDI activities locally, nationally and internationally.

## Conclusion

Since the initial discussions with UNHCR Ireland in 2022 and the pilot launch of the refugee education pathway in 2023, University of Galway has been on an impactful journey in advancing EDI. The first two education pathway scholarship recipients from Democratic Republic of Congo and Cameroon<sup>25</sup> have started their careers and are in permanent employment in Ireland. They were conferred with master's degrees in 2024 which was a poignant and proud moment made even more special by the presence of University of Galway's industry, CSG and NGO partners who have been integral to this journey.

The second pair of education pathway scholars from South Sudan and Eritrea have also commenced their industry internships and are well positioned to complete their studies in 2025, and a third pair of scholars also from South Sudan and Eritrea have been selected to enrol as scholars for the 2025-26 academic year. The EU-Passworld project which guided the pilot ended in 2024. However, the initiative continues in Ireland under the new name as Education Pathways Ireland now serving as the national coordinating programme. Two other Irish universities established education pathways in 2024 and more HEIs are planning to enrol students in 2026.

Supporting refugee students goes beyond access to education. It is about rebuilding futures, transforming lives, empowering communities, and creating a more equitable and inclusive world by promoting understanding across cultures. Executive Dean for Science and Engineering recently remarked that:

He is proud to be part of a project that has transformed lives and will continue to transform lives.<sup>26</sup>

This initiative serves as a compelling example of why EDI matters. It shows how collaboration between higher education institutions, indus-

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uQqifKFj5zg>

<sup>26</sup> Safe Sanctuary: Belonging at the University of Galway

try partners, and NGOs can drive meaningful social and cultural change by transforming lives and enriching society. University of Galway is helping to shape both national and global policies that advance accessible education, reinforcing its leadership in helping to create education pathways for refugees residing outside the EU. The support of refugee students paves the way for positive change, benefiting not only individuals but also communities and global society as a whole. Our scholarship students are inspirational, and this is testimony to the fact that EDI matters very much.

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II.

*ADDRESSING INJUSTICE:  
INVISIBILITY, DISCRIMINATION, VIOLENCE*



# *THE STUDENT MOVEMENT IN EUROPE: A NEW STRATEGY FOR INCLUSION*

ARNO SCHROOYEN, LISA SCHIVALOCCHI

## **Introduction**

The European Students' Union (ESU) is an EU-funded International Non-Governmental Organization (INGO) founded in 1982. Since its creation, it has been the primary advocate for students' voices across the European continent. Today, ESU includes 43 national student unions from 40 different countries and represents over 20 million students. It maintains a strong presence in key policy-making spaces such as the European Union, the Council of Europe, the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and UNESCO. Through its active involvement in these arenas, ESU works on a wide range of policy areas that are vital to student life and education. These include the social dimension of higher education, internationalisation and mobility, the protection of fundamental values, quality in education and the development of a cohesive European Education Area.

ESU's mission is to amplify the concerns and needs of students in the decisions that shape their academic and social environments. However, the student movement does not exist in isolation from the broader inequalities and forms of discrimination that have persisted in society in recent years. Conversations across Europe around inclusivity have risen, especially as students from marginalised communities continue to face barriers in accessing and fully participating in higher education. These communities include, among others, women, LGBTQIA+ students, racialised individuals, students with disabilities and those from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds.

Advocacy for inclusive policy in higher education must be accompanied by internal practices that reflect those same values and ensure the inclusion of members from marginalised groups. Therefore, equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) have become central priorities within ESU's internal development and external advocacy efforts.

This chapter on the student movement's path to EDI outlines how ESU has moved from a gender mainstreaming strategy to a broader, more comprehensive EDI strategy. This transition comes from reflection and a better understanding that inclusivity must account more for all students' intersecting and diverse identities, rather than focusing narrowly on gender or sexuality alone. We will examine how the strategy was developed, the key actions ESU is undertaking to reduce structural disparities within its movement and how it is working to ensure that every student, regardless of their background, can actively participate and feel represented in student activism.

The chapter will also provide examples from several national student unions implementing their EDI initiatives, demonstrating how these values are adapted to suit different national contexts. Furthermore, we will explore how ESU advocates to external stakeholders on critical topics such as gender-based violence and the rights of students with disabilities. These efforts are part of a broader vision to influence higher education policy and foster more equitable, accessible and safe learning environments for all European students.

By sharing this journey and highlighting achievements and areas for growth, we aim to inspire and give tools to different stakeholders on what the student movement wants to see achieved and how to include student representatives in the process meaningfully. Whether within student unions, academic institutions, or policy-making bodies, there is a shared responsibility to advance purposeful, significant, and lasting change in the name of inclusion and equity in higher education.

## **Mainstreaming EDI within ESU's Internal Structures**

### ***What brought us to the EDI strategy***

As already stated, ESU has always strongly advocated equality and inclusivity within higher education, from accessing higher education for all to preventing discrimination in the classroom and beyond. However, to advocate appropriately for a fully inclusive higher education system, ESU must recognise that, as an organisation, we are not a microcosm free from discrimination. It is essential to reflect on our own biases within our organisation and find structural solutions to ensure the student movement is more inclusive for all, regardless of their background. Cre-

ating a space where everyone can fully participate, give their opinion and shape student representation and activism.

Already in the mid-1990s, ESU created a gender equality handbook<sup>1</sup>. In the mid-2000s, we established a gender equality cross-committee and later on opened a position for equality coordinator. Following this, we also adopted a gender mainstreaming strategy, a document focusing on how to realise gender equality within ESU and recognising the disparities within the student movement. But also, what to advocate on the European level to achieve gender equality and how to support our membership in this work. This strategy was shaped with clear objectives, and it also identified who should be responsible, within ESU, to achieve these goals. One of the actions in this strategy was ensuring there were specific spaces for marginalised groups to meet. A women's session, an allyship session, a gender session, and an LGBTQIA+ session were held at each statutory event hosted by ESU. So that marginalised groups, here women and LGBTQIA+, can meet in a closed, safe space to exchange on the discrimination they face within Higher Education and the student movement. Others were designed to give training to all student representatives on matters related to gender and LGBTQIA+ issues.

In 2022, during the last revision of ESU's gender mainstreaming strategy, concerns were raised that this document only focuses on gender issues and does not extend to problems faced by students with disabilities, LGBTQIA+, racialised people, people from ethnic minorities, people from lower socio-economic backgrounds, etc. Therefore, it was decided to draft an Equity, Diversity and Inclusion strategy, to widen the scope of ESU's advocacy and internal work when it comes to equity, diversity and inclusion. This new strategy was adopted in 2023.

### ***The EDI strategy***

ESU's commitment to equity, diversity and inclusion is grounded in a comprehensive and strategic approach, which is reflected in our EDI strategy<sup>2</sup>, which is structured around seven key pillars. These pillars guide our work toward a more inclusive, representative and safe stu-

<sup>1</sup> European Students' Union, *ESU Publishes 30th Anniversary Publication*, 2024, <https://esu-online.org/publications/esu-publishes-30th-anniversary-publication/>.

<sup>2</sup> European Students' Union, *Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Strategy for the European Students' Union (ESU) 2024–2026*, 2024, <https://esu-online.org/policies/equity-diversity-and-inclusion-edi-strategy-for-the-european-students-union-esu-2024-2026/>.

dent movement across Europe, ensuring that systemic inequities are addressed through principles and deliberate action.

*Accessible Environment* means that ESU strives to ensure that all its activities, both physical and digital, are accessible to every student, regardless of their needs or circumstances. This includes the use of inclusive and accessible language in our communications, the provision of reasonable accommodations during events and meetings, and the adoption of universal design principles. We work continuously to eliminate visible and invisible barriers by listening to and incorporating feedback from those with first-hand lived experience. Through these efforts, ESU aims to create a space where all students can engage fully and comfortably in our activities.

*Visibility* focuses on raising the profile of marginalised and underrepresented groups within the student movement. We understand that visibility is not only about presence but also about voice and influence. ESU promotes the stories and perspectives of diverse communities through campaigns, the observance of international and regional awareness days, and the integration of inclusive narratives into our publications and events. Doing so challenges dominant structures and promotes a culture that values and celebrates difference.

*Education and Training* are essential to building capacity across our network. ESU offers continuous training opportunities for its leadership, staff and member organisations on anti-racism, unconscious bias, intersectionality and inclusive communication. These trainings are not standalone efforts, but part of a broader cultural shift within ESU that aims to deepen understanding and embed inclusive practices throughout our operations. The goal is to ensure that equity is not just understood, but actively practised in our advocacy and everyday work.

*Safety* within ESU is enforced through a strong code of conduct at all events, with clear procedures to prevent and respond to harassment or discrimination. We have created support systems, including confidential reporting mechanisms and designated Trusted Persons at events, to ensure that all participants feel respected and protected.

*Organisational Structures* focuses on aligning ESU's internal governance with its external values. This includes promoting gender balance in leadership, embedding anti-discrimination measures into our statutes and policies, and ensuring that decision-making processes are inclusive and transparent. We work to create structures where no one is excluded

due to language, background or institutional affiliation. By rethinking how power and influence operate within our systems, we aim to lead by example and foster lasting change.

*Inclusive Membership Structures* highlights the role of national unions and member organisations in shaping a more equitable student movement. ESU supports these organisations by sharing tools, offering strategic guidance and encouraging collaboration. We respect that each member operates within a unique national context and therefore promote flexible approaches that can be adapted locally. This pillar is about strengthening the collective capacity of our network to embed equity and inclusion in all aspects of student representation.

*Diverse Representation* ensures that leadership and participation across ESU reflect the broad diversity of the student population in Europe. We actively work to remove barriers that prevent students from marginalised backgrounds from engaging fully in our structures. This involves targeted outreach, mentorship and the creation of opportunities for meaningful involvement. Accurate representation is not only about numbers but also about enabling voices to be heard and ensuring that all students have an equal opportunity to lead and shape the student movement.

Our members are also very active on this matter, either by their own initiative or by taking inspiration from what is done in ESU and applying it to their internal work. Here are some national examples from our members:

### *1. Freier Zusammenschluss von student\*innenschaften – Germany*

Fzs uses its anti-discrimination regulations as the main guiding document for an equity, diversity, and inclusion strategy. It includes measures against structural and hidden discrimination in meetings, events, and General Assemblies, as well as support structures for minorities.

These policies are enacted by 3-4 Anti-Discrimination Officers elected yearly at the General Assembly. This team must be of at least 50% WINTA\* (Women, Intersex, Nonbinary, Trans\* or Agender People) and at least 50% BIPoC (Black, Indigenous or People of Colour). Their primary role is to ensure an EDI perspective in all fzs positions and to help facilitate inclusive events by organising all awareness work within fzs. As seen in the composition of the anti-discrimination officers, fzs uses quotas for most elected positions. Committees, as well as the presidency, have

a quota of at least 50% WINTA\*. Fzs uses this to counteract the standard majority of male candidates and to empower WINTA\* to run for positions of power.

## *2. Alianța Națională a Organizațiilor Studențești din România – Romania*

In recent years, the National Alliance of Student Organisations in Romania has recognised a growing and urgent need for more substantial equality, diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) measures. Both the students they represent and their member organisations have become increasingly vocal and engaged in highlighting the importance of reflecting and protecting the diversity of our society within our structures and actions. In response, they listened and acted. Together, ANOSR began transforming their union into a more inclusive space and a proactive promoter of EDI values.

Internally, ANOSR adopted the principle of equality and inclusion in our statutes, explicitly committing to protecting and advocating for the rights of women and the LGBTQIA+ community. They developed a Code of Conduct and established a Commission for Support and Safety to foster safe and welcoming environments at their events. They also introduced practical steps to promote inclusivity: name badges now include pronouns (for those who choose to display them), quiet rooms are made available for those needing a calm space, and LGBTQIA+ closed sessions are organised during our General Assemblies.

The evolution of ESU's commitment to equity, diversity and inclusion reflects a more profound understanding that meaningful advocacy must begin from within. Recognising the limitations of past strategies was a necessary step towards building a truly inclusive student movement. The adoption of the EDI strategy in 2023 marked a significant milestone, broadening the scope of inclusivity to address a broader range of intersecting identities and systemic inequalities. With this strategy, ESU has outlined a comprehensive approach to tackling these challenges through both internal reform and external engagement.

By embedding inclusion into the foundation of its events, training programmes, leadership processes, and collaborations, ESU sets an example for its members and the broader higher education sector. However, this work must be continuous. Achieving equitable structures demands ongoing reflection, regular assessment and an openness to adapt in re-

sponse to students' lived experiences. In doing so, we can ensure that student representation is diverse in appearance and genuinely inclusive in practice, empowering all students to participate fully, have their voices heard and help shape the future of higher education.

## **Advocating for Policies on EDI in Higher Education: Two Examples**

### ***Gender-based violence***

Gender-based violence (GBV) remains widespread and deeply rooted in higher education institutions across Europe. While often underreported, available data paint a troubling picture. A 2020 survey<sup>3</sup> conducted by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) revealed that 32% of women in the EU have experienced physical and/or sexual violence since the age of fifteen, with a considerable number of these incidents occurring in educational settings. Within the specific context of higher education, studies have shown that up to 62% of female students have experienced some form of GBV during their academic careers<sup>4</sup>. Despite the apparent prevalence of the issue, many institutions continue to fall short in implementing effective and comprehensive responses.

For ESU, this constitutes not only a violation of the rights and dignity of students, but a significant barrier to achieving genuine equity, diversity and inclusion in academic environments. ESU's commitment to combating GBV is part of its broader vision of inclusive and democratic education systems. From this perspective, GBV is not an isolated or incidental phenomenon, but rather a symptom of more profound structural inequalities that intersect with issues of gender, race, sexual orientation, socio-economic status and power hierarchies in academia.

To support a structural transformation, ESU advocates<sup>5</sup> for a coordinated approach grounded in what is commonly referred to as the "4P" framework. This strategy encompasses Prevention, Protection, Prosecution, and Provision of Services. Each of these dimensions addresses a

<sup>3</sup> European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, *EU Gender-Based Violence Survey*, n.d., <https://fra.europa.eu/en/content/eu-gender-based-violence-survey>.

<sup>4</sup> UniSAFE, *UniSAFE's First Policy Brief: Survey Results on Gender-Based Violence in Academia*, n.d., <https://unisafe-gbv.eu/project-news/unisafes-first-policy-brief/#:~:text=Survey%20results,homosexual%2C%20bisexual%20or%20queer%20people>.

<sup>5</sup> European Students' Union, *End Gender-Based Violence Against Students – Policy BM85*, n.d., <https://esu-online.org/policies/end-gender-based-violence-against-students-bm85/>.

different aspect of the institutional response to GBV, from challenging the cultural norms that enable violence to ensuring access to justice and support for survivors. The following sections will elaborate on each component of the 4P approach, drawing on ESU's policy positions and advocacy efforts towards decision-makers at the institutional, national and European levels.

**Prevention:** addresses the root causes of GBV and promotes cultural change within higher education institutions. For ESU, prevention must go beyond awareness campaigns and isolated training sessions. It requires a systemic effort to challenge patriarchal norms and power imbalances that perpetuate violence. This involves integrating gender equality and intersectionality into the curriculum, ensuring inclusive representation in governance and decision-making, and embedding anti-discriminatory practices across all institutional levels. Training should be available not only for staff but also for students, and should be mandatory, with regular updates tailored to address the specific needs of diverse communities. Importantly, students must be recognised as active stakeholders in developing and implementing institutional policies to prevent GBV. Prevention also requires universities to adopt clear and comprehensive policies that define unacceptable behaviours and commit to a zero-tolerance stance towards all forms of harassment and violence.

**Protection:** focuses on creating safe environments and ensuring that students who are at risk or have experienced GBV are safeguarded and supported. ESU highlights the importance of having accessible and anonymous reporting mechanisms that protect the confidentiality and dignity of survivors. Institutions must guarantee that those who come forward do not face retaliation, whether in academic penalties, social stigmatisation or professional consequences. Survivors should have access to various protective measures, including changes to class timetables, accommodation options and the possibility of issuing no-contact directives. ESU supports the establishment of independent ombudspersons within universities who are trained to respond to cases of GBV in a sensitive and survivor-centred manner. Furthermore, institutions should provide designated physical and digital spaces where students from marginalised groups feel safe and supported.

**Prosecution:** addresses the need for justice and accountability within academic institutions. ESU maintains that universities must have clear and transparent disciplinary procedures for dealing with cases of GBV.

These processes must guarantee due process for all parties involved, while prioritising the needs and safety of survivors. Investigation panels must be composed of individuals trained in gender sensitivity and intersectionality, and should reflect gender balance and diversity. Student representatives should be included where appropriate. To ensure credibility and consistency, ESU calls for establishing independent oversight bodies at the national or European level to monitor institutional compliance with anti-GBV standards. Institutions that fail to take adequate action should face appropriate consequences, including public accountability measures and potential implications for accreditation or funding. Perpetrators must be subject to meaningful sanctions that reflect the severity of their actions, ranging from educational interventions to expulsion in the most serious cases.

**Provision of Services:** emphasises the importance of supporting survivors holistically. The impact of GBV is not only immediate but often long-lasting, affecting a student's mental health, academic performance and overall well-being. ESU advocates for the availability of free, confidential and culturally competent psychological services on campus, including access to professionals trained in trauma-informed care. Legal and academic support should also be available, enabling survivors to continue their studies with the necessary adjustments and without further disadvantage. Healthcare services, including sexual and reproductive health care, must be accessible, confidential and timely. ESU further underlines the value of peer-led initiatives and survivor networks, which can provide crucial solidarity and empowerment. Institutions are responsible for ensuring that information about all available services is clear, visible and accessible in multiple languages and formats.

Eliminating gender-based violence in academia is essential to the broader work of equity, diversity and inclusion. It requires more than symbolic gestures. It demands a structural rethinking of how power operates within higher education, and a commitment to dismantling the systems that enable violence and silence survivors. The European Students' Union has consistently advocated for comprehensive action based on the 4P approach, through coordinated efforts with students' unions, higher education institutions, national governments and European bodies.

### ***Students with disabilities***

Following our examination of gender-based violence (GBV) and its impact on higher education, it is critical to explore another deeply entrenched issue that obstructs the path towards accurate equity, diversity and inclusion: the marginalisation of students with disabilities in academic settings. Just as GBV represents a symptom of broader societal inequalities, the exclusion and mistreatment of students with disabilities reflect deeply ingrained structural barriers that persist in higher education systems across Europe. These barriers, which range from inaccessible physical environments to inadequate support systems, not only undermine the dignity and rights of disabled people but also prevent them from fully participating in the academic community.

Available data paints a concerning picture. In the European Union (EU), only 30.9%<sup>[1]</sup> of people with disabilities enter higher education, a considerably lower figure than the average figure for the EU (44%). Students with disabilities are therefore often underrepresented in higher education institutions retention rates are low, contributing to a cycle of exclusion that persists across national borders. Indeed, many higher education institutions continue to lack comprehensive, inclusive policies that address the specific needs of students with disabilities.

For the European Students' Union (ESU), these barriers are not merely obstacles to access, but they represent a violation of the fundamental rights of students and a significant hindrance to achieving genuine diversity and Inclusion within academia. ESU's advocacy for students with disabilities is grounded in the belief that higher education must be inclusive, equitable, and accessible to all students, regardless of their disability. The following sections of this chapter will explore ESU's stance on the Inclusion of students with disabilities in higher education, focusing on the advocacy efforts aimed at European decision-makers, national governments, and higher education institutions themselves.

ESU's position<sup>7</sup> on disability inclusion is built upon a structural framework that can be understood through three interconnected dimensions: Access, Support, and Inclusion. Each pillar reflects a distinct but over-

<sup>6</sup> European Disability Forum, *Education Policy – European Disability Forum*, n.d., <https://www.edfeph.org/education-policy/#:-:text=The%20rate%20of%20early%20school,went%20on%20to%20tertiary%20education.>

<sup>7</sup> European Students' Union, *Statement on the Rights and Inclusion of Disabled Students*, n.d., <https://esu-online.org/policies/statement-on-the-rights-and-inclusion-of-disabled-students/>.

lapping aspect of the student experience, from addressing the barriers that prevent students with disabilities from entering higher education to ensuring they receive the necessary support to thrive and finally, creating a truly inclusive environment where they can participate fully in all aspects of academic life.

***Access: breaking down barriers to higher education***

The first pillar of ESU's approach to disability inclusion is access. Despite advances in policy at the European and national levels, significant gaps remain in terms of students with disabilities' access to higher education. In many instances, the barriers to entry are not just physical but also systemic, rooted in outdated admission processes, lack of early-stage support, and insufficient awareness of the specific challenges students with disabilities face. To tackle these issues, ESU calls for introducing more inclusive admission procedures beyond traditional metrics, such as grade averages and standardised testing, which often fail to accommodate students from diverse backgrounds and vulnerable students.

Access to higher education must begin long before a student applies for university. ESU advocates for early-stage interventions that address both structural and cultural barriers from an early age, ensuring that students with disabilities are not excluded from the education system at any level. This means promoting inclusive teaching methods and ensuring that educational pathways are adaptable to the needs of all students, including those with disabilities. Additionally, ESU calls for implementing national and European strategies to widen participation in higher education, ensuring that students with disabilities are given the opportunities and resources necessary to access university life from the outset.

***Support: Ensuring students with disabilities have the resources they need***

Once students with disabilities have accessed higher education, the next crucial step is ensuring they receive the support they need to succeed. The second pillar of ESU's strategy is Support, which addresses the institutional responsibility to provide appropriate resources, accommodations, and services to students with disabilities throughout their academic journey. This includes ensuring that the physical environment of higher education institutions is fully accessible, that digital platforms and learning materi-

als comply with accessibility standards, and that students have access to the necessary support services to accommodate their specific needs. ESU strongly advocates for higher education institutions to adopt universal design principles in physical and digital infrastructure. This means ensuring that lecture halls, libraries, dormitories, and online learning platforms are designed with accessibility in mind, providing a level playing field for students with disabilities. Moreover, ESU stresses the importance of providing tailored academic support, including specialised tutoring, counselling, and mentoring services, to help students navigate their studies.

Support must also extend beyond the classroom. Students with disabilities require access to comprehensive health services, including psychological support, physical accommodations, and healthcare related to their specific disabilities. ESU calls for Higher Education Institutions to provide easy access to these services and to ensure that they are culturally competent, trauma-informed, and tailored to the unique needs of students with disabilities.

### ***Inclusion: Creating a truly inclusive higher education environment***

The third and final pillar of ESU's advocacy for students with disabilities is Inclusion. Inclusion goes beyond simply removing barriers and providing support; it is about creating an environment where students with disabilities are fully integrated into the academic and social fabric of the institution. This requires a systemic commitment to inclusivity across all levels of university life, from governance and decision-making to student activities and social engagement. ESU advocates for the Inclusion of students with disabilities in all aspects of university governance, ensuring that their voices are heard and that policies and practices are developed with their needs in mind. This means creating inclusive decision-making processes that respect the perspectives of students with disabilities and ensure their active participation in shaping the future of their educational institutions.

Inclusion also requires a broader cultural shift within higher education institutions. We must move away from a deficit-based model of disability to one that values and celebrates the diversity that students with disabilities bring to the academic community. This involves integrating disability awareness into curricula, ensuring that academic staff are trained in inclusive teaching practices, and fostering an environment that actively promotes respect, dignity, and equality.

### ***Advocacy at the European, national, and institutional levels***

At the European level, ESU continues to advocate for harmonising disability policies across member states, ensuring that students with disabilities have equal access to higher education throughout Europe. One key initiative in this regard is the European Disability Strategy, which ESU supports for its potential to create a unified approach to disability inclusion across the EU. ESU also calls for the recognition of disability status across national borders, ensuring that students with disabilities are not disadvantaged when they move between EU countries for educational purposes.

National governments play a vital role in implementing disability-inclusive policies within higher education. ESU advocates for introducing national strategies to support students with disabilities, which should include funding for accessible infrastructure, improved student support services, and targeted financial aid for students with disabilities. Moreover, ESU calls for the implementation of precise monitoring mechanisms to assess the effectiveness of these policies and ensure that universities are held accountable for providing accessible and supportive learning environments.

At the institutional level, ESU stresses the importance of creating campuses that are not only physically accessible but also socially inclusive. Higher education institutions should adopt clear policies on Inclusion, provide training for staff and students on disability awareness, and ensure that students with disabilities can engage fully in all aspects of university life. This includes promoting inclusive extracurricular activities, providing accessibility in student housing, and fostering an environment where students with disabilities are empowered to take leadership roles within student unions and other organisations.

### **Conclusion**

The work to achieve equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) within higher education is both complex and ongoing. Throughout this chapter, we have explored the significant strides made by the European Students' Union (ESU) in advocating for a more inclusive academic environment, focusing on both internal practices and external advocacy. ESU's work is diversified and includes, *inter alia*, confronting gender-based violence (GBV) and addressing the marginalisation of students with disabilities

in academic settings. These efforts are not isolated but deeply interconnected, all striving toward the same goal of creating an educational ecosystem where all students, regardless of their gender, disabilities, background, or identity, can thrive in safety and dignity.

Internally, ESU's journey towards EDI has evolved from a gender-specific approach to a broader strategy that recognises the intersectionality of students' identities. This strategic shift acknowledges that discrimination and exclusion are not confined to one issue or group but are rooted in broader, systemic structures of power and privilege. By adopting the 7 pillars in the EDI Strategy, ESU aims to create an inclusive space within its own organisation and lead by example for its members, advocating for systemic changes that can be applied at national and institutional levels across Europe.

At the heart of ESU's approach is the recognition that real change requires a combination of internal reflection and external engagement. Internally, ESU continues to work on reducing structural inequities within the organisation, ensuring that all voices are heard and represented. By adopting principles such as universal design and integrating them into physical and digital spaces, ESU aims to eliminate visible and invisible barriers for students with disabilities. Furthermore, through its educational programs and safety measures, ESU ensures that its internal structures reflect the diversity of the broader student population. These efforts are crucial for creating an equitable student union and setting a model that higher education institutions can emulate.

Externally, ESU continues to be a leading advocate for the rights of students with disabilities, pushing for more inclusive policies at both the European and national levels. By addressing the barriers that students with disabilities face, ESU aims to create a higher education system that is genuinely accessible to all. This includes advocating for the recognition of disability status across borders, ensuring that students with disabilities have access to the same opportunities and support systems regardless of the country in which they study. Additionally, ESU's commitment to tackling GBV within higher education institutions reinforces the union's stance that inclusivity cannot be achieved without addressing the deep-rooted inequalities and power structures that perpetuate violence and discrimination.

ESU's work is not done in isolation. By partnering with national student unions, organisations that represent disabled people and collaborat-

ing with European and national policy-makers, ESU continues to push for legislative changes that prioritise inclusivity. Through campaigns and policy proposals, ESU aims to ensure that the voices of students, particularly those from marginalised backgrounds, are integral to creating policies that affect their lives. Integrating these diverse perspectives into decision-making processes is essential for creating a genuinely inclusive and transformative education system.

However, the journey towards full inclusion is a process. ESU recognises that meaningful change requires continuous reflection, adaptation, and engagement. It requires not just one-time interventions or superficial changes, but sustained efforts to dismantle the structural barriers that continue to marginalise certain groups of students. This includes the need for constant assessment of how policies and practices impact students from diverse backgrounds and the willingness to make adjustments based on feedback from the students themselves.

Ultimately, the work of ESU is part of a broader movement that seeks to reshape higher education into a space where every student can access the resources, support, and opportunities they need to succeed. The fight for equity, diversity, and inclusion is not only a moral imperative but a practical necessity for the future of higher education. Through its continued advocacy, internal reforms, and stakeholder engagement at all levels, ESU is helping to build an education system that truly reflects the values of justice, equ(al)ity, and inclusivity.

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# *THEORIES, POLICIES AND PRACTICES: EDI AND THE ROLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN COUNTERING GBV*

CRISTINA DEMARIA, CRISTINA GAMBERI

## **An Introduction: Contextualizing Gender-Based Violence**

How can Higher Education Institutions prevent, counter and fight Gender-based Violence (GBV)? How can they play a pivotal role in designing programs and strategic plans to increase a critical and in-depth understanding of all forms of violence, and to fight them by adopting innovative good practices and actions aimed at fostering safe, inclusive, and respectful work/study environments? How can they transform their organizational cultures and end institutional violence, that is “the violence of how institutions reproduce themselves, the violence of how institutions respond to violence”? (Ahmed, 2021: 180).

How gender-based violence is faced within university spaces has been only very recently investigated, yet with already available and debated research findings, documents and recommendations that acknowledge how universities are public spaces and communities within which gender inequalities still survive and reproduce themselves in multiple forms of discrimination, in different instances of sexual, psychological, economical, symbolic and, particularly in academic contexts, epistemic violence.<sup>1</sup>

Starting from a critical, albeit extremely synthetical, examination of the literature on this subject, our chapter will then focus on how the implementation of EDI policies, often discussed, refined and disseminated through international networks like Coimbra Group, can be a facilitating

<sup>1</sup> This is a violence against forms of knowledge, and it concerns the ways in which subjects and their diverse identities have been defined and made intelligible. Following Gayatri Spivak’s analysis (1988), epistemic violence points to how a dominant and patriarchal subject has consolidated and established itself by spreading its way of knowing, its “representations” - along with its system of values - creating its others as objects to be analyzed. Epistemic violence is therefore a violence against forms of knowledge, more dangerous and subtle than others because it is often not identified as such, hence, more difficult to eradicate.

factor able to effectively counteract GBV. To do so, we shall examine the University of Bologna *Helpdesk against gender-based violence* as part of a larger programme on sexual violence and harassment prevention and counteracting. However, a few premises are due, starting from how we define GBV and the paradigms that helped us to frame it.

It is thanks to feminist research that we came to understand how all forms of symbolic, psychological, economic, and sexual violence are mainly directed against women *because they are women* (Radford and Russell 1992). This belonging to “womanhood” still corresponds to a position of disadvantage and subordination within the social structure and the relationship between genders, that is with respect to how femininity and masculinity are defined, experienced, performed, and represented. And it is above all thanks to feminist research that the problem of violence against women has been identified as *widespread* – some speak of a pandemic; *transversal* – it crosses social classes and strata; how violence itself is a *systemic* condition, directed towards a group, that of “women”, because they are members of that “group”. Violence is a consequence of a gender inequality that is socially and culturally constructed, and then naturalized, inherent in the relationships between men and women, and of men and women who in turn bear other differences, and are subjects who inhabit asymmetrical relationships within which vulnerability is distributed differently. The very expression ‘GBV’ intends to emphasise how the single effects of violence (from insults to homicides) are part of a *continuum* of violence that is based on a larger structure of gendered relationship, within which violence is produced and reproduced. Violence perpetrated by men against women is thus defined as ‘gender-based violence’ because it is used precisely as a means of defending one’s own identity – the recognition of oneself as a “man”. In other words, the use of violence is a way to reconfirm one’s dominance in relationships with the opposite sex, according to gender relations and models. In these relational contexts, the use of violence paradoxically becomes “a method (...) of communication and of structuring the relationship itself” (Rampazi 2013: 69).

EDI policies against gender-based violence have been developed thanks to an expanding literature that shows how violence and harassment are widespread in university communities, and how, until recently, the prevailing tendency has been to hesitate not only to admit violence, but also to deal with it effectively. The prevailing fear is to jeopardize the

reputation of the institution, that in its turn entails adopting a reactive or punitive attitude rather than a proactive one, an attitude that not only ensures that violence continues to be reproduced, but also hinders its denunciation. As an academic institution, we still normalize violence and seldom contest the power relationships and asymmetries within which it is performed. This is a process that, in turn, nourishes the widespread belief that universities do not act and, most of all, do not take responsibility, a belief that leads to apathy or silence from the victims on one side, and to possible reactions of re-victimization both by peers, and by authorities and universities' governance on the other.

The perceived negligence, or in any case the not so clear, structured and visible reactions to violence and sexual harassment within university spaces, has been described as a *conspiracy of silence*, a cultivated or strategic ignorance, a systematic silencing; the affirmation of a *right not to know*: a type of inaction, often intentional, to protect one's name and reputation.<sup>2</sup> These attitudes and (in)actions point to a still thriving gendered institutional culture, which feeds all those elements that lead to *institutional inertia*, that is the right not to know that produces a cultivated ignorance. It is a culture underpinned by what Chapa Romeno and Caldena Alvear (2022) call 'myths', which here we would rather define as *recurring narratives and frames* that surround systematic and systemic gender violence.

Is it, however, possible to re-frame institutional responses that are truly innovative, without replicating the stereotypical narratives and frames of GBV? In the next pages we shall explore the ways in which European and national policies, along with feminist movements, for the past couple of decades have been a driving force that shaped a new paradigm able to redefine the collective threshold of tolerance of the acceptability of violence against women's bodies within public and academic spaces.

<sup>2</sup> A relatively recent study (Chapa Romero, Catena Alvarez, *et al.*, 2022) conducted by a group of researchers from the UNAM University in Mexico City, based on focus groups and testimonies of about a hundred students aimed at collecting and elaborating their perceptions, knowledge, and attitudes towards gender-based violence in Academia, produced results that we believe can be generalized, maintaining a value that goes beyond the context in which they were elaborated. Here, we shall discuss two of the factors underlined in this work to further ponder and analyze how to deal with gender-based violence in Academia.

## **GBV in the European and the Italian Context: Data, the Legislative Framework and the Feminist Agenda**

Without doubt, in recent years the higher education area has been witnessing a significant paradigm shift from the one that has long legitimized narratives that naturalize violence and downplay its severity. As recent research at European and national level increasingly shows, a new geography of violence is now emerging within the academic space, where new – and old – forms of gender-based violence are becoming more and more visible. The data collected within the UniSAFE project, which is the first European research that systematically explores these phenomena, confirm what we have discussed in the previous paragraphs: universities can be considered one of the spaces where gender-based violence is perpetrated and where forms of gender inequalities and discrimination persist in the professional sphere. As many as 62% of the interviewed sample, consisting of 42,000 people from staff and the student community across 16 European countries, reported having experienced at least one form of gender-based violence since they started working or studying at their institution (UniSAFE survey).<sup>3</sup> However, among respondents who had experienced gender-based violence, only 13% reported it. Almost half of the victims (47%) explained that they felt uncertain whether the behaviour was serious enough to be disclosed. Another frequent reason indicated by 31% of the victims is that at the time of the incident they did not identify the behaviour as an act of violence, or did not believe anything would have happened if they had reported it (Lipinsky et al. 2022b).

Focussing on the Italian context, it is relevant to look at the most recent survey that was conducted in November 2024 by CRUI - *Conferenza dei Rettori delle Università italiane*, which focused on the measures of prevention and response to abuse, harassment, and gender-based violence being implemented in Italian universities.<sup>4</sup> The survey highlights that, among the 80 universities that responded to the questionnaire, 25.4% reported having an anti-violence help-desk (18 universities), while 65.4%

<sup>3</sup> In the Project UniSAFE, the concept of ‘gender-based violence’ encompasses many and different forms of online/offline violence, violations and abuse, and gender harassment and sexual harassment. For more information: <https://unisafe-gbv.eu/faq/>

<sup>4</sup> This is an ongoing survey, and these are the first partial results that have been published online: “Misure di prevenzione e contrasto ad abusi, molestie e violenze di genere negli atenei italiani”, Indagine aggiornata al 4 novembre 2024. For more information: <https://static-prod.cdnipost.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/05/1741180479-Indagine-CRUI-molestie-negli-atenei.pdf>

have a counselling service (51 universities). The category from which the highest number of reports originates is the student community (77% of the requests). It is worth noting that the least reporting comes from universities in the south of Italy, with many institutions, especially smaller ones, recording zero reports.

As we have already highlighted, the experience of gender-based violence within the academic context should not be considered an isolated incident, but it should rather be understood as part of discriminatory practices in which power inequalities and gender stereotypes are still present and are often tolerated. While these data are crucial to highlight the incidence of a long-silenced phenomenon, they are also fundamental to articulate the complexity of factors that are at play in the specific organizational structures that characterize academia, which is shaped by power dynamics, gendered attitudes, actors, and factors which facilitate silencing. Drawing on the literature on organisational violence, Hershovis et al. (2021) highlighted the framing of silence as a collective process to prevent voicing individual experiences because of the negative consequences or impact on those who choose to speak out. For these reasons, the UniSAFE research points out two aspects. First, the necessity to articulate a “theoretical model of network of silence”, which is structured around three components, namely self-silencing by victims/survivors, silencing, and not being heard by others (Pilinkaite Sotirovic, Lipinsky, Struzinska, Ranea Triviño, 2024). Second, the necessity to take into account the phenomenon of non-reporting incidents for fear of retaliation by the perpetrator and for negative consequences for their personal well-being and professional advancement.

These are aggravating factors that might reinforce inequality regimes within universities and jeopardize the possibility to bring about institutional changes. However, these studies also aim to provide legal and political tools. One example is the “7P model” conceptual framework theorized by the UniSAFE project researchers to address and combat violence in Research Performing Organisations (RPO), to assess the efficiency of modes of intervention and regulation and the institutional responses put into place to eradicate gender-based violence, including sexual harassment (Lut, Linková, and Strid 2023). At the core of the “7P model” conceptual framework is measuring the prevalence of GBV, with the aim to understand the roles of universities and research organisations in prevention, protection, prosecution, provision of services, supported by

partnerships and policies.<sup>5</sup> Another example is the *European Code of Conduct for Zero Tolerance*, recently published by the ERA Forum Sub-group “Inclusive Gender Equality in the ERA”, which aims to address episodes of GBV in research and higher education environments. It defines a common approach and provides definitions with a list of principles to guide all stakeholders, with the goal of creating a European research and innovation environment free from all forms of gender-based violence, based on the values of gender equality, inclusion, respect, dignity, and safety.<sup>6</sup>

The opening of a *Helpdesk against gender-based violence* at the University of Bologna in 2022 is therefore the outcome of a larger strategic action to prevent sexual violence and harassment which should be read against the backdrop of the broader framework of European policies aimed at combating GBV. The Istanbul Convention of 2011 contributed to the starting of these strategies, setting international standards in the areas of prevention, protection, and support for victims of violence, adopting a multidimensional approach that offers an integrated view of various types of violence – including, for example, violence suffered by women with disabilities – and including the preventive role that education and media can play. In Italy, the Istanbul Convention was ratified under the Law 77/2013, leading to the approval of a new legislation usually referred as the “Red Code” (Law 69/2019), which tightens the penalties for existing gender-based felonies and introduces the crime of the unauthorized and non-consensual disclosure of sexually explicit images and videos of others, recognizing aggravating circumstances for intimate partners perpetrating this type of violence.

Among the various attempts to end GBV on national and transnational levels, there is the GEAR - *Gender Equality in Academia and Research* (EIGE 2022), which is a tool that provides universities and research organisations with practical advice and tools for implementing gender policies. Another tool has been introduced within the European legislative framework in 2021 and it is the GEP - *Gender Equality Plan* - the ba-

<sup>5</sup> For more information, <https://unisafe-gbv.eu/the-project/unisafe-7p-conceptual-framework/>

<sup>6</sup> In August 2024, the Commission’s ERA Forum Sub-group ‘Inclusive Gender Equality in the ERA’ has published a Zero-tolerance code of conduct that aims to address incidents of gender-based violence in research and higher education environments by setting out a common approach, definitions, and a list of principles to guide all stakeholders and individuals in order to create a European Research and Innovation environment free from all forms of gender-based violence, based on the values of gender equality and inclusiveness, respect, dignity and safety. For more information, see: <https://ec.europa.eu/transparency/expert-groups-register/screen/expert-groups/consult?lang=en&fromMainGroup=true&groupID=103813>

sis requirement for participation in its research framework programme. GEPs are defined as a set of commitments and actions that aim to promote gender equality in an organisation through a process of structural change. Among the recommended content-related elements, which are key gender equality issues that a GEP should seek to address, the Gender Equality Plans includes recommended activities to combat violence, establishing the institutional necessity to undertake actions of contrast and prevention within the AREA 5.<sup>7</sup>

However, it would be limiting to consider only the European and national framework in abstract terms, without looking at the collective political and emotional climate. For the past couple of decades, in Italy the feminist movements have become a social force that is contributing to shape a new paradigm that is redefining the collective threshold of tolerance of the acceptability of violence against women's bodies. Feminist and transfeminist groups such as *Non una di meno*, the women's shelters network *D.i.Re* ("Donne in rete contro la violenza/ Women on the Net Against Violence"), and other civil society organizations have been in fact active parts in the definition and circulation of new notions of what should be considered acceptable and desirable. These social movements have been promoting public discussions of the *continuum* of violence, have reframed practices of resistance (such as calling for a general strike on the 8<sup>th</sup> of March), have proposed educational programmes to subvert gender roles and stereotypes, and in general they have been able to include into the political agenda a critical understanding of GBV, while also raising awareness among journalists, media operators, and media activists (Capecchi 2018). This process can be seen in the work of the association of journalists such as "Giulia" ("Giornaliste Unite, Libere e Autonome/United Free Autonomous Women Journalists"), which through the "Manifesto of Venice" (2017) proposed a set of guidelines for the use of a proper terminology and a non-offensive and non-detrimental language while reporting gender-based crimes and femicides, contributing to a more profound recognition of the role played by gender relations in media.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> The Gender Equality Plan has five recommended content-related requirements: work-life balance and organisational culture; gender balance in leadership and decision-making; gender equality in recruitment and career progression; integration of the gender dimension into research and teaching content; measures against gender-based violence, including sexual harassment.

<sup>8</sup> Manifesto di Venezia (2017). Manifesto delle giornaliste e dei giornalisti per il rispetto della parità di genere. Venezia. Retrieved from <https://www.fnsl.it/upload/70/70efdf2ec9b086079795c442636b55-/0d-8d3795eb7d18fd322e84&5070484d.pdf>

In the Italian context, we also cannot overlook the shock following the brutal femicide of Emma Pezemo, a young Cameroonian woman studying at the University of Bologna in the Sociology and Social Work degree program, who was murdered by her partner on the night of May 2, 2021. The femicide of Emma Pezemo coincides with a pivotal moment in Italian feminist activism, which in recent years has become a social force capable of equipping itself with conceptual tools that can uncover the mechanisms of invisibilization of violence hidden behind simplistic interpretations in terms of “madness,” “passion,” or the “instincts” and “outbursts” of aggressors. The femicide of Emma Pezemo was also a moral impetus that urged the University of Bologna to speak out against violence and to implement both symbolic and very practical actions of awareness-raising. From the posthumous degree awarded in her memory on September of the same year, to the many initiatives for public reflection on gender-based violence organized with high schools, anti-violence centres (CAV), and local associations, up to the national conference *Gli Sportelli universitari contro la violenza di genere. Riflessioni, dati, buone pratiche. In memoria di Emma Pezemo*, which saw the participation of 12 university anti-violence desks from across the country (May 2023), the femicide of this young student made GBV an unavoidable issue. It was also through dialogue and recognition of feminist demands expressed by anti-violence centres, supported by the academic community, that the university *Helpdesk against gender-based violence* became a reality in Bologna.

### **The Helpdesk Against Gender-based Violence: Preliminary Data and Analysis After Two Years**

We choose to delve into the characteristics and data of the University of Bologna Helpdesk against gender-based violence because it represents an emblematic case of an action that, although it was not included in the University’s 2021-2024 GEP, has nonetheless proven to be particularly effective for our community, and has become a strategic element in the development of new policies and actions. The Helpdesk against gender-based violence has in fact become one of the driving forces behind the new GEP, which was approved at the beginning of 2025 and will be implemented over the next three years. The Helpdesk against

gender-based violence was established in October 2022 and is managed in collaboration with *Casa delle donne per non subire violenza di Bologna* APS, a feminist association with a long-standing history in fighting GBV. This is an important aspect because the outsourcing of this space guarantees some principles that we believe are fundamental: anonymity, free access, and neutrality. The fear of retaliation in private and professional life after speaking out about the violence that has been suffered is a factor that must be considered, as it often hinders the process of recognition and breaking the silence. Moreover, the fact that the service is managed by an organization with extensive experience in welcoming and managing trauma makes the desk not only a protected space for possible complaints, but also and most importantly, a place where individuals can find experts staff with a long experience and proved competence, who can make a difference in the very way the person who suffered violence is, first of all, listened to. This Helpdesk is meant to be a safe space for the entire university community: not only for students, but also for the administrative and technical staff; teaching and research staff; collaborators of various kinds with the University; foreign language instructors, lecturers, and readers; teaching and language tutors; research fellows.

What does the Helpdesk do? First and foremost, it helps to address all forms of violence that may occur both within the university context and outside the university, from partners, family members, acquaintances, and strangers. The Helpdesk conducts individual consultations managed by an expert in gender-based violence, offers phone support, including in emergencies, and provides the possibility of starting, with the person's consent, a support pathway and network collaboration, involving various services from the Metropolitan City of Bologna (social and healthcare services, law enforcement, other associations, and other entities useful in helping the person escape the violent situation). The service also allows for the activation of an emergency procedure to immediately protect the person experiencing violence, when necessary, after a risk assessment conducted by expert operators. The operators provide information on the services, figures, and institutional bodies of the University regarding gender-based violence and discrimination and offer initial guidance on legal aspects and the best ways to contact the competent authorities (law enforcement, lawyers, and courts). Finally, it facilitates interaction with the local network of services and associations.

Just over a year after the opening of the first one, a second university

Helpdesk against gender-based violence was opened on November 29, 2023, with similar characteristics. This time, however, it is located at the Forlì campus, where it is managed by the *Centro Donna* of the Municipality of Forlì in collaboration with the Department of Interpreting and Translation (DIT). We are, at the moment of writing (April 2025), expanding the network to other University of Bologna campuses, such as those of Rimini and Ravenna, thus extending this service to areas where it is not yet present.

The two Helpdesks operate with full autonomy, but, if necessary, they can refer to the *Consigliera di Fiducia* (Trust Advisor), a figure already present at the University. This role was first introduced in the European Commission Recommendation 92/131 of November 27, 1991, regarding the Protection of the Dignity of Women and Men, and in the European Parliament resolution A3-0043/94. It has also been incorporated into Italian law with the approval of the Unified Health and Safety text, Legislative Decree 81/2008. The role of the *Consigliera di Fiducia* serves as a guarantee, prevention, and intervention tool for the protection and respect of the values contained in the *Ethical and Behavioral Code* and the *Code of Conduct for the Prevention of Moral and Sexual Harassment* and their counteraction that is in effect at the University of Bologna.<sup>9</sup>

It may be too early to draw complete conclusions since the opening of the Helpdesk, but it is possible to make a preliminary assessment of the progress we have been making, based on a preliminary analysis of the data collected. The data collection occurs through the completion of a quarterly grid, which was agreed upon with *Casa delle donne* during the service preparation phase. As a university, we have agreed to collect data that can provide the institution with monitoring tools and, if necessary, intervention measures to improve and enhance this space, while safeguarding its key characteristics. The data available to the University has been anonymized to ensure the maximum protection of the individuals who access the Helpdesk, as well as to ensure the service full autonomy.

The data from the Helpdesk indicate that the number of accesses is constantly growing. In 2023, the total number of accesses was 59, with a significant peak in November 2023 coinciding with the femicide of Giulia Cecchettin: 8 new requests for help were received within 3 days of the

<sup>9</sup> For more information: <https://www.unibo.it/en/attachments/codicedicomportamentoperlaprevenzionedellemolestiemoraliesessualieillorocontrasto.pdf/@@download/file/Code-of-Conduct-for-the-Prevention-of-Sexual-and-Moral-Harassment.pdf>

discovery of the student's body.<sup>10</sup> From January to December 2024, 79 individuals accessed the desk, the majority of whom were female. Of these 79 accesses, 68 were students, 1 researcher, 5 PhD students, 1 professor, and 4 technical-administrative staff members. Regarding age, the data collected in 2024 shows that 47% were between 18 and 23 years old, while 33% are between 24 and 30 years old. Compared to the previous year, there was also an increase in accesses from individuals aged 31 to 60.<sup>11</sup>

In almost all cases, the perpetrator acted in person, while in 10 cases, the violence was perpetrated online. In most cases, psychological violence, including stalking and mobbing, was the most reported type of violence, as well as sexual violence, which included harassment and the illegal distribution of explicit sexual images or videos. In response to the number of sexual violence cases that have been reported, a specific treatment has been activated for those who have experienced it. In agreement with the University, a trauma-oriented psychotherapy service using the EMDR methodology was launched in May 2024, designed to support, and enhance the desk's services.<sup>12</sup> This opportunity is part of a project funded under the title "WoNdER-Women Network EMDR against Rape: Using EMDR to combat all forms of violence and gender discrimination," in which the university played a key role as a partner in disseminating the project, fully supporting its goals within the university context.

<sup>10</sup> The femicide of Giulia Cecchettin in November 2023, a university student aged 22, at the hands of her ex-boyfriend, significantly heightened public awareness of male violence against women, this thanks to intense media coverage and the advocacy of her family, which helped spark widespread political mobilization. This movement extended across universities, schools, workplaces, and public spaces throughout Italy.

<sup>11</sup> For the first time, in 2024 the University of Bologna has published these data in the Gender Equality Annual Report 2024, the document that provides a snapshot of the entire university community, made up of students, faculty, staff and governance. For more information: <https://www.unibo.it/en/university/statute-standards-strategies-and-reports/gender-budgeting>

<sup>12</sup> The American Psychological Association defines the Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) Therapy as a structured therapy that encourages the patient to briefly focus on the trauma memory while simultaneously experiencing bilateral stimulation (typically eye movements), which is associated with a reduction in the vividness and emotion associated with the trauma memories. During EMDR therapy, clinical observations suggest that an accelerated learning process is stimulated by EMDR's standardized procedures, which incorporate the use of eye movements and other forms of rhythmic left-right (bilateral) stimulation (e.g., tones or taps).

## **Re-framing Violence: Representing Violence in a University Awareness-raising Campaign**

The existence of the Helpdesk against gender-based violence and the national and European framework behind it, triggered the idea of creating the first University communication campaign against gender-based violence to inform and also raise awareness among the academic community. It was primarily a print campaign, which was distributed during the fall 2023 extensively and pervasively across all university campuses (Bologna, Ravenna, Forlì, Rimini, and Cesena), with over 41,700 postcards in Italian and 20,600 in English, 1,136 posters, and 13,000 stickers (in bathrooms and vending machines) in 135 spaces including departments, libraries, and offices.

The University campaign was created, first, by carrying out a research analysis to investigate how in recent years Italian universities - and some public institutions and private companies - have communicated on GBV. This initial step was important to identify the most frequent communication frames and strategies that were adopted in the Italian contemporary context. The research highlighted how many of these communication campaigns were still based on gender stereotypes that depicted forms of degradation of women with images of women only as victims or humiliated subjects. Some of the communication campaigns included headlines that blamed women through the so-called “victim-blaming” and some others included images that sensationalize and glamorize violence. In general, there were messages that lack positive examples of female strength and fail to involve men in the fight against gender-based violence (Capecchi 2021; Capecchi & Gius 2023).

For the University of Bologna campaign, we chose instead to adopt a communication frame with a gender-sensitive approach, that was capable of deconstructing those gender stereotypes that have characterized mainstream communication, and could respect the dignity of the person represented, including female perspectives and LGBTQI+ subjectivities.

In creating the campaign, we identified a multi-layered target audience with the explicit goal to speak to the whole academic community, namely men and women who differ in age and geographical, social, and cultural backgrounds, and also people who do not necessarily identify with gender binaries, so it was necessary to adopt an intersectional approach and pay great attention to a gender-sensitive language. At the

same time, we were also aware that, while speaking to everyone, it was particularly necessary to address a specific group, that is that of young female students. Younger women are among the highest-risk groups for suffering GBV with rates double the national average. At the same time, however, the data from the National DIRE Network shows that this age group accesses anti-violence centres at relatively low percentages: only 16%. This means that incidents of violence involving very young women are statistically less detected, and these incidents are often not accompanied by requests for help. In this grey area still relatively invisible, the University Helpdesk against gender-based violence can make a difference for it can help those young students whose requests would otherwise go unsupported.

The goal of the campaign was to make gender-based violence recognizable. Our aim has been to raise awareness on the many forms of GBV using different examples, situations, and very concrete cases, naming specific forms of violence, both online and offline, that could be easily recognizable. We also strategically used the device of “asking questions” to engage the reader, using the second-person pronoun “you” and a warm tone of voice.

### **Conclusions: New Challenges and Multiple Approaches for Countering GBV in the University**

Our chapter aimed at describing the nuances, as well as the contradictions and complexities, of the different stances and attitudes towards GBV both in academia and outside, in the growing literature of feminist research and in the declarations and commitments of higher education EU policies. However, we have seen how every discourse on violence as acceptable or not is shaped by the environment and cultures in which we live in, work and study, with respect to how gender roles are performed, reaffirmed, reiterated, perhaps even transformed (Sundaram 2018). Once again, we are talking about cultural expectations and norms that we must continue to challenge, especially as higher education institutions.

A crucial, fundamental aspect of prevention work consists in trying to change these deep-rooted gender expectations, often widespread in our local culture, within those gendered regimes that characterize our institutions (Connell 2006), which for long supported and protected the

distribution of power, work and even *emotions* based on gendered orders and regimes. To bring about change in the culture of an institution, we need to go beyond an approach that is limited to identifying ‘problematic individuals’, or implementing policies that respond to individual acts. We need to understand violence in its various manifestations, to identify and comprehend those values and practices that, within the university environment, refer to broader social and cultural norms. We need to make sure that there is widespread and general awareness of the reality of violence and combating its “acceptability”. To do so, we have to build a set of targeted policies, comprehensive frameworks/programs/prevention projects that should be able to identify the contextual norms, structures and cultures that reinforce gender bias and discrimination, identifying and involving the people who are most likely to be in danger, or at risk.

We need to acknowledge that we all - lecturers, students, staff - contribute to spreading, and sometimes reinforcing forms of violence. We must raise the level of critical awareness, both our own and that of our students, as a tool of empowerment. Systemic violence must be countered with a cultural and political attitude and targeted policies, in turn systemic and systematic.

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# *LEVERAGING THE POTENTIAL OF THE COIMBRA GROUP TO ADDRESS GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN ACADEMIA: AN EXPLORATORY CASE STUDY*

SIOBÁN O'BRIEN GREEN, IVETA BAYEROVÁ

## **Introduction**

This chapter explores the potential of university umbrella organisations such as the Coimbra Group and describes the work undertaken to date by its Equality & Diversity (E&D) Working Group in relation to gender-based violence (GBV). GBV in the university sector in the European Union (EU) will be outlined through a synthesis of relevant data, initiatives and reports. The focus on counteracting GBV in research settings and higher education by the European Commission, and subsequent activities and publications, will be referenced. The potential for university umbrella associations to provide coherent and unified responses to GBV within and beyond their institutes will be explored, as well as the role of university alliances, which feature Coimbra Group (CG) members, as accelerators for concerted actions opposing GBV.

The CG aims to influence policy and develop best practice in response to GBV through experience exchanges/activities – which will all be explored – such as the endorsement of the Prague Call to Action; participation in the UniSAFE final conference and the subsequent GenderSAFE project; participation in the European Research Area (ERA) Policy Agenda Action 5 subgroup, Inclusive Gender Equality in the European Research Area, and the development, implementation and monitoring of university policies to combat GBV amongst CG members. As the chapter authors are involved in many of these activities in their universities and countries, and through the Coimbra Group, they will bring a unique and reflexive perspective to this exploration. Finally, future directions for this collaborative means of working will be outlined, as well as routes to combat GBV through the Coimbra Group and university networks and alliance initiatives.

## Gender-Based Violence in Academia in Europe

Gender-based violence<sup>1</sup> remains prevalent across the society as a whole, as well as in academia. The most recent report of the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) revealed that ‘one in three women in the EU-27 (30.7%) have experienced physical violence or threats and/or sexual violence over their lifetime, by any perpetrator’ (FRA, EIGE, Eurostat 14). Out of them, 13.5% have experienced physical violence and/or have been threatened with physical (but not sexual) violence, and 17.2% have experienced sexual violence (14). This survey revealed another key finding: a very low reporting rate for GBV. Only a minority of women who experienced GBV contacted a support professional after the incident (Ibid).

Looking at the university and research environment, the UniSAFE project conducted a large prevalence study of the GBV. Results of the survey were alarming, showing that 62 % of respondents from 46 participating universities from 15 EU countries had experienced at least one form of GBV (Lipinsky 6). It is needed to acknowledge, that in this particular survey the forms of violence varied from a “hostile look” to much more severe forms, but still this research provided very important insight into how (un)safe the environment and organisational culture in the European Research Area is perceived by those working and studying there.

In general, GBV has severe consequences for individuals, including physical injury and harm and psychological repercussions such as depression, increased stress, potential for drug and/or alcohol use, anxiety, or lack of motivation (Genderaction+ 1). On an organisational level, not addressing GBV can lead to a lack of trust in an institution, affects collegiality, and creates a culture of insecurity (DG Research and Innovation 6). Therefore, combatting gender-based violence is an integral part of fostering democratic values in everyday academic life, as well as of establishing a safe and equitable work, study, research and overall university environment. Addressing this key issue is, above all, a matter of human dignity and respect for fundamental rights. It is only in a setting where everyone feels safe and respected, that individuals can realise their full potential, research can flourish and all members can achieve excellence.

<sup>1</sup> According to the Council of Europe, based on an explanatory report to the Istanbul Convention: ‘Gender-based violence refers to “any type of harm that is perpetrated against a person or group of people because of their factual or perceived sex, gender, sexual orientation and/or gender identity.” (Council of Europe).

The European Institute for Gender Equality's case study defined three main costs as results of the pervasive issue of GBV:

- lost economic output relating to a variety of costs associated with the work status and productivity of victims (12);
- the costs of public services covering health services, personal costs, criminal and civil justice systems, self-funded legal costs, housing aid costs and child protection, as well as specialist services (32); and
- the physical and emotional impact on the victims, accounting for a reduction in the quality of life of a victim as a consequence of violence (European Institute for Gender Equality 20).

In numbers, according to the European Institute for Gender Equality, the cost of GBV across the EU is €366 billion a year (24).

Given that GBV has serious consequences at individual, institutional, but also societal levels, these findings have called for urgent action to change the academic environment towards a safer one. This appeal is in line with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 4, to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all, and Goal 5, to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.

Since 2022, important measures have been taken to combat GBV in the European Research Area. Firstly, gender equality plans (GEPs) became an eligibility criterion for the Horizon Europe programme, which led to the widespread acceptance of these strategic documents among European universities.<sup>2</sup> Although institutions are not obliged to include measures against GBV in their plans, it is recommended as one of five thematic areas (European Commission 2021, 46).

Based on discussions and exchanges about experiences among members of the Coimbra Group Equality & Diversity Working Group and for example contained in a published analysis concerning the situation in the Czech Republic (Donovalová and Tenglerová), universities are addressing this issue via their Gender Equality Plans. Apart from this top-down initiative, there is the very strong voice of students demanding changes and safer universities (for example, a student association called "Why We Didn't Report It" at Charles University in Prague, Czech Re-

<sup>2</sup> An analysis in *She Figures 2024* shows that, in most of the countries featured therein, more than 50% of higher-education institutions mention actions towards gender equality on their websites.

public). This synergy of top-down and bottom-up pressure has led to the introduction of new measures to combat GBV, such as the introduction of reporting systems at universities and the establishment of ombuds offices in many higher education institutions.

Secondly, the Horizon Europe European Research Area funding programme has supported European-wide projects focusing on gender equality – and GBV, in particular – that are developing and sharing tools and training, organising university networking, raising awareness, and producing position papers.<sup>3</sup> Through these actions, these projects address stakeholders at all relevant levels: university students and staff, equality, diversity and inclusion professionals, university management, and policymakers at national and European levels.

To accelerate change – and, in particular, to provide guidance on how to make the European Research and Innovation environment free from GBV – the Zero-Tolerance Code of Conduct was published in 2024. This resource provides a comprehensive explanation of the problem of GBV, including an exploration of the current legislative and policy framework in the EU and an introduction to the basic characteristics of GBV in the European Research Area. In addition to the Code of Conduct itself, practical suggestions for its implementation and the roles of various stakeholders, including policymakers, associations and umbrella organisations, research-funding organisations, and higher education and research institutions are shared. The Zero-Tolerance Code of Conduct was developed by the aforementioned subgroup of the ERA forum, Inclusive Gender Equality in the European Research Area, which brings together experts from member states, associations and umbrella organisations, including the Coimbra Group.

GBV appears to be a priority issue within the European Research Area, via position papers such as that of the Genderaction+ project, which proposes several steps to ending GBV, including the recommendation to make it a thematic area and a mandatory part of Gender Equality Plans. The Prague Call for Action was an initiative created to raise awareness of the urgency of the problem, following a conference – ‘Ending Gender-Based Violence in Academia: Toward Gender-Equal, Safe and Inclusive Research and Higher Education’ – organised during the Czech Presidency of the Council of the European Union in Prague, in November 2022. This Call to Action, which refers to the Ljubljana Declaration

<sup>3</sup> GenderSAFE, GenderAction+.

on Gender Equality in Research and Innovation from 2021, wherein GBV was identified as one of six key challenges, formulates recommendations for the key categories of stakeholders, building on the fact that:

- policies without effective implementation will not bring change;
- policies without proper resourcing, accountability from leadership, training, monitoring, case management, and evaluation will not have the desired effect; and
- recognising GBV as a profound challenge is crucial (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic 2).

In summary, much progress has been made in raising awareness and developing tools to accelerate the transformation towards safer research and innovation in the European Union. However, measures have been implemented in different ways at national levels between member states, including the use and implementation of the tools developed. Umbrella organisations such as the Coimbra Group provide a unique environment where there are opportunities to share experiences, which in turn can act as catalysts for change.

### **The Role of University Associations, Alliances and Umbrella Organisations in Relation to Gender-Based Violence**

University associations and umbrella organisations are uniquely positioned within the academic and research-performing organisation ecosystem as a network with shared goals and values. These organisations can act as evidence-based change agents within and beyond their own institutes by utilising collective experiences and knowledge, and then sharing this with their network colleagues. As a result, these networks can act as change accelerants and peer supports, especially in relation to common experiences and shared challenges (UniSAFE II). Additionally, with communal values and usually based on a signed charter or agreed mission, these associations and umbrella organisations can set shared standards and expectations for their members, and indeed decline or reject current and/or prospective members if these standards are not met and maintained.

For the purposes of this chapter, the focus will be on the Coimbra

Group, which was founded in 1985 and currently (as of 2025) has members from 42 universities in 22 European countries, with a subsequent reach into over 1.4 million students and approximately 235,000 staff members. The Coimbra Group is an association of long-established European comprehensive, multidisciplinary universities of high international standards committed to creating special academic and cultural ties, in order to promote, for the benefit of its members, internationalisation, academic collaboration, excellence in learning and research, and service to society. Members are committed to promoting these components by embedding them in their ethos and activities. All of the members are also participants in university alliances and, where appropriate, work together to influence European policy related to higher education.

University alliances have been set up, since 2019, to provide transnational educational options for students, whereby they can earn a degree by combining studies in several European countries. Alliances are formal partnerships of co-operating universities who actively seek to realise transdisciplinary and transnational education and research by working together and providing innovative educational offerings in line with EU values and educational aims. The alliances deepen cooperation between participating organisations and work to promote European values while improving the international competitiveness of their institutions. The European Union provides the main source of financial support for European university alliances through the Erasmus+ funding programme. Currently (2025), there are 65 European university alliances, which include 570 higher-education institutions across Europe, in all EU member states and eight other European countries.

Given their positioning, network capabilities, and peer norm-setting, as well as maintaining and monitoring roles, university associations, alliances and umbrella organisations, such as the Coimbra Group, offer the potential to provide coherent and unified responses to GBV within their member organisations and act as accelerators for action opposing GBV in higher-education and research contexts (UniSAFE II).

## **Work to Date by the Coimbra Group Equality & Diversity Working Group in Relation to Gender-Based Violence**

The Equality & Diversity Working Group is one of 12 working groups within the CG and serves as a hub for promoting equality and diversity and combatting GBV within the European Research Area. The Working Group's focus description outlines that 'equality and inclusion are of crucial importance in facilitating long-term improvement of the quality and excellence in research and innovation'. Therefore, the need to address GBV emerges as one of the group's priorities because, as described previously, GBV has a range of negative impacts on both individual and institutional levels. If Coimbra Group members want to maintain and/or improve quality and excellence in their universities, creating a safe and equitable working environment for all is required because 'gender-based violence is both a cause and a consequence of wider gender inequalities, as well as an inequality in its own right' (Humbert, Strid, et al. 3). A focus on addressing and combatting GBV within academia has been a theme for much of the work to date by the Working Group, the highlights of which will be outlined herein.

The vice-chair of the Working Group participated in a conference within the framework of the Czech Presidency of the Council of the European Union, held in Prague in November 2022 and titled 'Moving Beyond Gender-Based Violence in Academia'. Following this conference, all CG members were encouraged, through their Working Group representatives, to endorse and promote the subsequent call to action to end GBV, or the Prague Call for Action, which outlines the rationale for a series of recommendations to the research sector and the European Union, stating why action on GBV is urgently required in this sector (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic).

An online meeting with a representative from the European Commission Directorate General for Research and Innovation – Gender Sector was organised in February 2023. This meeting allowed for exchanges on the next research Framework Programme and gender equality plan (GEP) requirements when applying for research funding, as well as support from the Commission for universities' GEP development. The WG was able to share with the Commission the Coimbra Group position paper *Public consultation on the past, present and future of the European Research & Innovation Framework programmes 2014-2027*, launched in Febru-

ary 2023. This paper, to which the Working Group members contributed, includes specific references to GBV and welcomes the introduction of GEP requirements, in particular the recommendation of a thematic area contained in GEPs to include measures against GBV, including sexual harassment (CG 2023). The paper includes areas of concern for members of the Working Group, such as financial support for research staff in relation to family and caring leave, and it endorses more attention towards a broader inclusiveness within GEPs, including, for example, disability status, ethnicity, and sexual orientation.

To coincide with International Women's Day 2023, a Working Group member (and this chapter's co-author) was interviewed by the European publication *Research Professional*, and the resultant article called out the imperative nature of addressing GBV within the academic sector and the commitment of the Coimbra Group to action in this area (Bo Wagner). The article went on to explore the potential for recommended areas for inclusion in GEPs, such as those addressing GBV, to become mandatory.

To mark the end of the Horizon Europe-funded UniSAFE project in November 2023, a final conference – 'Pathways to End Gender-Based Violence in Academia and Research' – hosted by the University of Namur, in Belgium, took place. At the conference, a member of the CG E&D WG (and co-author of this chapter) was invited to participate in a panel discussion called 'Mutual Learning as a Means to Advance Change among Umbrella Organisations', where other umbrella groups, such as LERU - League of European Research Universities, (with 24 members) and YERUN -Young European Research Universities Network, (with 24 members), exchanged ideas and experiences on how best to leverage their networks to combat GBV (UniSAFE II). The panel discussion also explored the UniSAFE project recommendations for university umbrella organisations and how these could be transposed into the *modi operandi* of the network members to drive positive initiatives and actions in the university sector. In addition, panel participants reflected on and shared the potential challenges and obstacles in the implementation of these recommendations.

The Equality & Diversity Working Group planned and hosted a meeting titled 'The Violence of Gender Discrimination from an Intersectional Perspective: Moving Forward' to coincide with the United Nation's 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence in December 2023, in Brussels. The meeting was in person, and the agenda was specifically designed to include presentations from the European Commission, the

European Parliament and the Spanish Presidency of the Council of the EU, in addition to a keynote address from the University of Bologna (a CG member). Aligning and exploring the interests and commitments of the WG members with those of the European Commission and future plans for the European Research Area were discussed. The next meeting presentation focused on the work of the FEMM Parliamentary Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality, and work and research to date on the then proposed Violence Against Women European Parliament Directive (Zamfir 6). The final meeting presentation outlined the achievements of the Spanish European Union Presidency in relation to GBV, in a conference organised by the Minister of Universities – 'Ending Gender-Based Violence in Academia: Making Universities and Research Organisations Safe from Gender-Based Violence' – in Bilbao (attended by Coimbra Group members), and recent Spanish legislation for the university sector focused on GBV and gender equality (UniSAFE website). This meeting was proposed by the Working Group Chair, and unanimously agreed by the participants to be dedicated to the memory of University of Padua student Giulia Cecchettin, who had been murdered by her fellow student and ex-boyfriend in November 2023.

Many of the activities described above relate to staff and academic and research stakeholders among Coimbra Group members. However, representatives of the Working Group were also involved in the largest student-led event to date, the Erasmus Generation Meeting, which took place in Seville, Spain, in April 2024. The panel event at the conference, titled 'Intersectionality in Practice: Keeping Universities Inclusive and Safe,' presented examples of good practice amongst CG universities in tackling GBV and developed into a lively discussion, with the students attending discussing their experiences and the current situation in European universities, from their own perspectives (Coimbra Group Newsletter).

As an umbrella organisation, the Coimbra Group is represented by two deputies in the expert subgroup of the European Research Area forum, Inclusive Gender Equality in the European Research Area, which was established in 2023 to support the implementation of Action 5 of the research Policy Agenda 2022-2024. Action 5 aims to promote gender equality and foster inclusiveness, therefore, addressing the topic of GBV in academia is a crucial part of the subgroup's agenda.<sup>4</sup> Coimbra

<sup>4</sup> A strategy to counteract GBV, including sexual harassment, in the European Research and Innovation system, and to assure gender-equal and -inclusive working environments through institutional

Group members have been involved in the subgroup since its inception. Together with other institutions from academia, research organisations and think tanks, the Coimbra Group has a role of the observer in the subgroup, however, it contributes with comments and insights to the joint work of the subgroup as well.

In addition to these activities, the Coimbra Group website, monthly newsletter, social-media channels and member-only intranet are leveraged to share information between members and working groups on activities and areas of interest. The Working Group has used these communication channels to highlight its work and events relating to GBV, and to invite collaboration within and beyond Coimbra Group.

### **Future Potential and Collaborations**

The work programme for the Equality & Diversity Working Group commits it to continue to focus on GBV in academia and in society, to continue its work on intersectionality, particularly with regard to sexism and racism. The Working Group will aim to contribute to European Commission documents and reports that contain equality, diversity and inclusion dimensions, especially in relation to GBV. However, there exists additional potential to leverage the range of work and competencies among stakeholders within the Coimbra Group association to address and combat GBV.

Numerous programmes – such as the Coimbra Group scholarship programme, intended for young researchers and staff from universities in Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa, and Europe – could be utilised to ignite collaborative research projects on GBV in academic settings. These have the potential to inspire and enable a new generation of early-career researchers to consider research on GBV, within both an academic context and their future careers.

Additionally, through memberships of transnational organisations, such as the Erasmus Student Network and the Association of Universities of Latin America and the Caribbean, the Group could ensure that GBV is on the agenda of mutual meetings and on shared work programmes. Regular Coimbra Group activities – including summer/winter schools,

change in any research-funding or -performing organisation, is one of four outcomes defined in the ERA Policy Agenda within Action 5.

annual conferences, seminars, and staff training – allow for GBV to be incorporated into the foci of these events, and to amplify and embed the work to date throughout the network. Finally, the location of the Coimbra Group office in Brussels and the strong working collaborations with European institutions – built up during the 40 years in which the organisation has been in existence – are exceptional points on which to grow and sustain future synergies, partnerships, and efforts to combat GBV in European universities and the European Research Area as a whole.

## **Conclusion**

GBV is an issue of concern for universities in their multiple roles as places of education, work, research, and, in some cases, accommodation and social activities – via alumni, sporting and cultural activities, etc. – given the established prevalence of GBV globally. The European Commission has highlighted this area of concern through publications, funded research projects such as UniSAFE and GenderSAFE, codes, and GEP considerations. Umbrella organisations have multiple roles to play, in order to provide visibility of the issue of GBV among their members and share what they have in place to address the issue, such as policies, services, reporting structures, etc. – especially in terms of boosting mutual learning.

By sharing GBV policies, institutional approaches and promising practices together, networks such as the Coimbra Group can act as accelerants to the rapid dissemination of good practices within the network. The peer element, and indeed the competitive nature of academia at an intra-institutional level, can be maximised for the good intention of offering safe and responsive universities in which to work, study and research, all the while maintaining standards and norms for members to uphold.

This chapter has explored the extent and repercussions of GBV in academia in Europe, outlined the role of university networks in responding to this concern, explored the work undertaken by the Coimbra Group to date – in particular, the Equality & Diversity Working Group – to combat GBV and promote equality in its universities and network, and shared potential future steps to continue, enhance and grow this work. The challenge of GBV detracting from excellence in academia, research

and teaching is enormous, but by purposeful and committed collaboration, the journey to eliminate it commences together.

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# *ACADEMIC WORKERS WITH SPECIAL CAREGIVING DUTIES: A PERSPECTIVE FROM ITALIAN UNIVERSITIES*

BERNARDO CORTESE

## **Introduction**

What does it mean to be an academic worker while at the same time taking care of a person requiring special assistance that goes beyond the normal care one is normally providing to a child, or partner, or other family member? What special challenges does such an academic worker face in her career, that are different from those other colleagues usually face? What kind of support does the employer university have to provide? Do regulatory frameworks applicable to academic workers as to their hiring, assessment, career advancement, ability to take part in academic life, etc., put such special caregivers at risk of being discriminated against?

To try and address such questions, this chapter will provide a legal analysis based on a number of international and EU law legal tools relevant under a “disability law” approach, namely the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), the EU Employment Equality Directive (EED), the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (CFREU), and the European Convention on the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (ECHR). By considering these legal regimes, the chapter shows how the situation of academic workers who are special caregivers is meant to be protected, under international and EU laws, following several concurring perspectives. First, it explains that, the special caregiver situation falls under a comprehensive non-discrimination regime, covering both direct and indirect discrimination, and requiring positive measures on the side of the employer university (reasonable accommodation). Furthermore, it highlights other relevant legal issues, involving fundamental rights protected both under the CRPD and, in Europe, under the CFREU and the ECHR, namely the right of the family member for whom the academic worker cares to live

independently and achieve inclusion and participation in society, and the right to family of both that person, and the academic worker herself. The legal perspective adopted will not stop at the international and EU level, but will also refer to some provisions of the Italian legal system, both to highlight some interesting parallels with the international and EU approaches, and to show some shortcomings of the national approach. Further, the gendered elements of the relevant factual situation will also be highlighted.

### **International and EU Law Instruments: Understandings of Disability and Special Caregivers**

Considering the addressees of this contribution, who are likely to be academics interested in EDI across a wide disciplinary spectrum, I will address the relevant legal framework unitarily, leaving aside some important differences, both as to the structural features and scope of application, of the relevant legal instruments.

As anticipated, in Europe one has to consider both the CRPD<sup>1</sup>, an international convention that binds all EU member States, and the EU itself, together with some additional layers of EU law, and the ECHR, a non-EU legal tool that is essentially relevant, again, both for EU member States and the EU. In particular, both the CRPD and the EU Directive 78/2000 on employment equality<sup>2</sup> (EED) rely on a powerful understanding of the principle of equality in its negative dimension, namely the prohibition of direct and indirect discrimination. Both also require positive approaches to equality, and among them especially the duty to provide reasonable accommodation.

Furthermore, the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (CFREU) is also relevant to assess special caregivers' situations, *via* the EU law trigger<sup>3</sup> of the EED and the CRPD itself. The CFREU signifi-

<sup>1</sup> On the CRPD and its Optional Protocol cf. Della Fina, Valentina, Cera, Rachele, Palmisano, Giuseppe (editors). *The United Nations Conventions on the Rights of Persons with Disability. A Commentary*. Springer, 2017. On its relationship with EU law cf. Ferri, Delia, "The Unorthodox Relationship between the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and Secondary Rights in the Court of Justice Case Law on Disability Discrimination". *European Constitutional Law Review*, vol. 16, no. 2, 2020, pp. 275-305.

<sup>2</sup> Directive 2000/78/EC of 27 November 2000 establishing a general framework for equal treatment in employment and occupation.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. art. 51 CFREU.

cance within this framework lies in its general anti-discrimination provisions, including equality between men and women,<sup>4</sup> and in its special provisions on the rights of the child, of the elderly, and on the integration of persons with disability.<sup>5</sup> Finally, the ECHR is especially relevant for its general antidiscrimination clause,<sup>6</sup> as well as for the protection of the right to family,<sup>7</sup> both having been interpreted by the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) as covering special caregiving situations.<sup>8</sup>

Under the CRPD, disability is “an evolving concept” resulting from the “interaction between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers”: it is that interaction, not the impairments per se, that hinders “their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others”.<sup>9</sup> The notion of disability is, therefore, social, and human rights oriented, and not medical. Correspondingly, the notion of persons with disability according to the relevant jurisprudence of the Committee entrusted with the oversight of the CRPD (CtRPD), is an open one, as it includes, *but is not limited to* “those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others”.<sup>10</sup> Because the EU is bound by the CRPD, the same notion, based on the interaction between some form of impairments and social barriers, including “attitudinal” ones, needs to be followed also under EU law, in particular when applying the EED,<sup>11</sup> and the CFREU.

Based on such a wide-ranging definition, whenever someone takes care of a person requiring long-term special assistance that goes beyond the care one is normally providing to a child, or partner, or other family member who is only temporarily incapable of autonomously and fully caring for herself, we can safely assume that the legal definition of disability is matched, and the relevant legal regime applies.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. arts. 20, 21 and 23 CFREU.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. arts. 24, 25 and 36 CFRU.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. art. 14 ECHR.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. art. 8 ECHR.

<sup>8</sup> ECtHR 22 March 2016, *Guberina v. Croatia*.

<sup>9</sup> CRPD, Preamble, letter e).

<sup>10</sup> CRPD, art. 1.

<sup>11</sup> CJEU 13 April 2013, joined cases C-335/11 and C-377/11, *HK Danmark*, paras 28-32. Cf. Cortese, Bernardo. “The Role of the Court of Justice of the European Union in Protecting Disability Rights”. *Actors and Roles in EU Disability Law*, edited by Delia Ferri and Eva M. Krolla, Hart, 2025, pp. 137-160, p. 143 ff.

The situation of special caregivers who are academic workers, and that of the persons they take care of, can be looked at under two concurring perspectives. The first perspective is the prohibition of discrimination, covering both direct and indirect discrimination, and covering also the denial of positive measures necessary to ensure the enjoyment of their rights, known as *reasonable accommodation*. The second perspective looks at the right to live independently, and the right to family, as applicable both to persons with disability and their family members acting as special caregivers.

The following sections will follow both legal perspectives, to draw the general lines of a legal regime applicable to workers active as special caregivers, protecting them in the employment relationship and, as far as academics are concerned, in their overall position in the academic system.

### ***Non-discrimination and equal treatment***

Both the CRPD and the EED prohibit direct *and* indirect discrimination based on disability. *Direct* discrimination is the situation in which a “person is treated less favourably than another is, has been or would be treated in a comparable situation”,<sup>12</sup> for a “reason related to” disability.<sup>13</sup> *Indirect* discrimination is the situation where apparently neutral rules or practices “have a disproportionate negative impact on a person with a disability”.<sup>14</sup> Under both instruments, moreover, the prohibition of discrimination based on disability protects not only the persons with disability, but also persons associated to them, like their family members. This is clearly affirmed in the relevant CRPD jurisprudence,<sup>15</sup> as well as in the relevant case law of the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU).<sup>16</sup> The same result is required under both the CFREU and the ECHR.<sup>17</sup> As we will see in the latter part of this chapter, there are plenty of such neutral provisions and practices, in the academic world, that ob-

<sup>12</sup> Art. 2 EED.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. General Comment n. 6 on equality and non-discrimination, CRPD/C/GC/6, para. 18.

<sup>14</sup> General Comment n. 6, para. 18, sub b). Cf. for a very similar language also art. 2 EED.

<sup>15</sup> General Comment n. 6, para. 17.

<sup>16</sup> CJEU 17 July 2008, case C-303/06, *Coleman*, para 38. Cf. moreover the clear reasoning of AG Maduro in para. 19 of its Opinion in the same case. On indirect discrimination, cf. Opinion of AG Rantos in case C-38/24, *Bervidi*, paras 33-43.

<sup>17</sup> ECtHR 22 March 2016, *Guberina v. Croatia* (cf. esp. the reasoning applied at paras 80-87 of the judgment).

jectively disadvantage academic workers in their employment relationship and in their wider academic (professional) life.

The consequences of an equal-treatment approach, however, are even more significant, as they include the need to take individual measures of a positive nature, to provide equal opportunities to persons with disabilities and, what counts more in our perspective, to their family members<sup>18</sup> who act as special caregivers: this is what lawyers call a *reasonable accommodation*. Reasonable accommodation is in fact an essential tool to positively grant equal treatment. It is defined as “necessary and appropriate modification and adjustments not imposing a disproportionate or undue burden, where needed in a particular case, to ensure to persons with disabilities the enjoyment or exercise on an equal basis with others of all human rights and fundamental freedoms.” Importantly, the duty to provide reasonable accommodation is an obligation addressed, as such, not only to States, but also to individuals, and in particular to individual employers.<sup>19</sup>

Coming now to the situations we are specifically considering here, the duty to provide reasonable accommodation to a special caregiver in an employment relationship has been specifically affirmed in the jurisprudence of the CtRPD,<sup>20</sup> but is also definitely mandated under EU law.<sup>21</sup> If one exits the international and European law layers, and enters the relevant Italian national law approach to the principle of equal treatment, it is worth noting that Italian law has already made – autonomously – the important step of including caregivers in the scope of application of such fundamental legal principles. In fact, a 2021 reform of the Italian *Codice delle pari opportunità tra uomo e donna*<sup>22</sup> has inserted a new provision, that prohibits indirect discrimination through the application of any treatment or change in the organization of working conditions or working hours which, *on grounds of family caring responsibilities*, may place the worker in a disadvantageous position compared to other workers, or limit their opportunities to participate in company life or decisions, or their

<sup>18</sup> Cf. UNCRPD, art 2, and General Comment n. 6, paras. 14 and 17, cit. above, for the express inclusion of persons associated to persons with disabilities.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. esp. art. 5 EED as interpreted by CJEU 4 July 2013, case C-312/11, *Commission v Italy*, para. 61.

<sup>20</sup> CtRPD, Communication n. 51/2018, *Bellini v. Italy*, adopted on 26 August 2022, CRP-D/C/27/D/51/2018.

<sup>21</sup> Opinion of AG Rantos in case C-38/24, cit., para 52.

<sup>22</sup> The name stands for *Code of equal opportunities between men and women*.

access to career advancement and progression.<sup>23</sup> Taken together with the legal understanding of denial of reasonable accommodation as discrimination, this means that, at the level of general antidiscrimination law, general Italian law is fully equipped to combat discrimination that might arise in case of special caregivers. Italian law, moreover, does so by recognizing the intersectional discrimination features of the phenomenon.

Summing up, one can conclude that under the principle of equal treatment and non-discrimination, workers who are special caregivers need to be protected against any discrimination based on their situation, both direct and indirect, and they need to be granted special positive measures by their employers (reasonable accommodation), whenever this would help overcome an indirect discrimination.

### ***The right to live independently and the right to family***

As outlined above, antidiscrimination law is not the only source of protection for academic (and non-academic) workers who act as special caregivers. In fact, their choices as to the work-life balance that are linked to their positions as special caregivers can also be looked at under the different lenses of the right to live independently enjoyed by their family members with disability, and of their own right to family.

As to the first of such alternative “legal lenses”, the work/life choices of the special caregivers have a clear impact on the right of their family members with disability to exercise self-determination over their lives, including daily routines, habits and personal relationships.<sup>24</sup> Not making it possible – or making it difficult – for the special caregivers to adapt their work/life choices to the choices and needs of the person with disability they take care of, will thus have a negative impact on the latter’s right to live independently and be included in the community.<sup>25</sup>

This right requires “exercising freedom of choice and control over decisions affecting one’s life with the maximum level of self-determination and interdependence within society”.<sup>26</sup> Now, if the member of the family that is active both as special caregiver and as worker is not

<sup>23</sup> Legislative decree 11 April 2006, n. 198, *Codice delle pari opportunità tra uomo e donna*: art. 25, n. 2 *bis*, as modified by art. 2, n. 1, of law n. 162 of 2021.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. General Comment n. 5 on Article 19 - The right to live independently and be included in the community, CRPD/C/GC/5, para. 16, letter a).

<sup>25</sup> Art. 19 CRPD and art. 26 CFREU.

<sup>26</sup> General Comment n. 5, cit., para. 8.

capable of adjusting her working conditions to the choices made by the person with disability, or to the best interest of that person, she will have no choice but to seek care by a third person – leaving aside the sometimes existential question whether that care is at all available – or be subject to (full or partial) institutionalization. In both cases, the person with disability will be denied the possibility to set her “independent living arrangements”.<sup>27</sup>

At the same time, this would amount to a limitation of the right to family of both the special caregiver, and her family member with disability, as protected under the CRPD,<sup>28</sup> and, under equivalent conditions, under the CFREU and the ECHR. In this framework, it should be noted that the concepts of family, and of family life, under international human rights regimes are essentially autonomous notions, that is, they are possibly independent from the legal characterization of a given relationship as family under the applicable national law. What counts is, in sum, the existence in practice of close personal ties,<sup>29</sup> involving commitment to each other.<sup>30</sup> The relevant relationship might be, for instance, that of a single mother and her child,<sup>31</sup> that of two adult partners and their child,<sup>32</sup> of two adult partners between them<sup>33</sup> or, in case of an adult depending on another adult with which she has no link of filiation, nor of partnership, a situation of reliance on the care and support by the caregiver in the daily life, as in the case of a person with severe disability.<sup>34</sup>

### **The Factual Situation of an Academic Worker with Special Caregiving Duties**

Having so far defined the abstract legal regime protecting special caregivers, let us now come to the “raw material” this chapter wishes to address, that is the factual situation of academic workers who are special caregivers.

<sup>27</sup> General Comment n. 5, cit., para. 16, letter c), on independent living arrangements.

<sup>28</sup> CRPD, art. 23 - Respect for home and the family.

<sup>29</sup> ECtHR 24 January 2017, *Paradiso and Campanelli v. Italy*, para 140.

<sup>30</sup> ECtHR 22 April 1997, *X, Y and Z v. United Kingdom*, para 36.

<sup>31</sup> ECtHR 13 June 1979, *Marckx v. Belgium*, paras 31 ff.

<sup>32</sup> ECtHR 18 December 1986, *Johnston a.o. v. Ireland*, paras. 70 ff.

<sup>33</sup> ECtHR 7 November 2013, *Vallianatos a.o. v. Greece*, para 73.

<sup>34</sup> ECtHR 10 March 2025, *Martinez Alvarado v. Netherlands*, paras 46 ff.

As a baseline, if compared with the generality of workers in similar roles and positions, including parent workers who provide normal care to their child during childhood and development, special caregivers will have to face an extra burden, due to the long-lasting impairments of their family members requiring assistance. As a bare minimum, that extra burden will have an impact on their work-life balance. Inevitably, in fact, they will need to add to their recognized and paid academic work an additional – informal, non-paid, and in principle non-recognized – work as caregivers. Depending on the nature of the impairments, and on the level of non-autonomy of their family members with disability, that extra burden will have varying impact on their capability to fulfil their duties as academics.

There might be in place support, provided under a general solidarity-based welfare state approach, to assist such persons in discharging their special caregivers' responsibilities. Employer-organized measures of support might also be in place, although this would be quite an exceptional case in southern European social models. Such support might of course mitigate the impact of the extra burden special caregivers face. The availability and extension of such support, however, might vary depending on existing State legislation, regional and or local policies. The actual positive impact of any such support will also vary depending on the degree and scope of the impairments, on the social situation of the family, and on geographical and other factors. To concretise this, consider the following questions: does the family member with disability require additional support "only" in some areas of everyday life/social life? Or does she require a specialized care that only specifically trained persons can provide? Is the special caregiver alone, or is there an additional member of the family who can share the extra burden? Is the place of residence of the family close to, or far away from, the place where the academic worker discharges her professional duties? Does the special caregiver(s) need to spend periods of time abroad, or in any case far away from the family place of residence? All such questions are relevant in assessing the reality and extent of any welfare state/employer-organized support in the assistance of the family member who is a person with disability. Quite understandably, in fact, even when they exist, such support measures are organized in a standardized way, and it might not be easy – or at all possible – to adapt such support to every specific need of an individual family.

Moreover, even when such supports are in place, and are effective in providing an adequate third-party care to the person with disability, the choice of relying on such external “social” caregivers, and the extent of their involvement in the life of the family member with disability (and of the family as such), should always remain a prerogative of the person with disability and of her family member who is her caregiver. To assume the contrary would violate both the right of the person with disability to live independently and be included in society, and the right to family of both that person and her caregiver(s).

Regarding the special caregivers’ factual situation, we might here safely assume that academic workers, having such an additional burden because of their special tasks, will tend to be less productive in quantitative terms, if assessed on an absolute output basis, when compared with academic workers who do not have such special responsibilities. In fact, having to add to their working activities, and to the normal caring duties of any parent worker, the extra and permanent burden of caring for a person with disability, they will tend to have less time to spend on scientific research. They will often require more flexible working conditions, in particular as to their teaching duties, in order to be able to cope with their additional burden, and with the organizational constraints that caring for their family members with disability imposes on them. Their special caregivers’ tasks will also typically make their participation in off-site activities, including international scientific conferences and meetings, far less practicable than it is for their colleagues. Additionally, because of the extra burden they face, they will be less likely to accept extra tasks as members of academic bodies, or vie for top academic positions.

There is plenty of “individual” evidence of such obstacles materializing in the career of academic workers who are special caregivers (myself included). Crucially, such evidence can never be dismissed as “just anecdotal” by the employer university. In fact, the legal characterization of the situation of a special caregiver, and of the duties of her employer, does not depend on an actual and accurate “measurement” of the situation of other employees in a comparable situation. While data collected from such measurements could help design general organisational measures the employer should take in order to reduce discriminations, they are not a precondition of the employer’s obligation to act in any individual case. As is typical of antidiscrimination law, what a person

claiming to be discriminated against has to do is just to provide *prima facie* elements substantiating her claim (meaning that the elements presented by the claimant are taken as “sufficient evidence”). This is why it is enough to rely on an assumption of extra burden – and on a *prima facie* evidence of it in an individual case, in order to require the employer to thoroughly assess that claim. And, as I will show in the following paragraphs, such a thorough assessment will highlight the need to act.

### ***Examples of indirect discrimination of special caregivers in Italian university practice***

For the reasons I have highlighted above, an academic worker who is a special caregiver of her family member enjoys protection against direct and indirect discrimination by association on ground of disability, including in case of denial of a reasonable accommodation. Indirect discrimination, in particular, occurs whenever apparently neutral laws, policies or practices produce a disproportionate negative impact on the special caregiver. This will presumably be the result of applying a productivity-based approach for appointment, career advancement, or any other situation involving the assessment of professional results, if no support measures are in place, capable of offsetting the extra burden faced by a special caregiver. This will also happen when this extra burden is not taken into account when determining the teaching duties of that person. We shall now consider those two areas of possible infringement of special caregivers’ rights, by considering first some examples of quantitative bias, and then issues requiring a reasonable accommodation.

### ***Productivity-based rules produce a discriminatory bias***

Productivity-based rules can produce a discriminatory bias, within the Italian university practice. To start with, an apparently minor issue is related to the determination of basic research funding each member of Italian universities is normally awarded, on a yearly basis. This is not big money, to be clear: it is what we use to go to a congress abroad, to invite a colleague to do a seminar, to co-fund a scientific publication. This kind of research funding rests on the general ordinary research budget of the university (*Fondo di Finanziamento Ordinario*, FFO), granted yearly to each public university by the Italian University and Research Ministry. One of the elements forming the matrix used by the Minis-

try to determine the FFO is the index of the triennial Research Quality Evaluation exercise (*Valutazione della Qualità della Ricerca*, VQR), which includes a quantitative assessment of the publications of each member of the research staff. That quantitative element is not corrected to account for any special caregiving situation. For the purposes of this analysis, then, the VQR index expresses a quantitative bias. Now, it is a widespread practice, at the university level, to use the same matrix – combined to other criteria – to divide the overall research funding among the several departments forming each university. Also, it is not uncommon for university departments to “punish” their least productive researchers, through a curtailment of their basis research budget. This is meant to induce a better performance in the next VQR evaluation period – and hence, better funding for the university and for the relevant department. However, applying this curtailment to a member of the research staff who is a special caregiver, and has therefore an additional burden when compared to other colleagues, while she was not granted any reasonable accommodation compensating that burden – e.g., a reduction of her teaching duties, as we shall see in a moment, would amount to an indirect discrimination on the basis of disability.

The same is true – and it is a more structural bias, capable of producing major discriminatory effects – when it comes to the use of quantitative criteria as the basis of appointment decisions, assessments of the results of specific research posts, and career advancements. Such quantitative criteria – and the discriminatory bias they produce in the case of special caregivers – are at the centre of the Italian academic system, both as to the national habilitation process determining the abstract qualification to hold a professorship, and as to the procedures used for choosing among different candidates for a given post, both in tenured and non-tenured positions.

The granting of national academic qualifications and the recruitment processes for academic positions in Italy heavily rely on quantitative criteria based on research output, teaching activities, participation in conferences, etc. This quantitative approach inherently disadvantages candidates who are special caregivers, as their caregiving responsibilities may limit their ability to achieve the same numerical metrics as other candidates, despite equal capabilities. The system fails to account for or provide correcting factors related to special caregiving situations, unlike accommodations made for parental leave. This quantitative bias in evalu-

ation and recruitment practices leads to a clear risk of indirect discrimination against academic workers who are special caregivers. This applies for the appointment of professorships as well as more junior positions in academia.

For “entry-level” academic positions, PhD positions and postdoc research contracts, we find other situations of apparent neutral provisions discriminating against persons who are special caregivers. PhD positions in Italy are normally supported with a three years study grant, and cannot normally take more than three years to reach the PhD final examination. For grave reasons - that can of course include the situation of a special caregiver, although not expressly considered by the relevant regulation, the duration of the PhD can be extended by a maximum of 18 months, however without any grant being paid for that extra time.<sup>35</sup> Postdoc positions too cannot last more than three years. The research contract can be suspended for grave reasons including the need to care for a person with disability. During the suspension, however, no remuneration is due (nor is applicable any general unemployment benefit).<sup>36</sup> In both cases, the outcome will be a discrimination of special caregivers as to the remuneration. In some cases, applying such *guillotine* deadlines to reach a certain career development, without appropriate flexibility for special caregivers, will have strong exclusionary effects, effectively kicking such persons out of academia.

### ***The obligation to grant reasonable accommodation***

As we have seen, denying a reasonable accommodation that would make it possible for a person with disability to enjoy her rights, is considered a discrimination based on disability. We also saw that denying a reasonable accommodation to a worker who is a special caregiver is also a discrimination based on disability, “by association”, vis à vis that worker. An academic worker who is a special caregiver, and her family member with disability, will be the object of such discrimination whenever the worker is denied a reasonable accommodation in terms of teaching time, that would facilitate the exercise of the caregiving tasks. Actually, in order to provide such a reasonable accommodation, the employer university might be required to assign to that worker a teaching slot in presence

<sup>35</sup> Cf. University of Padova regulation for Phd, arts. 22.9 and 25.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. University of Padova regulation for postdoc positions (*assegnati di ricerca*), art. 17.

that does not clash with her special caregiver responsibilities – just think of the need to take her child to a rehabilitation facility in given days, at given times. If the child, however, needs more continuous assistance and care, a reasonable accommodation might be that of permitting her caring mother (or father) to provide on-distance learning classes, while adopting the organizational and support measures that make it possible to effectively and successfully teach in such conditions. A reduction of the teaching charge might also be a positive measure of accommodation helping the special caregiver to fulfil her caring responsibility, and to have an adequate work/life balance.

Lack of adequate support for academic workers who are special caregivers might moreover impact their right to fully participate in the academic life of their institution, since their situation makes it impossible for them to take on extra tasks as, for example, members of academic governing bodies. This would already discriminate those workers. Indirectly, this will also have an impact on their career development, as having exercised such tasks constitutes a valuable qualification to be assessed in selection procedures for a full professor position. If, conversely, they accept (or are left with no alternative but to accept) such extra tasks, lack of adequate support and/or reasonable accommodation as to other duties might impact on their right to fully pursue a family relationship with their family member with disability, by forcing them to limit their involvement as caregivers, and to revert to third-party care services. At the same time, this will also involve a limitation of the right of the persons with disability to choose their caregiver inside their family, thus compromising their right to live independently and be included in the community, as well as their right to family.

### **Conclusion: Takeaways and Ways Forward**

So, what are the main takeaways of this analysis, and what the ways forward? I offer four main points here, in the hope that they will inspire readers across geographic locations to consider the role and legal obligations of the university in the lives of academics-and-special-carers.

First: academic workers active as special caregivers *are protected* by antidiscrimination legal principles, and by some further legal principles especially furthering the rights of their family members with

disability. Second: apparently neutral rules and practices concerning several elements of these individuals' academic activities carry a significant risk of producing discriminatory results, when applied to them without considering their extra burden. This is particularly true of any quantitative approach to research assessment. Third: universities should adopt positive measures of reasonable accommodation, taking into account the individual situation of each special caregiver. Fourth: universities should engage in a thorough assessment of the situation of those workers, in order to *ex ante* – that is, proactively rather than reactively – make adjustments, and make these academics' situation non- (or at least less) discriminatory.

Both being equipped to provide reasonable accommodation, and designing their functioning in order to make it less discriminatory, would not only make universities more inclusive towards academics who are special caregivers – and, quite often, female academics. It would also enrich their diversity, making it easier for them to select academics *with disabilities*, and widen their perspectives on research (and teaching, and disseminating) with different *regards*, ideas, and approaches, that this diversity would let in.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> On the different layers of a right of persons with disability to participate in cultural life, including in the creative part of cultural life, cf. Ferri, Delia, “The Right of Persons with Disabilities to Participate in Cultural Life”. *Dismantling Barriers and Advancing the Right of persons with Disabilities to Participate in Cultural Life. A Socio-Legal Analysis*, edited by Delia Ferri and Ann Leahy. Routledge, 2025, pp. 75-97. What I am proposing here, is to consider a further layer of participation in cultural life: that of academic knowledge creation (research) and dissemination.

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# *WOMEN IN STEM: UNDERSTANDING CHALLENGES AND PROVIDING EDI INITIATIVES\**

CAROLINE LILLEAKER EGGLE, PATRICIA ELGOIBAR, JONATHAN CALLEJA-BLANCO

## **Women in STEM Sectors**

Since the establishment of the UN Sustainable Development Goals in 2015, the UN has worked to promote women's access to work and to prohibit occupational segregation and gender wage gaps. This work has achieved valuable results in advancing gender equality; however, despite this progress, gender inequalities are still deep-rooted in every society and many sectors (United Nations, 2023). This gender gap is especially notable in the field of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM), where inequality and segregation persist and its effects have been well documented (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2023; Miner et al., 2019; Kim and Meister, 2023). STEM fields continue to struggle with the underrepresentation of women and remain male-dominated across many countries (Bilimoria et al., 2014; Guillemain et al., 2023) leading to a "leaky pipeline" (Blaique et al., 2023). The leaky pipeline metaphor describes the continuous loss of girls and women in STEM fields starting from high school until they enter the job market (Forget, 2021). The impact of this underrepresentation extends beyond individual women, affecting industry and innovation, workforce dynamics, and the broader societal contributions of women (Vergés-Bosch et al., 2021).

## **Gender Inequality in STEM at a Glance**

Statistics provided by the World Economic Forum show that women make up only 29.2 % of the STEM workforce in the 146 countries that

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were studied (World Economic Forum, 2023). This gender imbalance becomes even wider in leadership positions (16% female; Kim and Meister, 2023). In addition, women's turnover rate is four times greater than men (Blaique et al., 2023). In Europe, data from the European Working Condition Survey (EWCS, 2021) – which includes information from over 70000 individuals across the European Union, and multiple industries – shows that although the percentage of women attaining tertiary education exceeds that of men, their representation in STEM sectors and careers remains low. On average, and consistently across all age groups, in the EU women hold only 35% of STEM positions, with a significant concentration in fields related to health, education and social activities. Notably, these gender disparities vary by role, and across countries, but indicate that the inequality is not only found in the professional world, but also during (or even before) entering tertiary education. As a response to this systemic inequality, the EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025 has been established with specific aims to address the underrepresentation of women in STEM (European Commission, 2020).

Given that STEM sectors are becoming increasingly relevant globally, hiring women in this area is a timely goal for organizations and universities. To be able to attract, promote and retain women in STEM, organizations and academic institutions need to be aware of the reasons for women to avoid or leave the sector. With this aim and based on recent research on the issue, this chapter compiles the challenges women find in the STEM field and provides initiatives for inclusion, well-being and retention of women in STEM careers. We have organized the challenges found by women in STEM sectors into three levels: cultural, organizational and individual. This structure was chosen to provide a comprehensive and coherent understanding of the interrelatedness of the challenges faced.

### **Challenges for Women in STEM Sectors**

This section proposes a classification of the main challenges for women to enter and progress in STEM careers found in the literature. Three levels have been found to explain these challenges into depth: cultural, organizational and individual.

### ***The cultural level: Male dominated culture and gender stereotypes***

The concept of a masculinized workplace, often referred to as the “Old Boys Club”, is pervasive in STEM fields (Adams–Harmon and Greer–Williams, 2021; Buse et al., 2013; Van Veelen et al., 2019). This allows the more dominant and powerful group – in this context, men – to control and influence the minority – women – (Miner et al., 2019). Prieto-Rodriguez and colleagues (2022) describe how women frequently must adapt to work environments created by men for men, where they are subtly or overtly excluded or made to feel unwelcome and clearly outnumbered (Van Veelen et al., 2019). At times, male-dominated STEM sectors are portrayed as “highly competitive, individualistic and task-focused [...]. Characteristics typically attributed more to men than to women” (Van Veelen et al., 2019, p. 3). This can negatively impact women’s workplace satisfaction and their well-being (Settles et al., 2012). Women have reported experiencing pervasive dominance by men (Buse et al., 2013; Hyrynsalmi, 2019) as well as feeling isolated, overlooked and marginalized (Kansake et al., 2021).

In male-dominated STEM occupations, systemic stereotype threat is a subtle yet pervasive experience for women (Block et al., 2019; Cruz and Nagy, 2024). This is so frequent and normalized that it is even framed as “chronic stereotype threat”, given the long-term exposure to them (Cruz and Nagy, 2022). In this vein, women are concerned about being negatively stereotyped based on their gender (Van Veelen et al., 2019). Women scientists are many times more visible just by virtue of their gender instead of by virtue of their scientific qualities (Block et al., 2019). This (in)visibility leads to three ways of managing the stereotypes of women in STEM: a) fending off the threat; b) confronting the threat; and c) sustaining self in the presence of the threat (Block et al., 2019).

Recent research has found that males often dominate decision-making and influence policies and procedures, resulting in women being left out of influential events and networking opportunities (Adams–Harmon and Greer–Williams, 2021). The lack of diverse perspectives in the decision-making process leads to negative consequences not only from a social but also from an economical perspective, as products and services lack the inputs of women (Kim and Meister, 2023). These “chilly climates” perceived by women in STEM leads to lower job satisfaction, higher turnover and impact negatively their physical and mental health (e.g., depression and anxiety) (Miner et al., 2019; Reilly et al., 2018; Oliveira-Silva and Lima, 2022).

Persistent societal norms in STEM are continuous during women's lives, starting during childhood, influencing their higher studies, and into professional life (Prieto-Rodriguez et al., 2022). These systemic stereotypes lead to the impostor phenomenon among women (Clance and Imes, 1978), and women in STEM report being too self-critical, suffering from lower self-esteem, doubting their competencies (Hyrnsalmi, 2019) or feeling unworthy (Oliveira-Silva and Lima, 2022). Another consequence of the systemic stereotypes and social prejudices is the barrier for female participation in fields like mining (Kansake et al., 2021) and the expectation that women should take a caring role and stay at home, all which have an impact on women's opportunities and experiences (Adams-Harmon and Greer-Williams, 2021; Blaique et al., 2023).

### ***The organizational level: Discrimination and harassment in the workplace***

Gender discrimination is defined as the “unfair treatment in the employment setting in which individuals are placed at a disadvantage compared to others because of their gender, rather than their ability or skill” (Settles et al., 2012, p. 180). These discriminatory treatments are prevalent in STEM fields, significantly impacting women's experiences (Buse et al., 2013; Hyrnsalmi, 2019). The systemic discrimination of women in STEM appears horizontally across sectors and vertically across positions (Vergés-Bosch et al., 2021). The discrimination often takes the form of demeaning language and negative statements, often from jealous counterparts, which undermine women's success (Adams-Harmon and Greer-Williams, 2021), for example expressing gender-based assumptions about women's abilities for scientific roles. Such verbal gender harassment is often referred as “modern discrimination”, described as “low intensity conduct that lacks a clear intent to harm but nevertheless violates social norms and injures targeted employees” (Cortina, 2008, p. 55). It is fair to mention that this type of discrimination is strongly intersectional, being based not only on gender but on multiple individual characteristics such as origin, ethnicity, religion or age, among others.

In numbers, the EWCS (2021) reports that about 18% of women perceived some type of gender-based discrimination at their workplace, with verbal abuse being the most common type. That percentage varies across sectors, but STEM-related ones present higher rates. This pattern

has also been found in other studies, such as Kansake and colleagues (2021), who found that 53% of women in the working in mining activities felt discriminated against and 37% have experienced sexual harassment. Another type of discrimination in STEM is of course receiving a lower income – the 14% gender pay gap (Reilly et al., 2018; Williams, 2023). A study in Spain shows that women in computing suffer not only wage discrimination but also overqualification for their positions and glass ceiling effects (Segovia-Pérez et al., 2020). Discrimination and harassment overall contribute to job dissatisfaction among women in STEM, as well as higher turnover, psychological distress, lower creativity (Saxena, 2024), isolation in the workplace, lower self-confidence, negative psychological well-being (Settles et al., 2012), often resulting in individual underperformance, compared to their own potential (Reilly et al., 2018).

Microaggressions are defined as “small-scale, long-term discrimination that may be conducted without malevolent intent but reinforce identity-based privilege” (Makarem and Metcalfe, 2023, p.155). They can appear at interpersonal (e.g. comments, actions) or environmental (e.g. policies, media) levels (Makarem and Metcalfe, 2023). Women in STEM experience microaggressions related to their gender, but also their racial and/or ethnic identities (Kim and Meister, 2023; King, 2023; Makarem and Metcalfe, 2023; Williams, 2023). These microaggressions are also a form of discrimination, carried out using subtle insults and informal degradations, which makes it challenging for women to focus on work and be productive (Williams, 2023). Examples include being the subject of jokes, having male colleagues repeat women’s statements and getting the acknowledgement and recognition for their female colleagues’ ideas, hearing remarks about hiring individuals from underrepresented groups, and being required to complete administrative duties outside of their job responsibilities (Williams, 2023). Makarem and Metcalfe (2023) include the following subcategories of microaggressions: micro-assaults (hostile and alienating working environments and verbal harassment), microinsults (disparity in the allocation of work responsibilities and body microaggressions) and microinvalidation (invisibility and hyper-visibility). Similarly, Kim and Meister (2023) identify common gendered microaggressions in STEM, such as the devaluation of women’s technical competence, denial of their lived experiences, and pathologizing behaviours. Consequences of being a victim of these microaggressions are ostracism and negative occupational well-being (Miner et al., 2019). In

addition, women in STEM become hypervigilant towards these actions, which forces them to spend cognitive energy to combat these microaggressions, impacting their performance in other tasks.

Incivility is defined as “rude and discourteous behaviour that displays a lack of regard for others” (Miner et al., 2019, p. 228). A general climate of incivility is found in STEM workplaces, by both women and men. However, women experienced more incivility and were more harmed by those experiences compared to their male counterparts. Saxena (2024) examined the typology of STEM incivility and revealed four forms of incivility: a) Ostracism and social exclusion: participants reported experiences of being excluded from meetings and casual conversations; b) Undermining: peers taking credit for ones work and one’s opinions being ignored; c) Hostility: snappy and rude interpersonal behaviours such as name-calling; and d) sexual: for example mentioning women’s physical appearance in inappropriate ways. The incivility episodes were perceived as arising from the high-pressure, achievement-oriented nature of STEM, and carried out by both subordinates, peers, and superiors (Saxena, 2024). This is a chronic stressor that is particularly harmful to women’s well-being in STEM and for their career trajectories, as it impacts their reputation and visibility (Miner et al., 2019).

### ***The individual level: Work-life balance, role models and support structures***

Work-life balance is another significant challenge for women in STEM fields, often exacerbated by workplace policies that do not support flexible work arrangements (Williams, 2023). Women frequently struggle to balance their work and family responsibilities, particularly when these women have children (Adams–Harmon and Greer–Williams, 2021; Vergés–Bosch et al., 2021). In some countries, poor maternity support systems and rigid work schedules for parents, create an unfavourable work-life balance, where these responsibilities are often minimized or overlooked by STEM organizations (Kansake et al., 2021; Makarem and Metcalfe, 2023). Not offering flexibility for family care and imposing requirements for long hours and travels are a significant disincentive for women to enter STEM careers (Prieto-Rodriguez et al., 2022), to the extreme that Buse and colleagues (2013) found how women in the engineering sector were less likely to be married and have children, than

women in non-STEM sectors. Unmarried women without children, also face challenges, as they often impose barriers on themselves, describing themselves as workaholics due to organizational expectations of long working hours preventing themselves from enjoying free time (Adams–Harmon and Greer–Williams, 2021). Consequences of this work life conflict are higher levels of depression, negatively influencing women’s health and well-being (Oliveira-Silva and Lima, 2022).

Data from the EWCS (2021) reports interesting findings in this vein. Overall, work-life balance barriers are found to be similar between men and women. That is, the percentage of respondents stating difficulties to balance work and free time tasks is about 17% in both genders. However, strong differences arise in the distribution of time to these two different dimensions. While men work, on average, more than women during the week (41.5 vs. 39 hours), they also dedicate less than half of the time to housework, as compared to female counterparts (5.9 vs. 12.5 hours). Additionally, it is important to mention that the percentage of women who work half time (i.e., 20 weekly hours or less) is double that of men (about 5.3% of men and 9.8% of women).

The lack of role models available also hinders women’s progress in STEM fields (Hyrynsalmi, 2019; Prieto-Rodriguez et al., 2022). Recent studies show that the absence of female role models with similar racial or ethnic backgrounds often delays or hinders career pursuits in fields such as marine, aquatic, and fisheries sciences (King, 2023). Similarly, Prieto-Rodriguez and colleagues (2022) note that the absence of a critical mass of women in higher-level STEM positions leads to feelings of isolation and vulnerability to conservative gender ideologies, discouraging women from continuing their STEM careers. Linked to the lack of role models is also the lack of support. Women in the mining and other engineering sectors lack the necessary support to succeed, including mentorship, equal opportunities and facilities (Buse et al., 2013; Kansake et al., 2021) and women in STEM fields report less support compared to their non-STEM counterparts (Oliveira-Silva and Lima, 2022).

## **Promoting Gender Equality in STEM Organizations and Higher Education**

Considering the challenges explored above, what can be done to strengthen the presence and role of women in STEM? The following initiatives for organizations are found to facilitate the entrance of women in the sector, improving equality and ensuring their well-being and development in STEM professions. This list aims to tackle the main caveats found among the dimensions explained above. Also, while prior research has devoted larger attention to non-academic entities, this list has been somewhat adapted so that it can be easily incorporated within higher education institutions. The proposed initiatives are:

1. EDI workshops on the subtle negative gendered behaviours (e.g. microaggressions), where women can share their cases and the consequences in their well-being and professional aspects (e.g. productivity, promotion). This initiative allows the participants – all genders - to learn and understand gendered issues that might be unrecognized before and engage in practices towards equality in STEM (Kim and Meister, 2023; Miner et al., 2019).
2. Develop guidelines and policies that comprehensively address the challenges women in STEM face, aiming to inform, prevent, and mitigate the negative consequences of them as well as fostering supportive and diverse environments (Kansake et al., 2021; Makarem and Metcalfe, 2023; Elgoibar et al., 2025).
3. Establishing more tailored equality plans at organizational level that ensure equal pay schemes, zero tolerance for harassment, the removal of glass ceilings, and the promotion of work designs aimed at improving work-life balance (Vergés-Bosch et al., 2021). Even if these plans are established by law in many countries and sectors, they should integrate the specific context of the STEM sector.
4. Leadership development programs, providing continuous learning (Buse et al. 2013), such as executive MBA courses, job enrichment, stretch assignments or executive coaches benefit STEM female inclusion (Adams–Harmon and Greer–Williams, 2021; Reilly et al., 2018).
5. Mentorship has been shown to have a positive impact on women’s occupational commitment in STEM fields as it helps buffer the effects of negative experiences in the sector (Blaique et al., 2023; Reilly et al.,

2018). When this mentor is a woman, it leads to a “women empowering women” effect, which helps the mentees to be equipped not only with the needed skills but also with knowledge for addressing the gendered microaggressions and discriminatory behaviours (Makarem and Metcalfe, 2023).

6. Provide resources for parents of underage and dependent children – both mothers and fathers – to ensure career progression during this phase of life, as well as schedule and location flexibility, if the country normative doesn’t ensure this. These measures allow more women to stay in the profession and encourage new applicants, as these arrangements are essential in most cases for women with children (Adams–Harmon and Greer–Williams, 2021; Buse et al., 2013; Kansake et al., 2021).
7. Self-branding/self-promotion appears as a positive initiative to manage a promotion, particularly in small and medium companies (Adams–Harmon and Greer–Williams, 2021).
8. Ensuring equal access to networking for all, avoiding the “old boys’ network”, is needed for women to get access to managerial positions (Adams–Harmon and Greer–Williams, 2021; Reilly et al., 2018; Vergés-Bosch et al., 2021). It is relevant that these “out of work” activities are held in inclusive places.
9. Standardized interviews and a panel of diverse interviewers have been shown to decrease gender biases in the recruitment phase (Adams–Harmon and Greer–Williams, 2021).
10. Increase the visibility of role models, as it leads to higher attraction of women to the STEM sectors (Hyrnsalmi, 2019).

Higher education institutions can be pivotal in developing EDI initiatives, not only internally but transferring them. Universities can serve as incubators of good practices for STEM disciplines and industries. That would require stronger collaboration with multiple stakeholders to increase women attraction to STEM fields. Working to attract girls into STEM (before), support them throughout their academic development (during) and promote long-term actions with organizations promoting inclusive practices (after).

## **A Call for Promoting Gender Equality in STEM Higher Education Degrees**

Universities and other higher education institutions play a key role in facilitating the access of women to STEM professions. On the one hand, they serve as the primary source of more women to nurture STEM positions. On the other hand, promoting the attraction for girls and women to STEM degrees would contribute to greater participation of women in STEM disciplines, thereby blocking the “leaky pipeline” (Block et al., 2019). Given that STEM disciplines are crucial for addressing the present and future global challenges (Prieto-Rodriguez et al., 2022), universities should promote diversity within STEM careers. This includes not only gender diversity but also the inclusion of other forms of diversity for example in terms of race, sexual orientation, or religion (Vergés-Bosch et al., 2021). Predictions indicate that fields such as engineering and technologies like the Internet of Things, Big Data, and Artificial Intelligence, are significantly transforming our society and the labour market (International Labour Organization, 2021, Vergés-Bosch et al., 2021). Nearly half of all the work we do today might be automated by 2055 (Manyika, 2017) and with an academic degree in STEM, students have access to more occupations and higher wages (Van Veelen et al., 2019). Also, the shift towards a green economy is expected to increase the demand for individuals with STEM education, as advanced technical skills are essential for achieving a carbon-neutral economy (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2023). Thus, the training of young students – boys and girls – in STEM skills becomes a safe choice to effectively participate in the labour market.

Addressing the gender gap in STEM degrees is not only essential for promoting social justice and guaranteeing equal opportunities for underrepresented and disadvantaged groups as mandated by European legislation, but also for promoting economic growth (European Commission, 2022; Petrenko and Cadil, 2024). Not paying attention to inclusion in STEM fields will perpetuate, or even increase, the gap and contribute women’s underdevelopment. The European Commission (2018) reported that the European economy suffers a loss of more than 16 billion euros annually due to women leaving their digital careers. Projections suggest that enhancing gender equality could boost the European GDP per capita between 6 and 9 percent by 2050, equivalent to €1.95–3.15 trillion. Hence,

closing the gender gap in STEM should be a priority for economic as well as social justice reasons. For that purpose, universities emerge as a nuclear player as it brings together many involved stakeholders. Among other initiatives to improve the attraction and retention of girls in STEM degrees (see Hill et al., 2010 for further recommendations), the authors are encouraging the visibility of role models in the classroom (Reilly et al., 2018). Inviting female guest speakers, such as women in STEM professions, entrepreneurs or alumni working in STEM positions to share their experiences in the classroom is an accessible initiative which can inspire female students to follow this path - "*if she could get there, so could I?*" - and find role models in the field. In addition, inter-universities collaboration or networks within the Coimbra group and university alliances focused on women in STEM, such as mentorship exchanges or joint training programs can facilitate more students to benefit from these initiatives. Finally, integrating critical gender and intersectional perspectives in STEM curricula becomes essential for reaching gender inclusion in STEM fields.

## Conclusion

The gender gap in STEM will not be resolved on its own; active measures from governments, institutions, companies and universities are essential to address this issue. Despite various initiatives to attract women to STEM fields, women continue facing challenges related to their gender in these sectors. These challenges are found at cultural, organizational and individual levels. In this chapter we have reviewed the challenges but also offered several initiatives for organizations to facilitate the equal access of women and men to STEM careers.

Research generally agrees on the importance of EDI initiatives to create more supportive environments where everyone can thrive. These actions are important at individual level, as they improve well-being and increase opportunities. They also benefit society by challenging some culturally-accepted behaviours. Finally, diverse teams are often found to be more innovative and productive. In that vein, considering the importance that STEM industries have for global economic prosperity, enhanced efforts are essential to encourage women to pursue STEM education, to recruit them into these industries, and retain and promote by ensuring with equal opportunities.

Finally, it is important to recognize that not all women face similar barriers. Factors such as age, ethnicity, parenthood, seniority, religion, etc., may shape how individuals experience inequalities. Recognizing this complex perspective, instead of one-size-fits-all solutions, becomes relevant. Future lines of research tackle these differences, in order to better understand different configurations and build tailored initiatives.

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# *GENDER INEQUALITY: INSIGHTS FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF PADUA'S SCHOOL OF ENGINEERING*

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## **Introduction**

Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) has emerged as a critical framework for addressing longstanding disparities across various sectors of society, with challenges persisting in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM). Despite significant progress in educational access and workforce participation over recent decades, STEM disciplines continue to demonstrate pronounced gender imbalances (García-Peñalvo, Francisco J., et al., 2022) that limit both individual opportunities and collective innovation potential.

In Italy, women account for just over a quarter of engineering graduates, underscoring a substantial gender gap in this technical field. This disparity deepens when examining professional registration, with women representing only about one-sixth of the registered members in the Order of Engineers in Italy. Enrolment trends at Italian universities show that female representation in engineering programmes has remained relatively stable, with around one in four engineering students being women. However, within the broader context of higher education, only about 19% of female university graduates in Italy hold an engineering degree (Fondazione Consiglio Nazionale degli Ingegneri, 2023). This persistent gender gap reveals systemic barriers that hinder women's participation in STEM fields and careers. Overcoming these challenges demands comprehensive, multifaceted approaches that span the entire educational journey and extend into professional spheres. Effective initiatives combine curricular reforms, mentoring programmes that provide essential support networks, institutional policies and cultural shifts that challenge biases and harassment. Increasingly, universities and research

institutions are recognizing that true excellence in STEM is unattainable without a deliberate focus on equity, diversity and inclusion across all facets of their operations.

While increasing the number of women to overcome their under-representation through appropriate gender policies is one step in making STEM fields more inclusive, it is by no means enough. What is needed is “fixing the knowledge”, which means integrating the gender dimension into scientific content to create “gendered innovations” across all fields of knowledge (Tannenbaum Cara, et al., 2019). This involves ensuring that both biological characteristics and the sociocultural features, behaviours, and needs of both women and men are considered, without disparities. More generally, in order to produce excellent research, an inclusive approach that takes into account the most important intersecting social categories is essential. Londa Schiebinger, at Stanford University, is the most prominent expert in the field of gendered innovations (Schiebinger, Londa, et al.). She argues that “to harness the creative power of sex, gender, and intersectional analysis for innovation and discovery”, it is necessary to radically change existing assumptions and formulate new scientific questions. But how can a new gendered science be developed, along with new interpretations of facts, in contrast to the universal male point of view, which in STEM has typically been proposed as neutral? How can we formulate new scientific questions with the awareness that another science is possible? How can we create a critical view of the methods used to reshape science?

This chapter, which focuses on gender inequality in engineering education at the School of Engineering at the University of Padua, consists of three main sections that logically progress from broad context to specific initiatives applied within the institution. The first section introduces a survey conducted in 2024 at the School of Engineering of University of Padua, describing its main goals, methodology, and target population. It then delves into the results of the survey, which aims at mapping gender inequality challenges and perceptions among its engineering students. This data-driven section provides a foundation for understanding the current state of gender equality in the institution. Then, the focus of the second section is shifted to “gendered innovations” at the School of Engineering of University of Padua and how this approach fostered the introduction of gender perspectives in the learning programmes in Engineering. The last section highlights specific initiatives implemented by

the School of Engineering aimed at promoting gender equality. Throughout the chapter, the authors aim to connect statistical evidence with theoretical concepts and practical applications, providing a holistic view of the gender equality landscape in engineering education in Padua. Moreover, while the findings are grounded in a specific institutional context, they potentially carry broader implications for similar institutions across Europe and beyond, offering a potential model for promoting EDI in technical fields.

### **Mapping Gender Inequality in Engineering: Challenges and Perceptions**

Gender inequality remains a significant issue in STEM fields such as engineering, so it is essential to understand the factors that contribute to the under-representation of women in order to develop effective strategies to address these disparities. The Padua School of Engineering, one of the largest and most established in Italy with more than 16.000 students, offers a wide range of degree programmes in the engineering field and has increasingly integrated EDI principles into its academic and institutional practices.

Taking into consideration similar studies conducted on STEM fields (Openpolis, 2021; ValoreD, 2021), a research project aimed at mapping the female presence in Engineering was launched by the Padua School of Engineering, in collaboration with the School's Equal Opportunity Committee, in 2024. Funded by the Veneto Region and based on an online survey, the project looked at the number of women in Bachelor's and Master's courses and other related factors. More than 500 students from over 30 degree programmes participated in the online survey, which was promoted by a dedicated communication sent to all students in the School of Engineering, to provide a representative overview of engineering students' opinions on various gender equality issues.

The primary aim of this survey was to explore the students' experiences, perceptions, and expectations regarding gender inequalities in the engineering field. Specifically, the questionnaire investigated motivations and future career perspectives, perception of gender disparities and challenges women face in engineering, obstacles encountered during academic paths, and the balance between academic and person-

al life. Additionally, the survey assessed the perceived significance of the university's interventions to promote inclusion and gender equality; evaluated existing initiatives supporting equal opportunities; and gathered suggestions for enhancing female representation in engineering programmes, considering the importance of female role models in challenging gender stereotypes. The results have provided valuable insights into the effectiveness of the University's current efforts toward creating a more inclusive environment, to evaluate ongoing initiatives and gather suggestions for concrete possible measures, with the final aim of reducing gender inequalities in the STEM field.

The initial part of the survey gathered information on gender distribution, degree type (Bachelor's or Master's), year of the most recent degree completion, nationality, province of residence (for Italian respondents), and pre-university educational background. The gender distribution of respondents was relatively balanced, with 49.1% of females and 50.3% of males. Nearly 80% of respondents obtained their most recent degree (Bachelor's for Master's students, high school diploma for Bachelor's students) between 2021 and 2023. Over 95% of participants were Italian citizens, although the questionnaire was also available in English to include international students as well.

Regarding prior educational backgrounds, more than two thirds of the respondents had a high school background, while 28.5% had a technical or economic-technological education. A notable distinction emerged between men and women: female students predominantly had a high school background, while male students exhibited a more balanced distribution and a greater representation in technical education. Male students were more frequently enrolled in degree programmes such as Mechanical, Aerospace and Computer Engineering, while female students were more represented in the Biomedical engineering area, the only domain which seemed to have a clear female majority. This trend is consistent with national and international patterns in STEM education (see OECD, 2023; UNESCO, 2022). Similar trends were observed at the Master's level, especially for the Bioengineering degree programme, which not only comprises over 16% of the total number of master's students but also has a female majority.

Respondents shared their perceptions of gender stereotypes in engineering disciplines and the potential influence of these stereotypes on their academic goals. Gender stereotypes are widely recognized in

engineering fields (Powell et al. 2012), with female students perceiving their presence more strongly than their male counterparts. As shown in **Figure 1**, a significant proportion of female respondents agreed (52.6%) or strongly agreed (32.8%) with the existence of these stereotypes, whereas the percentages were notably lower among male students (40.5% and 13.1%, respectively). Students also reported on their impact on academic aspirations. **Figure 2** highlights that while 79.5% of male students reported that these stereotypes did not influence their academic goals at all, only 27.3% of female students shared this view. Instead, 21.7% of female respondents stated they were quite affected by them and a small but noteworthy percentage (2.8%) indicated a strong impact. These results highlight that gender stereotypes in engineering are not merely perceived but can concretely shape the educational experience, particularly for women. While male students tend to remain mostly unaffected, many female students report that such perceptions act as real obstacles, influencing their academic confidence and direction.

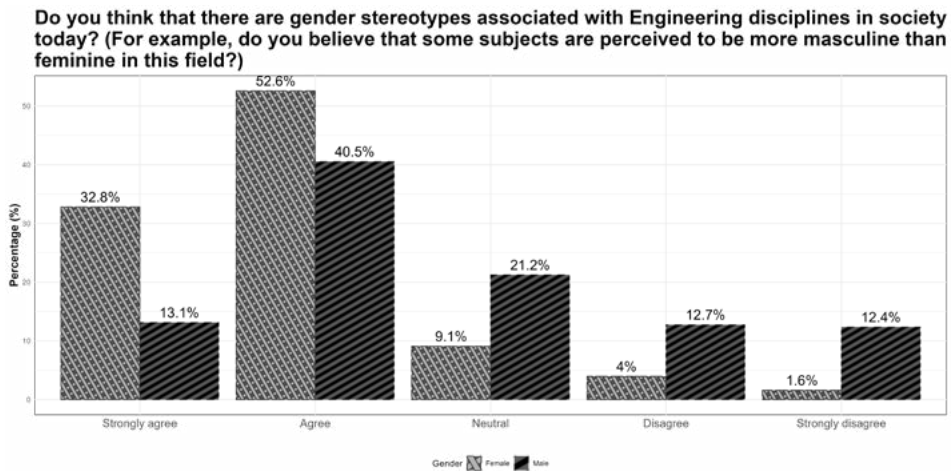


Figure 1: Responses in percentages regarding the perception of gender stereotypes in Engineering disciplines, separated by male and female.

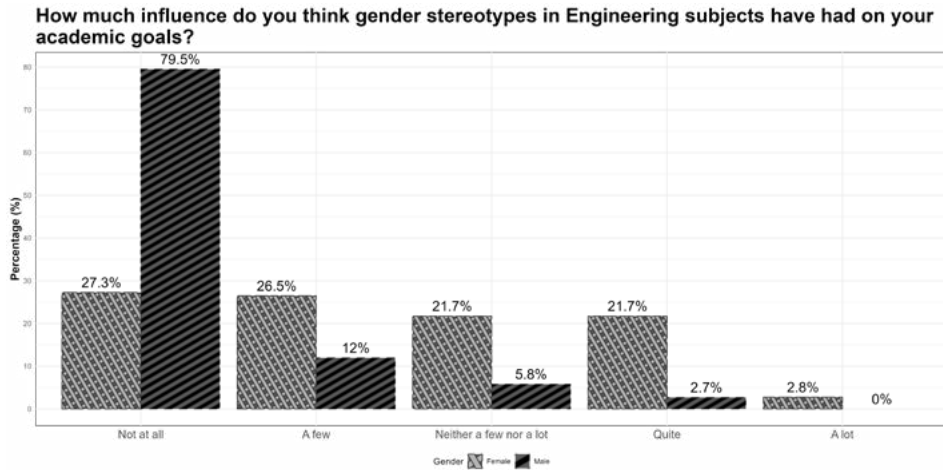


Figure 2: Responses in percentages regarding the influence of gender stereotypes on academic goals, separated by male and female.

The survey also examined the challenges faced by women in engineering, considering both academic experiences and professional careers. **Figure 3** illustrates the primary obstacles perceived by women during their studies, while **Figure 4** represents the perceived challenges within engineering careers.

Regarding the academic settings, a substantial 63.2% of female respondents identified gender stereotypes as a major obstacle, with 45.9% signalling the limited presence of female role models. These challenges, even if acknowledged by male respondents, were perceived mostly by women, highlighting a clear gender disparity especially in the academic context. Shifting the focus to the career path, the limited presence of female role models is almost equally perceived as a challenge both for male and female students.

When considering the professional world, the perception of gender stereotypes remains widespread, with 70% of women identifying them as a significant challenge, that persists also beyond education and even intensify in the workplace. Furthermore, the difficulty in reaching leadership positions emerges as a critical obstacle, with 68.8% of women identifying it as a major challenge. The difficulty in balancing professional and personal life is another significant concern especially for engineering career paths, with 51.4% of women considering it as a possible major

challenge in their careers. The gap with respect to the study-life balance in the academic context is possibly due in part to the additional caregiving responsibilities that often fall on female workers. Discrimination remains a persistent issue in the engineering field, with 41.5% of women reporting the presence of this kind of practices in their careers, compared to 30% in academia. Interestingly, while 16.2% of women reported not perceiving obstacles or difficulties concerning the academic path, this drops to 0.8% when considering the perception related to professional settings. This suggests that challenges become more obvious and harder to ignore as women advance in their careers, and that there is a widespread shared awareness because the vast majority do perceive these problems. Moreover, nearly half of male students also acknowledge the presence of gender stereotypes, and this can be a potential foundation for engaging male in interventions for gender equality.

These insights underscore the presence of gender inequality in engineering, spanning from education to professional practice. The challenges faced by women are multifaceted, encompassing societal biases, lack of role models, discriminatory practices, and the struggle to balance work (or studies) and personal life. Addressing these challenges requires targeted interventions at both the academic and professional levels to foster a more equitable and inclusive environment for women in engineering.

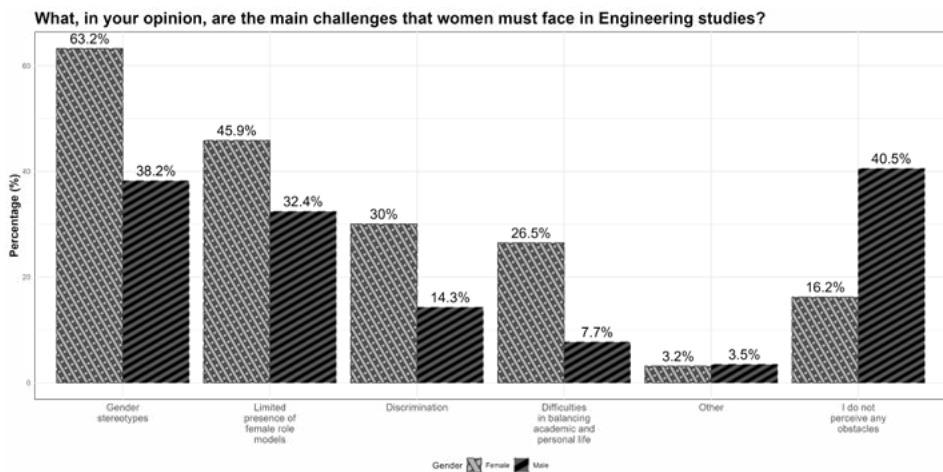


Figure 3: Responses in percentages regarding the main challenges for women in Engineering studies, separated by male and female (multiple choice).

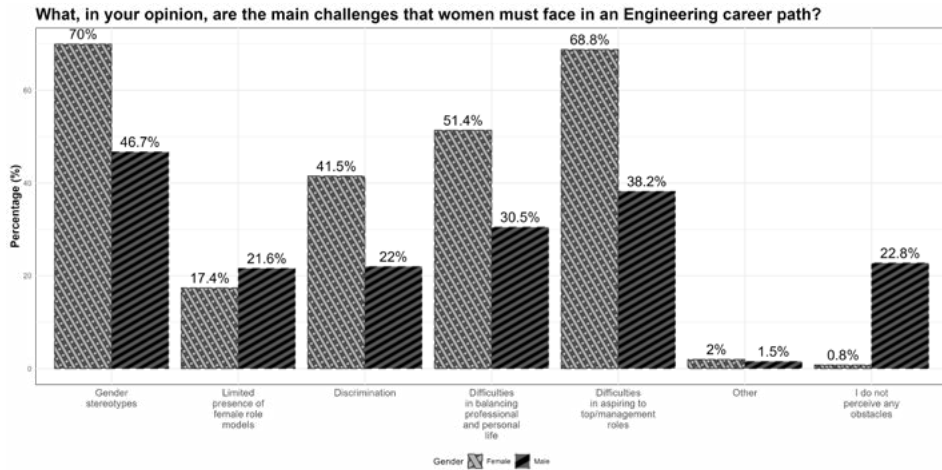


Figure 4: Responses in percentages regarding the perception of the main challenges for women in Engineering career path, separated by male and female (multiple choice).

When students were asked about the specific difficulties they faced during their studies (**Figure 5**), the data revealed a clear focus on academic issues. Among all students, the most frequently mentioned challenges were difficulty in learning, poor basic preparation, and lack of academic support, suggesting a need for a greater focus on core educational resources, but with a notable gender difference: male students more often reported “difficulty in learning” and “lack of academic support” compared to female students. Conversely, a higher proportion of female students with respect to their male peers perceives gender-related difficulties, such as studying in a predominantly male class and experiencing gender discrimination.

Both male and female students reported significant challenges in balancing academic and personal life (such as social life, free time and hobbies), but the specific difficulties and their intensity varied by gender (**Figure 6**). Overall, stress and pressure were the most prevalent concerns, with a notably higher percentage of female students reporting this issue. Women also struggled more with balancing study and social life; this is an interesting result compared with what emerges from **Figure 3**, because only 7.7% of male students considers this as a challenge for women in Engineering studies, while on the other hand, if related to their personal academic career, this difficulty appears as more present. In addition, male students reported slightly more difficulty with managing their academic workload compared to their female counterparts.

These findings suggest that while both men and women face challenges in integrating academic and personal life, the perception of those challenges differ, highlighting the need for tailored support strategies. However, it is important to highlight that there is a gap in the male perception of the woman challenges in balancing academic and personal life: 40.5% of them stated that they do not perceive any obstacle for their female peers.

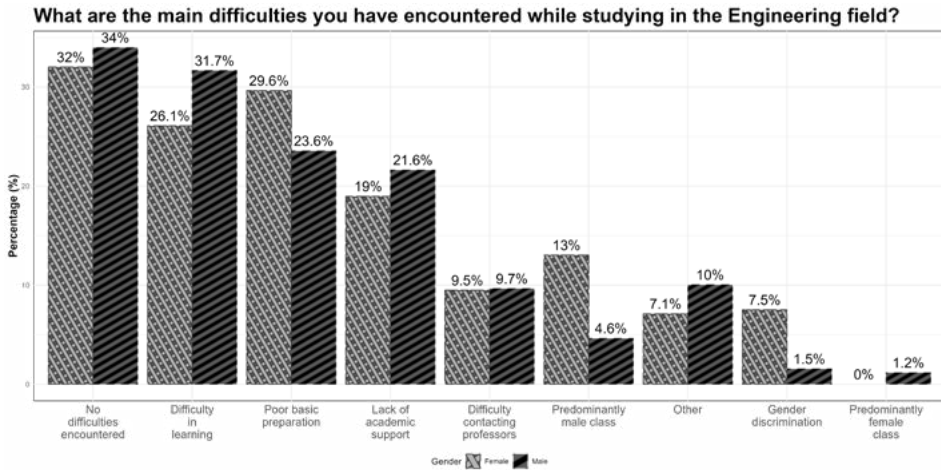


Figure 5: Responses in percentages regarding the main difficulties encountered in Engineering studies, separated by male and female (multiple choice).

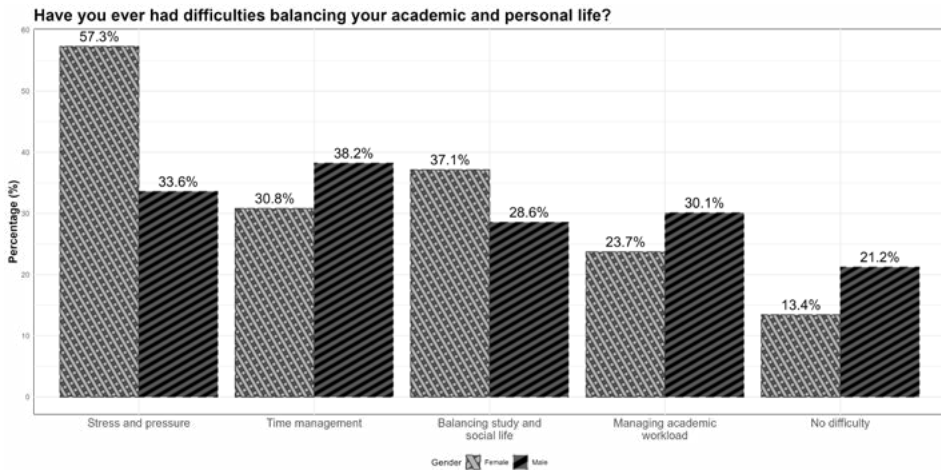


Figure 6: Responses in percentages regarding the main difficulties in balancing academic and personal life, separated by male and female (multiple choice).

The University of Padua, in its commitment to promote gender equality, has implemented various initiatives, including seminars, extracurricular events, and other activities that may help to increase the female presence in engineering degree programmes.

Female students generally showed greater appreciation for this kind of initiatives (that extends also beyond current programmes) compared to their male colleagues (**Figure 7**). In particular, respondents indicated interventions ranging from early childhood to secondary school as the most effective action, followed by the possible creation of women-focused events and conferences, as well as the strengthening of orientation activities: this suggests that systemic and educational adjustments are crucial. Conversely, educational interventions in families received an overall lower consideration. The effectiveness of initiatives such as financial incentives (e.g. scholarships) are perceived differently by male and female students, indicating that monetary solutions alone may not be the right strategy to increase the female presence in the field of engineering.

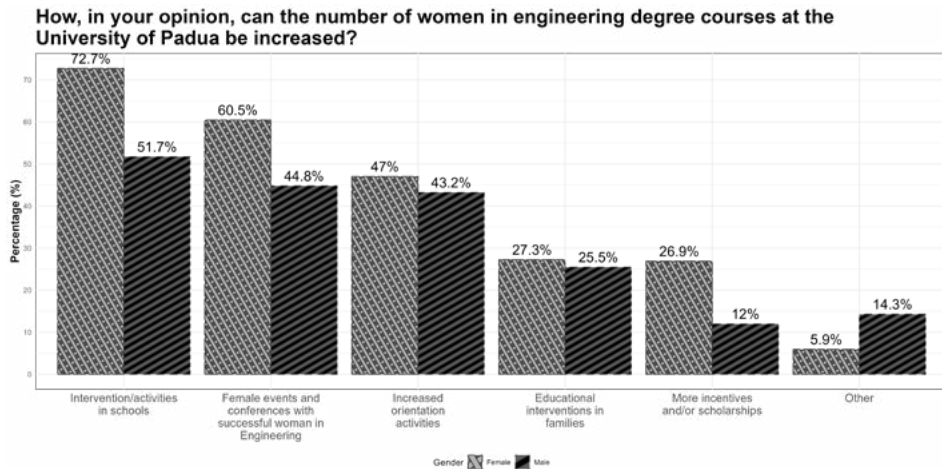


Figure 7: Responses in percentages regarding possible actions to increase female presence in Engineering courses, separated by male and female (multiple choice).

The results of this survey, as illustrated in the figures reported in this section, provide valuable insights into the gender disparities perceived by engineering students. The challenges that female students face in both academic and professional settings suggest that, while current academic initiatives for gender equality have been acknowledged as important,

further efforts can be made to enhance their effectiveness and long-term impact with the aim of reducing disparities as much as possible and acting towards the common goal of equality.

The next section will explore concrete actions already implemented by the School of Engineering of the University of Padua. By examining these initiatives, the authors aim to contribute to a broader discussion on how universities can actively shape a more inclusive and fairer environment.

### **Gendered Innovations at the School of Engineering of the University of Padua**

Following the principles of gendered innovations, we have conducted a formal reflection on the scientific method used to produce innovation and a critical analysis of the logical rules underlying it (Badaloni, Silvana, and Lisi, Francesca A., 2020). We have shown that science proceeds according to the logical rule of falsifying arguments; in other words, science does not progress through the progressive and continuous accumulation of truths, but through attempts to refute proposed theories, in line with K. Popper's theory. Only a complete redefinition of the method and the research model, with new ways of observation, can redesign science from a gender perspective, particularly in all Engineering disciplines.

In particular, our reflection involved the field of Artificial Intelligence, where it is essential to focus on issues related to gender and ethnic biases that may be embedded in the algorithms of Machine Learning systems. Due to their intrinsic nature, these systems can capture and reinforce the biases present in society, which are reflected in the datasets used for training. If used to make automated decisions, these systems can lead to 'unfair' outcomes that may discriminate against certain groups. The case of Joy Buolamwini, African-American researcher at MIT Media Lab, is well known. She discovered that the camera system installed in her laboratory did not recognize her, but when she put on a white mask the system functioned perfectly (Lohr, Steve, 2018). She realized that the system's accuracy was systematically higher for white men and lower for black women. Machine learning systems are only as smart as the data used to train it. If there are many more white men than black women in the system, it will have difficulties in identifying black women. It is cru-

cial for the implementation of Trustworthy AI that developers and users of AI-based tools are aware of this issue and avoid the blind application of data-driven AI methods (Badaloni, Silvana, and Rodà, Antonio, 2022).

Furthermore, to improve the overall fairness of the AI framework, it is essential to enhance the global representation of women in technical roles and boardrooms within the digital technology sector, which sees a strong under-representation of women: in Europe and the UK, only 16% of people working in the AI field are women and only 12% have more than 10 years of experience. This data is also repeated in Italy, where women hold only 16% of AI jobs (Thil, Laurène, et al., 2022). Institutions and companies should increase not only the number of female professionals in the technological sector, but also their representation in top roles, since a greater number of women in management positions can support policies that favor women's wellbeing. Hence, it is necessary that institutions adopt gender policies that create robust, gender-inclusive AI principles, guidelines, and ethical codes.

All these reflections led us to believe that Artificial Intelligence was a suitable field for introducing gender-related topics within the School of Engineering. Since 2021, the School of Engineering at the University of Padua has been pioneering an innovative course titled "Gender Knowledge and Ethics in Artificial Intelligence". This initiative, promoted by two teachers of the degree program in Computer Engineering and supported by the chair of the same program, marks the first explicit introduction of gender-related topics within an engineering curriculum, specifically in the bachelor's degree program in Computer Engineering. The course consists of 48 hours of in-person lectures and has been designed without requiring specific disciplinary prerequisites, allowing it to be open to students from various academic backgrounds. By inviting various experts to deliver lectures and seminars, the course provides a rich, diverse perspective on critical topics such as diversity, equity, and inclusion, particularly noteworthy given the persistent gender disparity within the engineering field.

The course's fundamental premise is the recognition that technology is not neutral but profoundly shaped by the values, experiences, and perspectives of its creators. This approach challenges the long-held notion of technological neutrality and encourages students to consider the broader societal implications of their work. By integrating these themes into technical curricula, the course offers multiple benefits to students and

the field of engineering as a whole. Firstly, it raises awareness among future engineers about the social impact of the technologies they develop. This awareness is crucial in an era where artificial intelligence and other advanced technologies are increasingly influencing various aspects of society. Secondly, the course fosters a more reflective and critical approach to technological development. By encouraging students to question assumptions and consider ethical implications, it helps create more responsible and thoughtful engineers. Moreover, the consideration of diverse perspectives can lead to more innovative and inclusive technological solutions. By exposing students to a variety of viewpoints and experiences, particularly those related to gender, the course helps broaden their understanding and approach to problem-solving. This diversity of thought is essential in creating technologies that serve and represent all members of society.

Perhaps most importantly, the course plays a role in shaping a new generation of technology professionals. These future leaders in the field will possess not only technical expertise but also a sense of ethical responsibility and awareness of gender issues. This includes an understanding of stereotypes and biases that characterize both our societies and the machines that have learned from these societal models. By recognizing these biases, students are better equipped to prevent their incorporation into AI systems, leading to more equitable and fair technological solutions.

The initiative has thus far garnered significant interest from both male and female students, with active participation in lectures demonstrating its relevance and appeal. However, integrating these themes into technical courses is not without challenges. It may face resistance from faculty accustomed to a purely technical approach. In particular, social and philosophical issues are still considered by some colleagues less relevant for the training of engineers and are downgraded to soft skills that are not strictly necessary. As a consequence, the educational committees of some degree programmes have refused to include this course in the study plans of some students. These episodes reflect the need for a significant shift in the academic and professional culture of the technology sector.

## **Other Initiatives: Working Against Discrimination and Gender-Based Violence**

At the University of Padua's School of Engineering, as data (including those provided above) demonstrate, there are significant stereotypes and cultural barriers that drive women away from STEM disciplines, particularly from Engineering studies. Experience as well as research shows that symbols and positive role models can help young women to break free from stereotypes and decide to study Engineering and embark on a high-profile technical career.

The School of Engineering found its trailblazer in Elvira Poli, who, in 1920, was the first woman to graduate in Engineering from the University of Padua, and the third in Italy. She was a pioneer, especially considering that, at the time, the territory in the north-east of Italy was characterized by a predominantly agricultural economy and a social structure in which women were still very far from achieving significant emancipation. To celebrate the hundredth anniversary of her graduation, in November 2020, a conference dedicated to Elvira Poli was organized, not only to present Elvira Poli's biography but also to create an opportunity to analyse data about women in the School of Engineering and discuss possible strategies to improve female presence among the students of the School.

With the aim of keeping attention on these themes high, the following year, in collaboration with the association Alumni of the University of Padua, the Elvira Poli Award was established. This award is to be assigned to the four best graduated women students of the four departments of the School of Engineering, who have reached important achievements in their professional careers and have contributed to promoting gender equality in Engineering. The award presentation ceremony is an opportunity to discuss with the winners the gender gap in STEM and how to promote equality. The second edition of the Elvira Poli prize has been recently awarded during a dedicated ceremony, which renewed attention to these themes, with the four winners discussing the current conditions for women in Engineering. They said they have never felt discriminated against as women, but consider themselves fortunate for that. However, they have at times felt social pressure to prioritize their caregiving role over their careers. For instance, one of them once turned down a major promotion that involved relocating abroad, as the offer came shortly after

she found out she was pregnant. This is a clear example of how cultural barriers may impact on women career in STEM. They also highlighted the lack of enough role models and suggested to keep up economically supporting young women willing to pursue their career in STEM.

However, as already pointed out and as also emerged from the survey, gender issues in engineering are not only matters of programmes to promote young women. Unfortunately, terribly unpredictable events may happen: on November 11th, 2023, Giulia Cecchettin, a 22-year-old female student of Biomedical Engineering at the University of Padua, was tragically murdered by her male classmate and former boyfriend. She was preparing to graduate on November 16th, but she completed her thesis just a few hours before being reported missing.

After the news of Giulia's death, the university community, including her classmates and professors, spontaneously organized to meet and expressed profound grief over her death, but also anger and confusion in the face of this femicide.

The case sparked local and nationwide protests, highlighting the urgent issue of femicide and prompting discussions about cultural and societal changes to fight gender-based violence. This femicide heightened awareness of the pervasive patriarchal culture that manifests in various forms of gender discrimination and violence even within academic settings. The experience of grief brought students and professors closer, both through open dialogue about what had happened, but also through the daily sharing of university life during the grieving process, when the lectures were going on in a tense and bitter climate.

These tragic events stimulated a critical reflection within the teaching staff community on their educational role and their relationship with students in the university environment, not exclusively limited to the learning experience. In particular, the importance of an open dialogue was highlighted, based on mutual respect and effective communication: students should feel comfortable approaching professors with requests for help or assistance, while professors should be accessible and responsive. For these reasons, the professors' community felt they were not highly trained to address relational and psychological distress in students, and experienced the urge to become better acquainted with the already existing university measures for students' psychological support and for preventing gender-based bias and violence, to foster a safer and more inclusive environment.

In other words, professors, students, and administrative and technical employees felt that something was missing in their “non-technical” education and that, to prevent such tragedies from occurring, people must first understand the roots of this violence to eradicate these phenomena.

The Department of Information Engineering, which hosted the Biomedical Engineering Course, and the entire School of Engineering, undertook a number of initiatives in response to this tragedy and the broader issues it highlighted. Seminars were organized with the aim of raising people’s awareness of hidden gender violence, prejudices, and all that creates a favourable background for gender violence. Colleagues from the Department of Developmental Psychology and Socialization of the University of Padua were invited to give a seminar entitled “From Pink Ribbons to Femicide: Gender Issues Online and Face-to-Face”. During this seminar, they explained how stereotypes may promote gender violence, the role of images and words in legitimizing violence, and some peculiar aspects of gender violence perpetrated online. The Padua Anti-violence Center staff was also invited to give a seminar entitled “Identifying Gender-Based Violence” focused on how to detect potentially dangerous behaviours and situations in advance. Further seminars will be organized soon to address topics such as toxic masculinity. Unfortunately, attendance at these events has not always been as high as hoped, confirming that there is still a lot of work to do in this field.

The Department of Information Engineering also organized a public meeting with the father of the murdered student, who, after the femicide of his daughter, founded an association to combat gender violence and educate for inclusion and respect for others. During the meeting, he shared his dramatic experience with the audience. He did not emphasize what could have been done (and was not) to prevent that femicide, but instead he solicited people to be proactive in fighting against violence in general and gender violence in particular, delivering a message of hope for the future.

Moreover, since symbolic gestures are important both to honour the victim and raise awareness of these themes, study awards named after Giulia Cecchettin for the best graduated female students of the Department of Information Engineering have been established. Fellowships were also provided, in collaboration with the association Riviera Donna, for students of the Master’s Degree in Bioengineering at the University of Padua. Finally, the study room of the Department was also named after

Giulia Cecchetti. A large picture of her smiling face was painted on the wall of the room, and one chair in the room was coloured red, recalling the fact that that seat could have been occupied by a woman, but is not because she has been a victim of gender violence.

## Conclusions

This chapter provides several insights into the persistent gender disparities within engineering education and profession in Italy, particularly at the University of Padua. The survey results reported in the first section reveal that while some progress has been made, significant challenges remain in creating a truly inclusive environment for women in engineering. Gender stereotypes continue to be a major barrier, with female students perceiving and being affected by these stereotypes more acutely than their male counterparts. The challenges faced by women in engineering extend from academia into professional life, with issues such as limited access to leadership positions and work-life balance becoming more pronounced in the workplace. There is a strong desire among students, especially women, for more practical support mechanisms such as internship programmes and networking opportunities to bridge the gap between academia and industry. University initiatives promoting gender equality are generally well-received, particularly by female students, but there is room for improvement in their effectiveness and reach. Students advocate for systemic changes in both academic and professional settings, including fairer hiring policies and more inclusive work environments.

The University of Padua's School of Engineering has taken proactive steps to address these issues, including the introduction of innovative courses like "Gender Knowledge and Ethics in Artificial Intelligence", the organization of seminars on gender-based violence and discrimination, and the establishment of awards and initiatives to celebrate female achievements in engineering. These efforts represent important steps towards creating a more inclusive and equitable environment.

Moving forward, addressing gender inequality in engineering requires a multifaceted approach that combines curricular reforms, mentoring programmes, institutional policies, and cultural shifts. The University of Padua's School of Engineering initiatives provide a foundation for these

efforts, but sustained commitment and ongoing evaluation will be necessary to create lasting change. Ultimately, achieving gender equality in engineering is not just a matter of fairness, but a necessity for driving innovation and excellence in the field. By fostering an environment where all talents can thrive, regardless of gender, the engineering profession can better address the complex challenges of our time and contribute to a more equitable and sustainable future.

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III.

*CHANGING INSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURES:  
POLICIES, PRACTICES, CARE*



*WHY EDI MATTERS: INSIGHTS FROM RESEARCH AND  
UNIVERSITY EQUAL OPPORTUNITY PRACTICES AT  
HEIDELBERG UNIVERSITY*

CHRISTIANE SCHWIEREN

The study of gender differences and their intersection with various dimensions of diversity represents a vibrant area within behavioral economics. However, the relationship between research and practice in this field remains predominantly unidirectional, with researchers offering theoretical and empirical insights to policymakers, organizations, and universities but rarely integrating practitioners' experiences into academic inquiry. Researchers might sometimes be "blind" to some crucial factors, not intentionally, but because the primary methods of behavioral economics, of experiments from lab to field, tend to focus on individuals' behavior rather than structures or systems. This chapter bridges the gap between practice and research by reflecting on how five years of serving as the Equal Opportunities Commissioner at Heidelberg University have changed my research agenda as a behavioral economist studying gender.

The chapter begins with a selective overview of the current state of (behavioral economics) research on the underrepresentation of women in STEM fields and (academic) leadership. Drawing on practical examples from equal opportunities work (in italics, throughout the chapter, to distinguish experience-based personal reflections from research-based parts), the chapter proposes a participatory research agenda that acknowledges that researchers and practitioners necessarily rely on biased samples due to people's self-selection into and out of given structures. Exchange between practitioners and researchers can help to alleviate biases resulting from such selection issues. I further argue that EDI should not be perceived as oppositional to majority groups but as a collective strategy to create a better, more equitable, more productive, and creative academia, and give reasons why EDI as a professional endeavor is important in academic settings (and elsewhere). As most of the research to

date uses binary sex as its unit of analysis, and very few studies include intersectional aspects, I restrict myself here mainly to this level of analysis, too. In the future, I hope there will be more intersectional research, which is important especially when aiming for practical relevance.

## **Introduction to Behavioral Economics and Gender**

Gender differences in labor market outcomes have been a focus in behavioral and experimental economics for decades. Much of this research has focused on individual-level factors, especially gender differences in preferences. Based on this large body of research, especially after the publication of “Nudge” by Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein (2008), practical advice on implementing change became more relevant for the field. “What works,” by Iris Bonet, a book addressing practitioners, was published in 2016 and gained prominence quickly. While part of the large amount of work focused at practitioners - EDI practitioners, managers, and women (!) - dealt with the more general theme of reaching gender equality in pay, promotion, and careers, my focus here will be on one specific aspect of this: Female representation in male-dominated fields – especially in STEM and in leadership roles.

There is a vast body of research on the underrepresentation of women in STEM fields and leadership positions, both in psychology (for an overview, see (Lyness & Grotto, 2018; Schmader, 2023), and (behavioral) economics (see Azmat & Petrongolo, 2014; Lozano et al., 2023). The literature in (behavioral) economics, which is the focus of the current chapter, mainly revolves around three different aspects. First, demonstrating the difference in representation and its effect on secondary labor market outcomes like wages, pensions, lifetime earnings, and other economic indicators (Blau & Kahn, 2017). Second, analyzing potential causes of this difference in representation concerning “hard” factors, for example, gender differences in education, human capital formation, or time use (Olivetti & Petrongolo 2016), and finally, gender differences in preferences and social norms that directly and indirectly affect the other two factors. In this chapter, my focus will mainly be on the third aspect.

To get a short overview of the first aspect, the most recent statistics on female representation and its income-related consequences (ILO, 2024) provide a starting point. Here, it is sufficient to say that women world-

wide make up only 28% of the STEM workforce, 29% of university professors in the EU, and roughly 10% of CEOs in Fortune 500 companies. Concerning the underlying causes, two aspects have recently been focused on in behavioral economics research: the choice of specialization (study/career field) and time use.

While general differences in time use are being discussed widely (especially in the German-speaking countries, women more often work part-time, do the most significant part of the care work, and have more extended interruptions of their careers), there are also subtler aspects of differences in time use. Babcock and colleagues (2017) were the first to demonstrate that women not only do more care work than men for the family, but also provide / do the most significant part of “office care work”. These findings have been replicated widely since then; Recalde & Vesterlund (2023) summarize part of this literature. Often, these tasks are “non-promotionable”, i.e., while very important for the organization, they do not help women to further their careers.

Gender differences in career choice have also been widely discussed but the reasons for such differences are still not fully understood. Women are less often found in STEM fields, and this holds in many countries across the world, with some notable exceptions, for example, in India or some Eastern European countries (UNESCO & Straza, 2024). If women are in STEM, they are still often in female-dominated STEM fields, such as Biology. The same holds for leadership roles – women are frequently found in leadership roles in the more female-dominated areas, like human resources.

In the following, I review the literature concerning gendered preferences for competition/status, gender differences in confidence, personality, resilience, mental health, gender norms, prescriptions, and stereotypes, relating this to my personal experience as an EDI officer at the end of each topic. In the final section, I will discuss why research and anecdotal evidence often do not match, and what the most pressing issues at hand are from my perspective, both for research and for practitioners of EDI, concluding why I think EDI as a professional role is still of utmost importance.

## **Behavioral Economics Research of Relevance for EDI**

### ***Gender differences in competitiveness***

Over the last years, a large body of behavioral and experimental economics research has studied gender differences in “competitiveness”. Starting with the work of Gneezy et al. (2003) and Niederle & Vesterlund (2011), it could be shown in many laboratory and field studies with many different samples of participants that women seem to avoid competition, do not increase performance as much as men in competition, and are not highly motivated by status or related aspects of competitive settings. The reasons for this range from the general finding of a gender gap in risk attitudes, with women being more risk-averse (for an overview, see Croson and Gneezy, 2009), to gender differences in confidence (Bandiera et al., 2022). The gender gap in competitiveness is mediated by task stereotypicality and gender composition of the competing group, which both contribute to its exaggeration in STEM and leadership settings.

Competitive behavior in the broader sense also comprises claiming credit for team efforts, or any kind of (sometimes also unethical) effort to enhance one’s own outcomes at the expense of others’ outcomes. Several studies have shown that men show these types of competitive behaviors more than women. Men claim more credit for the results of team efforts, especially when exaggerating their own contribution is incentivized, and even in situations where this harms the other team members (Kinnl et al., 2023). Men are more prone to lying than women if the lie benefits themselves and (potentially) harms others (Capraro, 2018).

*In my experience as an equal opportunities commissioner, I saw many women in hiring situations and discussed with female and male professors interested in promoting gender equality. I attended lectures and workshops towards this aim. Women in academia are highly competitive, at least at the surface. This is an issue of selection – those who do not compete probably will not be around after the PhD to discuss with me in a recruitment setting. However, after some time of conversation, it often turned out that they paid a price for this competitive success, in terms of identity, mental well-being, or private life and dreams. Some considered this price worthwhile, while others did not, in retrospect. Some men also think they pay a price by being so focused on competition, but saying so as a man is even more stigmatized.<sup>1</sup>*

<sup>1</sup> As EDI commissioner at a German university, I am also responsible for all kinds of related com-

*Selection and adaptation are two factors that often blur the picture and render actual problems invisible. We do not see those people who dropped out of academic careers due to competitive requirements they did not want to or could not fulfill. Therefore, we do not know what they would have contributed to science. Those who “made it” despite not “fitting into the structures” rarely discuss the price they paid. Missing the right counterfactual – that is, observations we cannot get – can blind us to structural issues that might play an important role in determining who does academic research and teaching and who does not. It is impossible to know whether those who self-select out would have contributed differently, would have asked different questions, or would have changed the culture in academia in important ways. EDI professionals see and know this, and can contribute by asking the right questions and pointing to gaps in the evidence.*

### ***Gender differences in confidence***

Related to the literature on competition, Niederle and Vesterlund (2011), and many others afterwards, have shown that women tend to be underconfident, while men are often highly overconfident. Female underconfidence is prevalent, especially in male-stereotyped tasks (Exley & Nielsen, 2024). In experiments, women do not compete or submit their work to a high-level competition unless they know for sure that they are good enough. In contrast, even with clear signals that they are not good enough, men happily compete (Niederle & Vesterlund, 2011; Markowsky & Beblo, 2022). Some studies implicitly link these behavioral patterns with a real and felt need of women to be better prepared than comparable men. The psychological scholarship discusses this as the impostor phenomenon (Armstrong & Shulman, 2019; Neureiter & Traut-Mattausch, 2016), affecting career planning, striving, and motivation to pursue leadership roles.

In settings where people can signal their qualifications, men send higher self-evaluations than women to promote themselves to future employers in male-stereotyped tasks (Exley & Kessler, 2022). Solda et al. (2020) find that showing overconfidence is more prevalent when individuals can use it as a strategic signal to persuade others of their high performance, rather than as a simple self-assessment without further

plaints and conflicts. This holds in it, that I talk to people of all genders who want to talk to a confidential advisor.

strategic considerations, and this holds for men and women. Charness et al. (2018) described similar behavior, with the strategic aspect being deterrence of the opponent. Especially men tend to inflate their relative ability in these settings. Men and women deflate their relative ability when encouraging others is more advantageous.

*The differences in overconfidence are well documented. However, where do they come from? One aspect that has been hardly researched in behavioral economics is sexism. As a confidential counselor for cases of mobbing, harassment, and discrimination, I had more than one conversation surrounding the fact that young women were unsure whether they are actually good, or whether it is just “preferential hiring”, or worse, “the fact that the supervisor/some important man is (sexually) attracted to them”, “them being held to lower standards” etc. Young men rarely have to worry about this, and it can substantially damage confidence. Public comments about a woman being “the most beautiful face in the field” make her and others doubt why they have been hired. More research should look into this, and men should be made aware of these differences, which is another important aspect of the role of EDI.*

### ***Personality/resilience/mental health***

Gender differences have been studied widely concerning personality characteristics (Almlund et al., 2011; Müller & Schwieren, 2012). One of the main findings of relevance here is that women tend to score higher on “neuroticism”, among other personality factors, while men tend to score higher on the so-called “dark traits” (Hartung et al., 2022). While the latter can be helpful for career advancement up to a certain point (but often detrimental for the work culture, (James et al., 2014; LeBreton et al., 2018), the former is related to emotional instability, risk aversion, low resilience, difficulty to work under pressure, and proneness to mental health problems. At first sight, this aligns with the previous finding and might suggest, given that personality is considered relatively stable (Damian et al., 2019), that indeed men, on average, are the better choice for specific highly competitive, exposed, leadership positions. However, the economics literature has given much less consideration to the underlying mechanism. This can be found in the psychological literature: the double burden of care and work, but also exposure to more aversive life events due to prevalent sexism in society, are mentioned as potentially

underlying factors. Norms and prescriptions that favor “dark trait”-type of behavior in men within society can explain the “male” side of this (Luo et al., 2023; Schmitt et al., 2017) – but with negative consequences nevertheless: “Toxic workplaces are the main reason women leave academic jobs” was a title in *Nature* (Sidike, 2023). Toxic workplaces not only affect the selection of women out of academic careers, but these toxic settings often remain after women have left. At the same time, there is more and more evidence and awareness of increasing mental health problems among students and academics, men and women (Campbell et al., 2022; van der Weijden et al., 2023). Postgraduates at US universities have more mental health problems than comparable groups not pursuing academic degrees (e.g., Hazell et al., 2020), and also at higher career levels, problems of the work culture have become more and more visible (Nature Collections, 2019).

*Especially when I interacted with men and women involved in any kind of conflict, I quite often heard that women were “too emotional” or “not tough enough”. In contrast, men got away with quite some amount of “dark trait” behavior, resorting to their great intellect and even genius, which might come paired with a bit of “excessive” behavior, or that even warrants a heightened self-image. What struck me most, and what makes me believe even more in the importance of taking EDI and EDI officers seriously, is the fact that even well-meaning men did not see it when they behaved in a way that made others feel low, or did not see their contribution towards women’s “emotional” reactions. Conversely, women attributed male behavior to evil intentions, even if it was “just” bad outcomes, without bad intentions. Awareness is key, and awareness based on sound evidence is more valid and convincing than anecdotes. EDI professionals can provide exactly this, plus safe spaces for all people involved, to work towards a better understanding of themselves and others. Young women (and probably men) – especially those with the best outside options – leave toxic workplaces. This implies the loss of talent and affects our understanding of the effects of, e.g., institutional and hiring policies, due to selection effects.*

### ***Gender norms/prescriptions/stereotypes***

The “genius” is a stereotype that is quite prevalent in university settings: a scientist is “brilliant” or some kind of “genius”, especially in STEM fields. Both genius and brilliance are perceived as male characteristics more

often than female (Storage et al., 2020). This “male genius stereotype” can be found in the media and is reinforced socially and culturally (Bian et al., 2017). A striking example is letters of recommendation, which often describe men as brilliant, while women are depicted as hardworking and diligent (Baltrunaite et al., 2024).

Another important stereotype relates to informal performance evaluation – at levels below “genius”: Men are often somewhat automatically considered more competent, even in fields where men and women perform equally well, without self-promotion as a mediating factor. Reuben et al. (2014) report that men are twice as likely to be hired as women for an arithmetic task in an experiment where no performance differences existed. Grunspan et al. (2016) report that men were considered more knowledgeable than women in an undergraduate biology course, without relation to their actual performance. Benson et al. (2024) show that women receive lower potential ratings despite outperforming men in job performance assessments. Krawczyk and Smyk (2016) find that lower competency and publishing success are ascribed to female authors without fundamental differences. When there is ambiguity about individual contributions in mixed-sex teams on a male-stereotyped task, women are devalued in their competency and contribution (Heilman & Haynes, 2005). To make things worse, Heilman et al. (2004) find that successful women in male stereotypical areas are less liked and more personally derogated than their equally successful male counterparts.

*So, the more “male-dominated” and “stereotypically male” a field, the harder the struggle for women. The problem I have seen in practice quite often is the strong and innocent belief in meritocracy in universities, and the ignorance that evaluators might be biased even when evaluating facts, like the quality of a paper or someone’s contribution to it. Even less aware are (male and female) evaluators that these subtle disadvantages can pile up, leading to an objectively smaller publication/grant acquiring record in a seemingly equal and gender blind evaluation setting. It is the task of the EDI professionals to explain and insist that – even if there are, of course, individual outliers – on average, members of minority groups face more obstacles in an academic career, even if or especially if the academic community is committed to meritocracy. Starting discussions on how this could be changed, what merit means, and how we define “achievement” or “success”, or “excellence”, is an important task that EDI professionals can stimulate – in the end, to the profit of everybody in the academic community.*

## A Proposal for a New Perspective

Nearly all of this research has one thing in common: it is based on the assumption that women would unambiguously profit from entering STEM, leadership, or other highly competitive academic careers if qualified.

*My experience as an equal opportunities officer paints a different picture. While the rewards might be high for some aspects – research done, status reached, money earned...– costs encountered along the way can be high. For a young researcher, especially in today’s ever more competitive academic environment, these rewards are quite uncertain and into the far future, but the costs are real and now. Therefore, it can be entirely rational for women not to pursue an academic career. The “elephant in the room” is sexism, and one of its ugliest consequences is sexual harassment. These topics come up at coffee breaks and in the “personal experience” section of many “role-model talks”. They are discussed under the theme “it was not always fun” or “I had to fight hard”, but “it was still worth it”. They are much less addressed in the “official” part of the female-empowerment workshops and research papers. Identity issues are another aspect: it is not considered appropriate female behavior to be competitive and career-oriented; outside of academic contexts, this might come with negative evaluations by others. Finally, parenthood leads to a whole new level of dis-acceptance and stereotyping (inside and outside of the academic setting) mainly for women, and especially in the German context with its strong focus on the role of the mother in (early) childhood.<sup>2</sup> It might drive up the personal cost to an unbearable level. The “solution” provided by supervisors and department heads is often “24h child-care,” which raises issues of individual goals, both private and academic, guilt, and overburdening.*

Folke & Rickne (2022) discuss sexual harassment in a relatively recent prominent paper, but this is one of the few economics papers dealing with this topic. Direct effects of sexual harassment on women can range from nuisance to trauma (Chan et al., 2008). Nevertheless, even if not being directly affected themselves, observing it in others or just being quite constantly aware of the fact of sexism makes being in a male-dominated, potentially sexist environment a less good experience for women than for men.

*Women also often avoid social settings – the beers after work, the team-building event, the drinks after the conference dinner. Not to speak*

<sup>2</sup> The literature on discrimination, or at least disadvantages for parents in all kinds of professional settings, is too extensive to discuss here—a good overview can be found in (El Haj et al., 2024).

*about the more problematic settings, such as conferences in beach resorts where joint bathing or sauna is part of the fun. This all can be just nice social opportunities, but more so for cis men. On an intersectional level, this can even get worse, e.g., for Muslim or Dalit women in specific field work settings.*

*Finally, another factor is not discussed as much as it should be: costs are not only paid by women, and by minorities of all genders! Even the seemingly unaffected cis white men do pay a price. We see that in the numbers for mental health issues. In people who drop out of academia mid-career to have time for their family. EDI could play a role in retaining talent of both sexes by making academia more inclusive and fueling the long-needed discussion about meritocracy, values, practices in academic settings, and work culture more generally.*

Why does research not cover these and similar aspects more often? The reason does not lie in some malevolent males' focus on men. It lies in selection issues when studying human subjects and in publication incentives. Selection affects not just researchers but also EDI professionals. Publication incentives mainly affect researchers. Their effects on gendered knowledge are discussed extensively in the growing literature on male defaults in research. In a nutshell, it was (and sometimes still is) not necessary for being published to consider both sexes (or even gender in a broader sense), and, thus, it is often not done. Especially if considering both sexes brings all kinds of complications. An example is research on the effects of stress on human behavior. If using only all-male samples, consideration of hormonal changes due to the menstrual cycle is not necessary, and thus, a smaller sample is sufficient, analyses are less complex, and publication success is achieved at a faster pace (for a short discussion, see Buckert et al., 2017). As long as this is considered acceptable, researchers, especially junior researchers, will follow this path and leave detailed gender analyses aside.

The second aspect, selection, has been discussed extensively by John List for questions other than gender in his 2006 paper on experimental methods, indicating what each type of empirical study can conclude. He points out that, especially for real-world interventions and research testing their effectiveness, one can often speak only about the program's effects on those who selected themselves into it. They might, however, differ from those who did not select themselves into the program. This is important for EDI on several levels. First, on the level of running evaluations of EDI programs. We must be clear about what we can make state-

ments about. Was it a voluntary program? Who entered? Could selection be done any other way? If yes, do we have an idea what the conclusions would be?

It is also essential when evaluating more general university policies, such as selecting the best talent or professor, or reviewing a paper. We usually only see those (applicants, talents, papers) that applied or have been submitted. We do not know what would have happened if other policies were in place. We can only make assumptions based on a self-selected sample – that might, to give one example that we observed in our current research project “hei\_Change” (heiCHANGE, 2025), be actually very competitive and not very interested in other indicators beyond publications and similar measures. Thus, we might conclude that new indicators (such as COARA) are unnecessary and that many EDI practitioners’ claims are wrong. However, our sample consists of academics in postdoc or even professor positions. Thus, we see only those who succeeded (partially) in the current system, who somehow fit into the system (and if not, who at least have had to convince themselves that they fit into the system, to keep going). Change is hard to reach by those for whom the system worked! This might be one reason why change is very slow, and EDI professionals are needed to work towards it, as they are partially outsiders to the system.

The second reason change is happening so slowly is that being in a highly competitive system can be very stressful, and stress makes people react more “habitually”; they use their resources – and their brain – as efficiently as possible. In Kahneman’s terms, they use “system 2” over “system 1”. This also means that in a society where experience, stereotypes, and social roles have been gendered over centuries, ascribing men rather than women leading roles in academia and especially STEM, people will resort even more to gendered hiring and evaluation practices when under stress, without bad intentions, just due to brain efficiency (Hangartner et al., 2021). EDI is therefore important to help avoid this, because even the evidence for the “business case for diversity” is at best mixed. Thus money, which often moves things, is not a safe push factor for change alone.

## Conclusion

There is a large body of research in experimental economics on gender differences and aspects related to career differences of men and women, in academic and other labor market settings. It often informs our EDI policies and serves as a background for developing new policies and evaluating the old ones. There is also a long tradition of EDI policies in universities. Still, despite some slow progress, we currently observe substantial backlash. By summarizing some of the key research findings and contrasting them with anecdotal evidence from my practical experience as an EDI commissioner, I point out some reasons for this. Even gender researchers and EDI practitioners often take the current structures as given, and ignore biases both in evaluating these structures, and in our evidence that is affected by (self) selection of people and those things people voluntarily talk about.

As EDI practitioners, we cannot address those who self-selected out of, for example, our universities. As researchers who evaluate organizational practices, we often do not see those who self-select out of the organization we study. We do not see those who consider our interventions not a good fit for their needs, as they do not participate. We do not see those who are too overwhelmed with their lives and work to participate in research. We have a biased perspective, in spite of good intentions, but we are often unaware of it. As an EDI practitioner who is also tasked with counseling, I sometimes see those people – those who think they do not fit, those who are overwhelmed, those who have had negative experiences. This is also a biased sample. So, to improve our policies and research, we should aim to have a larger picture, to bring the different biased samples together and let them inspire our research and policies.

I propose to have more stakeholder participation in research on gender/minorities and workplace outcomes. By systematically rather than anecdotally integrating the perceptions and experiences of women, men, minorities, and majorities of all backgrounds into our selection of topics, samples, and study designs, we can improve our research. Collectively, we can reduce biases stemming from our individual experiences, perceptions, and data limitations, providing better policy advice. By doing this, we can also show a larger group of people why diversity, equality, and inclusion are essential, and can demonstrate that EDI policies do not only benefit minorities, but can make workplaces better for everybody

involved, as they can foster structures where heterogeneous groups of people can thrive and feel that they are treated fairly and respectfully. Difficult times need innovative and diverse ideas and trusting, respectful, and fair communities to benefit all, majority, and minority members, in leadership roles or not, in STEM as well as in the humanities.

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# *STEPPING INTO A DISCOURSE: THE INTRODUCTION OF GUIDELINES ON GENDER-SENSITIVE LANGUAGE AT VILNIUS UNIVERSITY*

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## **Introduction**

In 2021, The Vilnius University Guidelines on Gender-Sensitive Language (henceforth, the Guidelines), adopted as recommendations, unexpectedly sparked significant public reaction. It is difficult to recall another instance where an internal university document has drawn so much public attention. Gender-sensitive language in the context of Lithuanian language can have various forms of expression. Lithuanian is a language with a grammatical gender system, and there are two grammatical genders: masculine and feminine. Nouns, adjectives and participles are always marked for gender and have either a masculine or a feminine ending. In Lithuanian, the most prototypical masculine endings are -as, -ias, -us, -ius, while the most prototypical feminine endings are -a and -ė. Given that Lithuanian has a complex inflectional morphology, agreement is required with respect to gender, number, and case (Vernich, Argus, Kamandulytė-Merfeldienė 223). In everyday Lithuanian, the masculine is commonly used to refer to a group of people of different genders and the feminine form is used to refer to groups comprised exclusively of women. In linguistics, this is described as the masculine default or masculine is considered the unmarked gender (Adamson and Šereikaitė 5).

As we will discuss the development of these Guidelines in more detail further on, we shall briefly note here that as the word *guidelines* implies, the document was drafted as an optional tool for those who would like to use more gender-sensitive language. Written in a Q & A format, it describes various ways to name groups of people, addresses them in a gender-sensitive way and it is framed as a document that could be useful in improving the internal communication of the University community.

The Guidelines were developed by a group of researchers in sociolinguistics and social sciences upon request by the University administration as part of the implementation of the Gender Equality Plan that had been adopted by the University Senate the previous year.

In a relevant study, Drew and Bencivenga (2017) conducted an analysis of the impact of projects, notably Horizon 2020, on the implementation of gender equality policies within higher education institutions. Their study examined various intervention strategies, including the adoption of gender-sensitive language, the provision of awareness-raising initiatives and training programs, and the integration of gender-sensitive perspectives into pedagogical practices. The authors posit that sustainable and meaningful progress requires a holistic organizational approach, characterized by institution-wide sensitivity to gender equality issues and a robust networking and coordination framework. While emphasizing the importance of consensus and shared commitment from members of the organisation, Drew and Bencivenga also acknowledge the necessity of strategic pressure to facilitate change (38-39).

A similar case to ours in terms of the impact of an internal document on the public discourse has been observed in Slovenia. In 2018, the Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana, decided to use the feminine grammatical gender in its internal regulations as generic and inclusive for all genders. Intriguingly, the Working Group's proposal, formulated by faculty members from linguistics, sociology, and cultural studies, elicited minimal debate within the Faculty Senate, culminating in its adoption by a significant majority (51 votes in favor, 3 against, 2 abstentions; see Kuhar and Antić Gaber 246-248). Despite its application as an internal university document, the decision generated substantial heated public and media discourse. Kuhar and Antić Gaber identified reactions wherein critics characterized the regulation as a normative linguistic intervention, and according to them, the media response can be divided into four key frames which "label the decision as impermissible linguistic engineering, associate it with exaggerated political correctness, see it as the wrong intervention to eliminate sexist practices in language or, uncommonly, defend it [the attempt to eliminate sexist language practice]" (258).

Similar notions have been observed in our case as well. However, besides the discourses in opposition of the recommendations, we are interested in what strategies the University used or could have used to handle this opposition. Vilnius University has a particular position in the wider

higher education landscape in Lithuania. It is the oldest university in Lithuania, established in 1579. It has remained prominent throughout the years and was the sole Lithuanian university during the Soviet occupation. With its rich history and great ambitions for future development, the University exists at the intersection between tradition and innovation. As phrased on the University website, “what symbolises today’s Vilnius University the most are the two most important threads of its identity that are twisted like a DNA spiral: its passionate efforts to adapt to the needs and trends of the rapidly changing world; and at the same time, the traditions that have survived since its establishment” (Bumbauskas and Vaiseta). On one hand, it is possible that the public backlash to the Guidelines may have been encouraged by the perception of Vilnius University as a traditional institution; on the other, it may have also become part of a broader counter-discourse about diversity and inclusion.

In this chapter we will use media analysis to expand on the public reactions to the Guidelines on Gender-Sensitive Language initiative and the discourses surrounding it. We will also analyse interview data to elaborate on the struggles that a university may encounter when striving for increased equity and diversity. At the core, we strive to show how these struggles tie in with the deeper issues of the society the University serves, and what strategies a university can use to tackle the pushback.

## **Methodology**

Social reality is never objective; rather, it is shaped by subjective perceptions. Nevertheless, common ground enables mutual understanding while allowing for different worldviews. Frame theory explores how we form our perception of reality (Goffman & Berger 5). A frame is a principle for organizing perception, reflecting our subjective understanding of involvement in social events (Goffman & Berger 10; Chong & Druckman 104). An event is understood within a specific context, defined by its relationship to a particular phenomenon or occurrence within a defined timeframe (Chong & Druckman 106).

Frame analysis explores how the perception of reality is (re)constructed through specific ways of discourse formation (Triandafyllidou & Fotiou 2.3; Goffman & Berger 11), and is a subset of critical discourse analysis’s theoretical and methodological tradition (Triandafyllidou &

Fotiou 1.1). Understanding frames helps uncover empirical and normative controversies by highlighting how power is manifested through text. Framing involves selection and salience. This means that actors choose to use certain words, phrases, or stereotypical images to thematically reinforce particular facts or evaluations while obscuring others (Entman 52). These frames are significant in constructing a narrative about a particular problem (Gamson et al. 385).

Frames are inherently discursive and can be expressed in three ways: diagnostic framing highlights the problem requiring a solution; prognostic framing proposes solutions to the identified problem; motivational framing seeks to persuade stakeholders of the efficacy of the proposed solution or the process of solution of the problem (Nokalla & Bacevic 701; Entman 50). The framing process is closely linked to agenda-setting, where social actors use framing to justify a problem, and its solutions based on their goals and values. Frames are used to legitimize a position as the only legitimate and rational one (Nokalla & Bacevic 701). In the public sphere, particularly in the media, subjects encounter competing frames and tend to choose the ones that align with their values (Chong & Druckman 112; Gamson et al. 373; Triandafyllidou & Fotiou 2.7).

This chapter analyses the discursive frames surrounding the implementation of the Guidelines on Gender-Sensitive Language at Vilnius University. The data corpus includes media texts, as well as interviews with 3 members of the University community who were responsible for the development of the guidelines. Google search was used to find the relevant media texts. 27 media messages and 2 statements from members of the Lithuanian Parliament and a group of non-governmental organizations during the period from 20 September 2021 to 6 June 2022 were analysed. A thematic analysis was conducted, which resulted in a constellation of frames that reveals the primary arguments in support and in opposition to the guidelines, as well as their perceived or possible impact.

### **The Guidelines and the Pushback**

The analysis of the media and the interview data paint a complex picture. On one hand, the issue exploded in the media drawing a lot of attention both from specific actors and the national media at large. On the other,

the three participants who were involved in the process of drafting the guidelines recall feeling surprised and somewhat confused at these reactions since, for them, the Guidelines were a regular university document that should not have attracted so much interest from the general society. In this section, we shall discuss both how the Guidelines came to be and the media storm that followed.

### *A view from the inside*

As mentioned above, the participants recall the drafting of the Guidelines as a rather straightforward endeavour: “the university was involved in a big project, similar to other universities’ projects, where one part of it was a commitment to have something like this. ... I don’t actually remember any kind of dramatic process [in developing the guidelines] at all. It was quite simple” (Participant 1).

The goal of the Guidelines, as explained by the participants, was to ensure a more cohesive internal communication at the University and it came as part of a broader diversity and equality agenda. The process started in 2015 when the newly appointed Rector of the University introduced the position of Pro-Rector for Organizational Development and Community Affairs. The first Pro-Rector came from the field of social work and, according to one of our participants, she encouraged the development of a strategy for equal opportunities and inclusion. As the Rector and his team changed in 2020, the issue was taken up by the next team and in the same year, the Gender Equality Plan was adopted and confirmed by the University Senate. The Guidelines were considered as a follow-up to this plan and were supposed to provide guidance to the members of the University community on how they could use more inclusive language. As one of our participants recalls,

the idea was that the Guidelines for gender-sensitive language would be a guideline, that the administrative departments and members of the community would choose whether to use or not to use that language, but it would be a reference document, that there would be something to refer to and it would be conceptually sound. And we were very proud of it. Truly, because it was drafted by qualified people in our community, people who know their field, and it looked very progressive (Participant 3).

According to the participants, the media uproar started with a Facebook post by a relatively known intellectual who focused on one aspect

of the Guidelines, the proposed new word *žmoga* which is a currently unused female version of the word *žmogus*, meaning *human* in the sense that *man* means *human*. That is, the word used in Lithuanian to refer to a human being employs the masculine default, and the authors of the Guidelines proposed that in case of a female-gendered human, the word *žmoga* which has the grammatical markers of the feminine gender could be used. This became one of the core issues in the negative media regarding the Guidelines.

### ***The outrage***

It is difficult to pinpoint the exact moment when the Guidelines became a focal point of national debate. What the data shows, however, is that for over half a year, there had been a debate in various forms of national and regional media regarding the potential impact of the Guidelines on Lithuanian language, culture, and society. The majority of media messages expressed a negative view of the Guidelines, with a limited number of messages in support or, rather, defence of the document. The first peak of public attention was observed in mid-October when the news of the Guidelines was published in right-wing publications. The outrage that followed was related to several broader discourses which were prominent in Lithuanian society at the time.

First, although the Guidelines clarify that the focus is on language etiquette rather than grammar, critics argued that they contradict tradition and the natural evolution of language. They argue that the main issue lies in replacing commonly accepted (“normal”) language with a new version: “The document discusses various strategies aimed to desperately avoid normal, according to Vilnius University, outdated language, replacing it with a much more sensitive and progressive one” (Media source 1). Gender-sensitive language is also presumed to lack universal acceptance: “I believe that not all women would want to be addressed in the neuter gender<sup>3</sup>. Apparently, change is not always progress—it can also be regression” (Media source 2). The language of the critics relies heavily on

<sup>3</sup> In the current grammar of Lithuanian, nouns distinguish only two genders and neuter forms have been retained only for adjectivals. In the Russian grammar, however, the neuter gender for nouns is available and when the phrase ‘the neuter gender’ is employed, the Lithuanian term for it is exactly the same as would be used to refer to the neuter gender in the Russian grammar. Given the contentious relationship between the two languages due to the Russification of Lithuania during both the Tzarist and Soviet Russian rule, the ‘neuter gender’ carries a negative connotation.

rhetorical oppositions to illustrate the negative judgment. In the example above, the initiative for gender-sensitive language is discredited by describing it as a regression and the opposite of progress.

Implied negative consequences are also framed through the examples of supposedly overly liberal Western practices somehow alien to the Lithuanian national sentiments or mentality:

Let us try to imagine the confusion that would arise if the subconscious energy that has flowed from the depths of the psyche suddenly lost the channel it had been following for thousands of years and fell into artificial forms that were not suited to it, created by an alien consciousness. Wouldn't the new Babel surprise us? Would our thinking remain stable? Would we not suffer the fate of the Indians or the peoples of Siberia, where a 'higher culture' has disrupted the fundamental psychological structures of cultural consciousness and left them to their fate as a body without a soul, but with a bottle of alcohol in their hand? (Media source 4)

Ever since the Lithuanian independence in the 1990s, the West has been habitually construed as a space of progress in the national discourse. Here, however, it is perceived negatively, as a bearer of "artificial forms". Following this line of argument, the West is positioned as a possible coloniser of Lithuania and the argument is built around comparisons to cultures with actual colonisation experiences. This is another use of opposition when the *natural* Lithuanian culture is opposed to the *artificial* Western one.

The second theme in the critics' position is the perceived threat to gender identity. Two arguments frame this threat: one concerns the supposed gender-neutrality of the term *human* or lack thereof, and the other focuses on sexual identity. The detrimental effects are emphasized by highlighting the supposed far-reaching social consequences of the Guidelines: "They'll start banning saying 'father' and 'mother'. It's already happening in the world. These Guidelines are already questioning the word 'human'" (Media source 6). When discussing the threat to sexual identity, anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric is also used, emphasizing threats to traditional binary sexual identity: "It sounds ridiculous to try to deny a basic law of nature and say there are no men and women, but that everyone is neuter" (Media source 8).

As in the previous topic, ideological dominance and the potential threat of censorship is also construed as a possible future threat. The discourse of the critics envisions a future where ideological language norms

evolve into censorship and, ultimately, the destruction of the national culture: “observing the evolution of language norms in Western countries, we can see that it all started with recommendations and turned into strictly enforced political correctness and, eventually, censorship and cancel culture” (Media source 3). Rhetorically, this frame also employs the opposition between natural and artificial: “when language develops and changes not naturally, but rather through new rules imposed by ideologues and bureaucrats, it results in the destruction of traditional culture (not just language)” (Media source 11).

References to George Orwell’s *1984* are used to reinforce this perceived threat. Historical references to Soviet-era censorship are also employed to underscore the threats of language control: “the first newspeak project in independent Lithuania, ‘Gender-Sensitive Language’, doesn’t hide its ideological goals. ... Let us all remember the Soviet times when Glavlit<sup>4</sup> controlled ideological language” (Media source 5). It is paradoxical that arguments about the perceived overreach of liberal Western values are layered with those regarding Soviet censorship: “Considering what happened in the West due to similar activism, a bleak prediction emerges: this is just the first step towards turning the university into a brainwashing facility” (Media source 13) and “The ideologues increasingly entrenched at Vilnius University, who are zealously imposing their ideological views on the entire academic community, are effectively throwing the university back into the darkest times of Soviet ideological obscurantism” (Media source 12).

In a further development of the argument discussed above, the negative connotation of ideology, which largely stems from the negative experiences of the Soviet occupation, helps to frame the institution that implements the Guidelines as ideological rather than scientific, and question the University’s commitment to *pure* science: “I wonder what the biology and medical sciences professors at Vilnius University would say about the guidelines mentioning more than 2 genders? Is this institution really worthy of being called a university?” (Media source 8). This also harkens to the perception of natural sciences as the *true* sciences and social sciences and humanities (which are to be held responsible for

<sup>4</sup> Main Directorate for the Protection of State Secrets in the Press under the Council of Ministers of the USSR was the official censorship and state secret protection organ in the Soviet Union. The abbreviation of the Russian name of the organisation, *Glavlit*, was commonly used until the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

the Guidelines) as less scientific. This argument can also be related to the natural vs. artificial opposition discussed above.

In general, the criticism towards the Guidelines revolved around four main arguments: 1) contradictions between linguistic change and traditions; 2) threats to gender identity; 3) establishment of ideological positions and threat of censorship; 4) undermining of scientific authority. All of these rhetorically employed the opposition between ‘the natural’, which was the status quo viewed favourably, and ‘the artificial’, which was the (supposedly negative) change proposed by the Guidelines.

### *The defence*

Amidst the predominantly negative discourse surrounding the Guidelines in the public sphere, several articles emerged in support of them, attempting to refute the critics’ arguments. Those supporting the Guidelines adopted a more defensive stance when discussing their benefits. Support for the Guidelines was expressed by the Vilnius University Student Representation; no other university directly supported Vilnius University, though some of them declined to comment on the Guidelines (Media source 11); some representatives of another university supported the university’s autonomy in language use (Media source 7).

The Vilnius University administration publicly stated its position only after members of Parliament demanded the revocation of the Guidelines<sup>5</sup>:

The Vilnius University Senate sent a response to the concerned members of Parliament, clarifying the status of the Gender-Sensitive Language Guidelines and emphasizing their recommendatory nature. The university is open to comments, criticism, and suggestions but stresses its autonomy in discussing and making internal policy decisions (Media source 7).

As noted above, the university institutionally largely refrained from taking any kind of public stance or entering the public debate as an institution aside from this reference to institutional autonomy. This absence at least in part resulted in a lack of conceptual and legal clarity

<sup>5</sup> Several right-wing non-governmental organisations have expressed their stance against the Guidelines and called for their revocation. A month later, a group of right-wing members of the Lithuanian Parliament issued a similar position. They questioned the legality of the Guidelines as well as the university’s lack of authority to standardize language, doubts about the competence of the authors of the document, and emphasized the threat to the university’s authority and the indoctrinating nature of the Guidelines.

on the issue. Some commentators questioned whether the Guidelines were adopted, and what was the exact position of the university community (if there was one at all) with regards to the Guidelines: “The Guidelines seem to be adopted, but they are also still under consideration. It appears that there is an agreement among the university community, but nobody seems to have consulted the community” (Media source 14). During the peak of the debate, in October-November of 2021, two sociolinguists, members of the group which drafted the Guidelines, commented publicly in defence of the Guidelines as private people. Their comments which were published in the media, are also included in this analysis.

In terms of framing, the response to the criticism of the Guidelines is conveyed through four main frames: the Guidelines are useful to fight discrimination, it is an attempt to introduce a more sensitive language etiquette, to reflect changes of the society, and that the critics’ arguments are unprofessional. In a certain regard, these frames reflect the defensive nature of the arguments as they aim to respond to the critics’ statements. The facts that the Guidelines can be useful in fighting discrimination and reflect the changes in society are used to counter the narrative that the linguistic tradition of the Lithuanian language, lauded by the opponents, should be preserved at all costs. Similarly, the reproaches that the University has undermined its scientific authority by choosing ideology over science are tacitly countered by demonstrating that the critics’ arguments are unsubstantiated, false or unrelated to the Guidelines. The last is the case when the opponents’ frames of threats to gender identity and censorship are considered because it is quite difficult to argue against an argument that is built on an imagined future-oriented threat.

In promoting an anti-discriminatory rhetoric and a more gender-sensitive language etiquette, the proponents of the Guidelines pointed out that the “neutral” masculine in Lithuanian grammar is not that neutral by referring to common language use: “Few critics, especially men, would apparently agree to be described in the feminine ‘I am a physicist [*fizikė* in Lithuanian, fem, sing.], a saleswoman’ and so on. This shows that the language is not neutral” (Media source 7) as well as the structural roots of this use: “In fact, the masculine is not always ‘spontaneous’ and ‘neutral’ in describing people, but sometimes simply reflects structural (not only historical but also current) discrimination” (Media source 5). They

also noted that language consists of more than grammar and should be able to address the changing needs of the society:

The Guidelines propose that what is considered to be the norm of the Lithuanian language could include new things that may arise from societal change. They do not refer to the language as a whole, but to addresses and the naming of people in a working public environment. For example, one could say ‘dear students [studentės, fem. sing.] and students [studentai, masc. sing.]’. ... Such language operates in a field of linguistic behaviour and etiquette that is constantly changing within society and has many variations (Media source 10).

The proponents, especially those that took an explicitly defensive stance, often pointed out that the opponents’ arguments are constructed in bad faith and the supposedly linguistic opposition has little to do with language: “the Guidelines are first and foremost a values document ..., the opposition to it is neither about language nor grammar – in some cases, the public criticism reflects nationalist ideology, in others, anger and fear of losing one’s male privilege disguised by ‘grammatical knowledge’ (Media source 9). The tendency of the opponents to evoke right-leaning political talking points related to national preservation was also taken into account: “under the banner of national survival, the groups that can be called the ‘strong majority’ are waging a multi-faceted war against small groups and their expectations” (Media source 10).

There are several significant distinctions between the negative and the positive media messaging. The negative publications were largely concentrated in the period between October and December 2021 and a number of them were published and republished in multiple right-wing media channels. Aside from the comments from the sociolinguists involved in the drafting of the Guidelines, positive media publications came out over six months later in March and June of 2022 once the media storm had died down. These publications veered towards analysing the Guidelines in a broader socio-political context and tended to not only explain the importance of the guidelines but to deconstruct the negative reactions to it as well.

### *Inside the university*

Reflecting on this media storm, our interview participants noted several aspects. One, it was personally challenging to get involved in the polarising and emotionally charged debate: “It’s just that when the discussion

is this emotionally draining, I found that it is quite difficult, to find the will to have something significant to say” (Participant 2). The participant who worked at the University administration department responsible for drafting the Guidelines, noted that it was a very challenging period inside the University as well:

It was a huge emotional wave and that gender-sensitive language was in a sense lumped together with other things and I don’t really understand why there was such a huge resistance being built up, so many emotions. I don’t want to just single out older, high-ranking men in the hard sciences. But it was a huge, an enormous resistance. ... You had to constantly defend the gender-sensitive language, because it was like a boxing bag for people to express their emotions, to talk. ... That’s how much you have to give up, both in terms of your physical health and your mental health, in order to be in that position. Well, I don’t want to use those words, but to stand on the front line, to endure not always hatred as such, but a lot of negativity. (Participant 3)

The authors of the Guidelines were also rather perplexed at the reactions, given that a very non-imperative text had been interpreted so differently and resulted in such a passionate response:

I was so surprised that a moderate text, not prescriptive and not demanding at all, although it does describe some kind of commitment, that it has been taken in ways, some of which I couldn’t even see, and then so passionately. [I didn’t expect that] talking about linguistic etiquette, neutrality of grammatical forms and things like that, that they can get people’s passions so worked up, although I wish it had been a much calmer conversation. (Participant 1)

The participants indicate two reasons for the relative silence from the University. One, the discussion was very emotionally charged and, therefore, difficult to engage in: “this kind of discussion is still quite, apparently, emotionally charged, like gender issues, or like ecology, or like vaccines, medicine, it’s hard to have that discussion” (Participant 2). Two, the University was not prepared for this kind of reaction from the public. The news broke out before the University administration could introduce and present the Guidelines to the community:

And it just so happened that at the time when it was made public, many members of the community were not individually made aware of the document in any way, it was not presented. And so it happened that in a sense some of the people who were involved in these processes, they knew that there were these Guidelines that had been drawn up, but we didn’t even have the time to, as it

were, introduce it to the community. ... We didn't even have time to do that, because the plan was to do some kind of coherent introduction. (Participant 3)

In retrospect, some participants noted that the university could have foreseen that what the university considered a technical issue may turn out to be a political issue for some and then model the presentation and possible reactions more proactively. Nonetheless, the silver lining of it all, according to others, is that the message that the Guidelines carried was spread much wider than the University community: "Maybe not in the way we planned, not in the way we wanted, but there was much broader publicity for the guidelines and for spreading that message in general. That was a success in a way" (Participant 3).

## **Conclusions**

It is difficult to accurately measure the exact impact of the Guidelines. At the time of the storm, the participants recalled some personal support from other universities or other members of the University community. They also noted that, at least in their observations, the suggestions provided in the Guidelines have been taken up by some members of the University community: "I didn't measure it, but it seems to me that, after these guidelines, people who were, let's say, either discussing or already attempting to use, let's say, very simply two forms, male and female<sup>6</sup>, maybe I started paying attention more, but they do and they do continue to use it consistently, so I guess there has been such a positive effect" (Participant 1).

Two years later, at the end of 2023, Klaipėda University also adopted a Gender Equality Strategy, incorporating the promotion of gender-sensitive language into its regulations (Klaipėda University 8). However, it did not attract a lot of media attention. This made us wonder about the external circumstances that were present at the time and conclude that the Guidelines were introduced into the public discourse at a time when it became a part of a broader discourse of opposition to women's and LGBT community rights.

The prelude to the media storm on the Guidelines started already in

<sup>6</sup> The participant here refers to the shift from using only the masculine to address or refer to a mixed-gender group of people (the masculine default) to using two forms simultaneously: the masculine and the feminine.

2020. The COVID-19 pandemic and the restrictions imposed in 2020 to reduce the spread of the virus influenced the civility of general public discourse. Furthermore, the Lithuanian parliamentary elections took place in the fall of 2020 and a centre-right government led by a female prime minister was formed. The members of the governing coalition proposed to introduce legislation on same-sex partnerships and ratify the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (better known as the Istanbul Convention) which has been referred to the Parliament in 2018 but not yet ratified.

In February 2021, a popular Catholic priest encouraged his followers on Facebook to sign a petition demanding the parliament not to ratify the Convention. This resulted in heated public debates from both proponents and opponents of the Convention and largely introduced the perceived threats to gender identity, introduction of multiple genders, the need to defend “family values” and similar moral panics into the general public discourse. The media frenzy lasted for over a month and in May 2021 the Great March for the Defence of Family was organised which espoused the same hateful rhetoric and attempted to coalesce into a political movement. It ultimately failed, but this movement attracted a lot of political support, including by members of the parliament who in five months would demand Vilnius University to revoke the Guidelines on Gender-Sensitive language.

In retrospect, the advice for the university to consider the wider socio-political situation seems prudent. However, other participants contend that this issue could not have gone unnoticed either way: “I think that one way or the other we would not have got away with anything, and we would certainly have had resistance, and probably from the same people” (Participant 3). Even though the public reactions were often led by people outside of the university community, there was hardly a consensus among the staff with regards to the Guidelines. Some of the critics were also current or past employees or alumnae of the university as well. Thus, the debate, to an extent, was to be expected. What was surprising both to us and the creators of the Guidelines, was how heated the debate became given that the document was not imperative whatsoever. As the University is perceived to be a space of calm and rational debate, the highly emotionally charged reactions were unusual and made it very difficult for the proponents of the Guidelines to engage with the critics.

Given the broader national discourse, we could also question whether there was a genuine wish for discussion on the critics' part. Our interview participants, nonetheless, were convinced that a more gradual and cohesive introduction would have benefitted the community.

Our participants noted that aside from strategic planning on issues that could have wider societal impact or, in some regard, question the entrenched norms, the important thing is to have employees who are willing to take on complicated issues and stand for them, even in the face of adversity. For an employee like that it is important to see the bigger picture, to understand the purpose of such development and, ideally, to be able to see the potential impact. As one of the participants put it,

Even though I say that I suffered for it, I saw the purpose for standing for it. I believed in it and I believe in it to this day. ... And when I meet new people, they know about this [the Guidelines]. This means that the seed has been planted. And we now have a [linguistic] way to include all kinds of audiences, to enable them to identify more with the story. That is the beauty of it. And then, looking back, you regret nothing (Participant 3).

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# INSTITUTIONALIZING EQUITY, DIVERSITY, AND INCLUSION AT UCLouvain: CHALLENGES, RESISTANCE, AND SUCCESSES

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## Introduction

In October 2023, the University of Louvain (UCLouvain) in Belgium embarked on a historic initiative: a week-long event inviting the entire university community to reflect on, share, and articulate their expectations and aspirations regarding Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI). Organized with the support of the university's then-rector and led by two internal advisors, this event, referred to as the *États Généraux sur l'Équité, la Diversité et l'Inclusion*,<sup>1</sup> was both a celebration and a critical moment of engagement. Over 1,200 participants in various sessions allowed experiences of discrimination to be voiced, critiques shared, and calls for change articulated. The event generated more than one hundred concrete proposals coming from the workshop attendees. A key outcome was the call to move beyond conversations and commit to the institutionalization of EDI efforts. In response, the university initiated the development of a comprehensive gender and diversity plan which came in addition to an already existing plan to combat sexist and sexual violence at the institution.<sup>2</sup> An EDI Bureau and a Prorector for EDI were established. These steps marked an important shift from informal discussions to structural commitments toward inclusion.

Eighteen months later, as we write this chapter, the momentum generated by the *États Généraux* has evolved. While some of the initial en-

<sup>1</sup> The “*États Généraux*” historically referred to gatherings of the three main social classes (clergy, nobility, and commoners) in medieval France, convened by the king to address political, legal, and financial matters. These assemblies were central to the development of modern political institutions, with their most famous moment occurring in 1789 during the French Revolution.

<sup>2</sup> UCLouvain has had a Gender Equality Plan since 2015, set up by the Rector's adviser on Gender, appointed in 2013. This article focuses on the most recent period and on the efforts to integrate other types of discriminations in a Gender Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Plan at UCLouvain.

ergy has naturally settled, important steps have been taken – including the establishment of dedicated EDI structures, a vote on a Gender Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Plan, and the development of an initial framework of five priorities.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, the process of deeper institutionalization is still underway with some important challenges still to be addressed. This chapter explores the challenges of institutionalizing an EDI policy, drawing on our situated experiences as insiders who have been directly involved in identifying enablers – those conditions, actions, or attitudes that have helped move the process forward – and navigating the obstacles that arise in this process. We trace the evolution of EDI at the university from its roots in an established gender policy and semi-informal conversations at the *Etats Généraux* to more structured and coordinated actions. Our analysis is grounded in a multilevel framework inspired by Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's work, which allows us to examine resistance and inertia at the individual, organizational, and ideological levels. Through this lens, we highlight both the barriers encountered and the strategies employed to address them, offering insights into the complexities of embedding EDI within academic institutions.

Our approach is explicitly reflexive and auto-ethnographic. As scholars, institutional actors and activists from *within*, the chapter co-authors have each played different roles in the development of EDI at UCLouvain. We also draw on our experience in inter-university working groups from UCLouvain's alliances, such as the Circle U Gender Balance Taskforce and The Guild's Gender and Diversity Work Group. This chapter does not claim to offer an exhaustive or objective account. Rather, it reflects our lived experiences and the tensions we have encountered in contributing to institutionalize EDI. We acknowledge that our efforts have been imperfect and that the process itself is ongoing, shaped by negotiation, compromise, and learning. By foregrounding our positionality, we aim to contribute to a broader understanding of how EDI policies are shaped not only by formal structures, but also by the everyday practices, constraints, and commitments of those working to implement them. Additionally, our experiences are by no means unique to our institution but reflect systemic challenges that affect universities more broadly. In fact, in countless conversations with EDI colleagues from other institutions across Europe and North America, our counterparts have shared very

<sup>3</sup> These are: digital inclusion, EDI data, precarity among students, EDI Charter, bias and stereotypes

similar experiences. Being part of this wider effort one can only observe the structural nature of what may initially appear to be personal or isolated, and thus, the relevance of this chapter extends well beyond our own institutional context.

### **About EDI at UCLouvain: The Story Behind the Process**

UCLouvain is one of the oldest higher education institutions in Europe. In 2025, since its founding in 1425 the university had been exclusively led by white men. Like many other universities in Europe (Reay 2018), UCLouvain can be described as predominantly white and male with regard to its academic staff, as well as able-bodied and socially well off. The appointment in 2024 of the first female Rector marks a historic turning point—one that is deeply connected to nearly two decades of persistent efforts toward gender balance. Indeed, UCLouvain had already undergone a progressive formalization of gender integration through several key initiatives. A research group dedicated to gender (since 2014) the participation in setting up of an inter-university Master in Gender Studies (since 2017) and the Charter for Inclusive Writing (since 2015) were essential milestones, ensuring the recognition of gender at many levels. A bi-annual report on equality provides an analytical framework to assess progress and define concrete areas for improvement.<sup>4</sup> Eventually, the implementation of a dedicated service and measures to combat gender-based and sexual violence reinforced this commitment, fostering a safer and more inclusive environment.<sup>5</sup>

These initiatives are not isolated actions in the French-speaking region in Belgium; rather, they reflect a wider institutional dynamics aimed at embedding gender equality into university policies and practices in a sustainable way, leading to a subtle but tangible form of consciousness of the problem. The previous rector of UCLouvain, at the end of his tenure, took a step in the EDI direction by appointing two female professors, including one of the co-authors of this chapter, to develop a coordinated anti-racism, anti-ableism and gender strategy. Acting as advisors (a non-statutory position), they encouraged a more inclusive, intersectional

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.uclouvain.be/fr/system/files/uclouvain\\_assetmanager/groups/cms-editors-edi/Rapport%20Etat%20Egalite%20de%20genre%202021-2023.pdf](https://www.uclouvain.be/fr/system/files/uclouvain_assetmanager/groups/cms-editors-edi/Rapport%20Etat%20Egalite%20de%20genre%202021-2023.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.uclouvain.be/fr/respect>

approach and initiated a participatory process—laying the groundwork for a concrete shift toward EDI. Within a year, over 150 conversations took place between the *conseillères* and various representatives of the university who had long been engaged in different areas related to these issues but whose efforts had never been recognized as part of a coherent or unified policy approach. It quickly became clear: much was already happening at the university, but often actors were not connected, the engagement was often invisible with many university members unaware of the available services or ongoing efforts, and there was no strategic approach, in particular on racism, ableism and other discriminations intersecting with gender. This needed to change.

To foster networking and initiate dialogue, the *États Généraux* were conceived and implemented. This was a week of lectures and various exchange formats held at the end of 2023, with over 1,000 members of the university community attending. One key result was a shared recognition of the need to institutionalize EDI efforts.

### **Multi-level Resistance to the Institutionalization of Equity, Diversity and Inclusion**

By the institutionalization of EDI in the academic context we mean the process through which EDI becomes an integral, sustainable, and strategically embedded part of the structures, policies, and practices of the university. This involves not only formalizing EDI through governance mechanisms, resource allocation, and strategic planning but also ensuring its long-term stability by fostering cross-departmental collaboration, accountability, and cultural change. As spaces of knowledge production and social influence, universities have a responsibility to reflect and promote equity and inclusion in their internal practices and cultures that goes beyond the argument that diversity is good for business performance and that has gained ground in the corporate world (Bereni 2024).

At UCLouvain, various social support structures, such as services for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, programs for refugee students and staff, and access to affordable healthcare on campus, have long been in place. However, until recently, there were no targeted efforts to address issues such as racism or ableism. Moreover, there was no overarching framework to ensure that EDI would be treated as an institutional

priority, rather than as isolated initiatives with clear mandates, sustained funding, and data-informed strategies to guide decision-making. The absence of these elements creates barriers that slow down or obstruct the process, making institutionalization a critical yet contested endeavor. Institutionalization is essential to ensuring that EDI is not merely a set of aspirational values or isolated initiatives, but a fundamental, structural commitment embedded across the institution.

When EDI is integrated into decision-making processes, governance structures, funding priorities, and academic norms, it moves beyond symbolic gestures to drive lasting and systemic change (Norman et al. 2023). Institutionalization ensures that progress does not depend on the efforts of a few committed individuals, but is supported by clear mandates, sustainable resources, and shared accountability. In doing so, EDI becomes a driver of academic excellence, innovation, and social relevance, key pillars of a resilient and forward-looking university. Especially in today's climate, where universities are increasingly facing political pressure to abandon diversity initiatives, institutionalizing EDI also constitutes an act of resistance against the growing right-wing backlash, and a strong defense of academic freedom and democratic values.

In the following, we discuss how resistance and barriers at different levels, manifested through practices, behaviors, ways of doing, and ways of thinking, can be deeply embedded within an institution's policies, governance mechanisms, and operational culture. Such resistance and barriers may slow down, obstruct, or entirely prevent meaningful progress on equity, diversity, and inclusion.

For our analysis of the resistance encountered in the institutionalization process of EDI at our university, we draw on Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's multi-level approach, with which he implicitly engages in his book *Racism Without Racists* (Bonilla-Silva 2014) by examining how racism operates at different levels, that is: individual, institutional, and structural. According to Bonilla-Silva, at the individual level, racism manifests in everyday interactions, personal beliefs, and discourse. It is reflected in attitudes, behaviors, and the ways individuals justify or deny racial inequality. Bonilla-Silva emphasizes that racism at this level is often subtle, embedded in 'color-blind' narratives rather than overt bigotry. At the institutional level, racism is embedded in policies, practices, and structures, regardless of individual intent. This level highlights how racial inequality is systematically maintained through institutions such as education, the

labor market, housing, healthcare, and the legal system, often through seemingly neutral policies with unequal consequences. At the structural level, racism is an overarching system that shapes and sustains racial hierarchies across society. This level goes beyond individual actions or institutional policies, showing how racial inequality is deeply ingrained in the very organization of society, reinforced across generations and interconnected institutions. We expand this framework to analyze resistance to EDI efforts, which in our understanding include anti-racist work but also address other dimensions of (intersectional) discrimination, such as sexism, homo- and transphobia, ableism and classism.

### ***Resistance to EDI efforts at individual level***

Resistance to EDI efforts at the individual level presents us with challenges visible in our daily interactions with others. The tricky part of EDI work is that it positions itself as inherently inclusive. It therefore values participation, which, as we see in our journey toward greater institutionalization, is both a blessing and a curse. This is particularly the case within a university, a context where knowledge is produced and where knowledge producers are often put forward as individuals who are experts on many issues.

In our experience, it is not only individuals who are in (perceived) positions of power and/or are well-connected within the university and beyond who resist the institutionalization of EDI efforts. However, in the context of institutionalization processes, individuals in decision-making positions are key actors because they hold the power to shape policies and allocate resources. This sub-section focuses on individual forms of resistance to EDI initiatives, recognizing that personal engagement plays a crucial role in how such efforts are implemented and sustained within institutions, and highlights three key dynamics: rhetorical strategies that diminish the perceived value of EDI initiatives, limited expertise paired with reluctance to engage, and apathy reflected in low participation and inaction.

As we will explore below, the resistance we encounter at the individual level is not always strategic, and it is certainly not collectively organized. Few engage in open and direct resistance; more often, we encounter subtle forms of resistance hidden between the lines, in the way things are said or framed, in what is concretely done – and, importantly,

in what is *not* done. This type of individual, unorganized resistance is known in the literature as *dispersed resistance* (Lilja and Vinthagen 2018), of which we give concrete examples.

In some meetings aimed to organize EDI as an institutionalized process, certain recurring rhetorical strategies have emerged. One of them is the framing of EDI as a concept imported from the U.S., suggesting that the current political climate there illustrates potential risks associated with such approaches. This discourse reflects broader rhetorical patterns, including what can be described as the ‘slippery slope’ argument in which small institutional changes are portrayed as potentially leading to extreme and undesirable outcomes – and ‘whataboutism,’ which shifts focus from the issue at hand by invoking external examples. In this context, the political situation in the U.S. is used to question the relevance or appropriateness of EDI efforts, without directly addressing their specific goals or implications within our university setting. The same is documented in the literature, about certain political and institutional discourses where gender frameworks are erected as repellent figures and even constructed as scapegoats, portrayed as foreign imports incompatible with European cultural realities, or ideologies (Toldy et al., 2020).

That said, such explicit expressions of resistance are relatively rare. More commonly, resistance appears in more subtle forms at the individual level. The example of EDI being labeled as an “export from the U.S.” highlights the lack of awareness in these meetings and a significant knowledge gap in this area. Master’s in Gender studies or in Diversity management exist, yet the majority of individuals involved in these conversations, and those who make decisions about EDI, lack expertise on the subject, whether because they have not personally experienced discrimination or because they have not engaged with the topic in a learning capacity.

Although many participants in these meetings may not have specialized knowledge in EDI, this gap is not always recognized. Rather than acknowledging the limits of their expertise and engaging in further learning, some tend to share their views with confidence, which can unintentionally overshadow the contributions of those with more experience in the field. This is certainly common in many organizations, but we find that academia presents a unique context where decision-making positions are often occupied by professors, whose primary role is to create knowledge, and who are generally perceived as experts in society. This is

both a hurdle and an opportunity: the lack of awareness regarding their own knowledge gaps poses a significant barrier to the institutionalization of EDI as it prevents productive conversations and undermines the development of informed, evidence-based policies and practices. While the lack of expertise is often not acknowledged in meetings, it is nevertheless, sometimes, used as an excuse to avoid responsibilities or to avoid engaging openly with EDI issues.

An example of how limited familiarity with EDI concepts can hinder institutionalization emerged during an honorary award nomination process. When a candidate known for her contributions to social justice and equity was proposed, some members of the academic community expressed hesitation, citing a lack of familiarity with her work. This illustrates how gaps in EDI knowledge—and the hesitation to bridge them—can unintentionally slow down or block efforts to embed equity and inclusion more deeply within institutional practices. This behavior poses an obstacle to the institutionalization of EDI because it reflects a lack of willingness to engage with and support initiatives that fall outside of familiar comfort zones.

However, we have also encountered encouraging examples where individuals responsible for developing EDI strategies at the local level actively sought out and involved trained experts, recognizing the value of their contributions. While this collaborative approach is promising, it often leads to an increased workload for those already engaged in EDI. On several occasions, we were invited to “think with” colleagues on topics beyond our own expertise – such as disability-related discrimination – which prompted us to consult academic literature and follow practitioners and advocates on platforms like LinkedIn to deepen our understanding. These exchanges often led to the formation of new alliances. This highlights the importance of viewing EDI expertise as a shared institutional responsibility, rather than relying on a small group of individuals.

Although formal leadership on EDI remains limited in some areas, many faculty members have taken the initiative in more discreet ways. Some have reached out privately to the EDI office or advisors to share how they had revised their course content to include EDI-related topics or adapted their teaching methods to create more inclusive learning environments. These individual efforts suggest a growing awareness and willingness to engage with EDI principles. However, the fact that these actions are often communicated in one-on-one conversations rather than

in public forums or departmental meetings points to a broader hesitation to assume visible leadership roles in this domain. This pattern speaks to findings in the literature, which show that when academic leaders actively invest in EDI, it can create a ripple effect that encourages others to follow (Marchiondo, Verney, and Venner 2021), and that in the absence of such leadership, change tends to occur in a more fragmented and less coordinated manner.

In various conversations, individuals expressed strong verbal support for EDI at UCLouvain, often accompanied by promises to initiate further discussions or concrete actions. These exchanges initially left us feeling optimistic. Yet, in many cases, little to no follow-up occurred. When we later inquired, we were often told that other priorities had taken precedence or that there had not been enough time nor human resources to address the issue. This pattern of inaction may be partly explained by findings in the relevant literature: research suggests that leaders who have not personally experienced discrimination may struggle to fully grasp its impact, which can reduce the perceived urgency to act (Onyeador, Hudson, & Lewis, 2021). Such a lack of lived experience of discrimination can also lead to defensive reactions—such as denying the existence of inequalities, rationalizing them as merit-based, or expressing discomfort in ways that shift attention away from systemic issues. These responses, while often unintentional, can significantly hinder meaningful engagement with EDI efforts. Documenting inequalities and approaching them as dynamic and evolving phenomena is essential to any meaningful EDI strategy; this requires embedding a research function within the EDI vision itself, enabling continuous analysis, reflection, and adaptation of institutional practices.

### ***Barriers to the institutionalization of EDI at the institutional level***

Resistance at the institutional level refers to the resistance embedded within the institution itself, which contributes to the significant slowing down or complete blocking of change and progress. Therefore, it is more accurate to refer to these as barriers rather than resistance. These barriers are embedded in policies, strategies, mechanisms, and (hierarchical) governance structures, in how an institution operates. They are often not explicitly written down, making them harder to pinpoint, and instead take on more subtle forms.

This sub-section identifies five main institutional barriers: lack of coordination and strategic direction, exclusion of expertise and lived experience from governance, insufficient resources and precarious staffing, instability due to staff turnover, and broader structural issues affecting the entire university.<sup>6</sup>

At the policy level, the university has already implemented several policies that overlap or share common ground with EDI. EDI at UCLouvain is indeed upon a pre-existing gender policy and aspires to bring together a range of initiatives that, while not originally framed as part of an EDI strategy, nonetheless address various forms of inequality and discrimination. As a result, EDI is currently taking shape as a kind of institutional patchwork—an assemblage of efforts scattered across departments and services. While this diversity of initiatives reflects a genuine concern for inclusion, it also makes it difficult to form a coherent, university-wide vision. In this fragmented landscape, it remains unclear who is responsible for ‘stitching the pieces together’, and who, metaphorically speaking, is the lead tailor. The recent creation of a pro-rectorate for EDI could be a step towards addressing this challenge by providing a more strategic overview and coordination.

Moreover, fostering transversal conversations across faculties and services is essential, but this requires time, trust, and sustained effort. The scale of the task is often underestimated. For example, Euraxess or the university’s *Charte des valeurs*, published in 2024, explicitly include diversity and inclusion among UCLouvain’s core values. However, both exist without explicit links being made to the EDI department—and are now largely used independently of it. This situation illustrates that diversity is already being considered in many areas of the university, but the lack of coordination and strategic alignment prevents these efforts from being fully integrated into a broader EDI framework. Importantly, this is not necessarily due to a lack of willingness, but rather to structural issues such as staff overload and fragmented communication. Without a clear strategic direction and better use of existing resources, the institutionalization of EDI remains a significant challenge.

<sup>6</sup> These institutional barriers do not necessarily only pertain to EDI. Colleagues working in other areas experience similar challenges .

Furthermore, at the policy level, the university is required to implement a Gender Equality Plan, a mandatory initiative for all universities in the European Union. The EDI department is supposed to oversee its implementation, and while the plan attempts to address issues beyond gender, this has only been partially successful. At present, a significant amount of time is spent critiquing the measures that extend beyond gender, rather than taking action to implement them. The proposal to develop a comprehensive diversity strategy for the university remains on the table, but no decision has been made yet.

At the governance level, some already existing bodies have been charged with the responsibility of decision-making on EDI, and at least one new body has been created, namely the *Conseil EDI* (EDI council). The council was created with the intention of bringing experts and decision makers within the university together. Members of this council are mostly individuals who lead various departments within the university or representatives of bodies (academic people, researchers, students and administration). UCLouvain has a complex governance structure, with many bodies involved. However, it is striking that one such body, which is a council, consists of many individuals who are often not specifically familiar with the topic of EDI, while those who have expertise within the University are often invited only in an advising capacity, but not in a decision making capacity. The council also includes very few people who are personally affected by discrimination beyond sexism, which limits the diversity of perspectives and lived experiences in these discussions, and primarily enables conversations about, rather than with, those directly concerned by EDI.

At the level of allocation of resources to EDI, an EDI department was created and staff recruited in 2024. However, the EDI department has not yet been adequately resourced. This means that there is currently not enough budget for all of its planned activities. Instead, the EDI department is expected to apply for external funding through calls for proposals in order to finance these activities. As a result, staff members spend a considerable amount of time writing proposals, which detracts from their ability to implement actual measures and initiatives. At the same time, the lack of visible progress with regard to the university's Gender Equality Plan on paper is used by some as justification to question the existence of the EDI department altogether, creating a vicious cycle. We also know that colleagues in other roles and fields face similar challeng-

es, which is why we emphasize that this is not just an issue specific to EDI, but rather a broader, structural concern at universities.

Until recently, the EDI department consisted of four individuals: a vice-rector, a coordinator, a statistician, and a project manager. Additionally, there is another related department with three staff members who specifically focus on issues related to sexual harassment and violence. All the positions, with the exception of the vice-rector and the statistician, were initially filled on temporary contracts. In the meantime, at least two people have been given a permanent position, and there are ongoing efforts to extend the others with long-term fixed-term contracts. While steps have been forward, the practice of hiring staff on temporary contracts is a barrier to the institutionalization of EDI. Moreover, individuals in these roles often work under existential pressure and may fear for their contract renewal. We know that this is also an issue in other positions within the university and academia as a whole, and precarious working conditions are being criticized across the board. However, in strategically important positions, especially those tasked with addressing uncomfortable topics and bringing them to the institution's agenda, this becomes particularly problematic. It hinders the institutionalization of EDI through the existential anxiety and precariousness of individual employees.

### ***Resistance and barriers to the institutionalization of EDI at the structural level***

The structural level refers to broader societal processes and dynamics that occur outside of the university but have a significant influence on its institutional practices. These processes include political, economic, and cultural factors that shape how institutions approach EDI, affecting the resources, priorities, and policies within the university. This subsection addresses six key issues: the influence of broader societal structures on institutional EDI efforts; limited and legally constrained data collection; political and financial barriers including reduced national funding; structural discrimination in access to decision-making positions; the overburdening and tokenism of marginalized individuals with EDI expertise; and the fragmentation and low visibility of existing EDI initiatives and funding opportunities.

The university collects data on various members of its community, including their gender, nationality, educational background, and, to some

extent, disability status. These data can be cross-referenced and used to represent different populations, but they are far from sufficient for effective EDI work. Notably, data about race or religion can hardly be collected in Belgium, and disability information is only available for those who have disclosed it in order to access certain university services. As for the social background of students, the only option is currently to make assumptions based on where the student went to school – a method that is discriminatory in itself. Currently, active efforts are underway to determine how such data can be collected, and, more importantly, how it can be collected legally. It is not merely a matter for the institution alone, but also a broader structural barrier, one that is not unique to academia but can be observed in other contexts as well (Perry & Recker 2024). The lack of data presents a further challenge to the institutionalization of EDI, because without comprehensive data, it is nearly impossible to assess, address, or measure progress in key areas such as racial or socioeconomic equality, accessibility, and representation (D'Ignazio and Klein 2020).

The current political discourse at the level of our government tends to be resistant to EDI efforts, influenced not only by external factors such as the political climate in the U.S. but also by rising right-wing populist parties gaining influence in Belgium. These parties, as in many parts of Europe, often advocate for less funding for EDI initiatives, further hindering progress and institutionalization of EDI within universities. While funding for EDI decreases, there are still other existing funding opportunities related to EDI, for example at the European Commission or through the call by the Circle U, an international alliance of which UCLouvain is a member. In fact, there might even be an overabundance of initiatives, many of which offer only limited funding, as was the case for the Circle U funding that proposed a 4,000€ reward for selected projects. As the example shows, this issue extends beyond the university's internal resources and includes numerous foundations and alliances that create a confusing and overwhelming landscape, making it difficult for many initiatives to be fully utilized.

The lack of representation of members of marginalized groups in decision-making positions at the university is also rooted in discriminatory structures, because these structures often perpetuate unequal access to power, resources, and opportunities. Historically, universities have been built on systems that favor certain groups, usually those who hold social, economic, or racial privilege, while marginalizing others (Azeezat 2018).

This results in systemic barriers that prevent individuals from underrepresented groups from gaining the qualifications, recognition, or opportunities needed to ascend to leadership roles. Additionally, unconscious bias, exclusionary practices, and a lack of institutional support for diversity and inclusion further limit their chances of being in decision-making positions.

For the very few people who represent marginalized groups in decision making positions and who also have formal expertise within EDI beyond personal lived experience, there is a strong desire to involve them in the process of EDI institutionalization. However, this leads to a situation where these people are constantly called upon, resulting in chronic overburdening as they are expected to attend every meeting. This also fosters tokenism. Tokenism arises because the few individuals who are included based on their lived experiences often face excessive demands without corresponding, meaningful changes to institutional structures or processes.

### **Conclusion, Navigating Resistance, Cultivating Alliances to Build an Equitable Institution**

Following Bonilla-Silva's framework, this chapter has given an account of the multi-level nature of resistance and barriers to EDI that can be faced in higher education. At the individual level, we showed how subtle attitudes, rhetorical strategies, and everyday behaviors reveal how resistance can be dispersed and unorganized, yet impactful in daily interactions and decision-making. At the institutional level, we uncovered how embedded policies, governance structures, and resource allocations create systemic barriers that slow or block meaningful change, even when there is no explicit opposition. Finally, at the structural level, we situated these phenomena within broader societal patterns of inequality that transcend the university, highlighting how deeply ingrained power hierarchies shape and sustain resistance.

It became clear that the barriers we encountered along the way are particularly challenging because they reinforce each other. For example, if there are not enough financial resources for universities available at the structural level, this has direct consequences for a publicly financed institution, which will then also struggle to allocate funds to the insti-

tutionalization of EDI. If, at the individual level, decision-makers lack sufficient awareness or sensitivity regarding EDI, it is highly likely that the limited financial resources available to the university will not be allocated to EDI and its institutionalization but will instead be directed toward other priorities.

At the same time, we want to be clear that our intention is not to single out or accuse our institution, nor indeed the academic world. On the contrary, we deeply appreciate the fact that universities like UCLouvain have taken important steps toward advancing EDI and that many individuals, including some in decision-making positions, are supporting this work. In the Belgian landscape, UCLouvain was the first to implement a programme to combat sexist and sexual violence and has been a pioneer in showing the will to institutionalize EDI policies. It is precisely because we are part of a university that is making progress in this area that we believe it is both possible and necessary to engage critically with the challenges that remain. At this point, we wish we had found the golden formula and had already succeeded. But as this chapter has shown, we are still on a journey that comes with many barriers that we must navigate and overcome. While in our work we have explored different ways of constructively engaging with resistance, we chose not to detail these approaches here, as we are mindful of the institutional sensitivities involved. Still, we see great potential in further analyzing such strategies and hope to return to them in the future.

It is important to emphasize that the EDI bureau, including the pro-rector, and the EDI actors - is not isolated in an empty field. On the contrary: an incredible number of people – staff, students and other members of our university community – are walking this path with us. Sometimes we walk hand in hand, then let go, only to meet again later. There are many allies, people who are committed to learning and unlearning alongside us. These are people who have already done outstanding work even without the support of a central EDI department, there are inspiring initiatives and great projects; people who repeatedly engage in activism from within, raise their voices, and advocate for change at various levels.

At the end of the day, we remain optimistic that change can happen in the coming years. The many people who contact the EDI department with inquiries, initiatives, and project proposals; the people with whom we've already brainstormed initial ideas and drafted proposals; the ongo-

ing strong interest that has continued unabated since the États Généraux in 2023; all of this makes us hopeful. The solidarity of so many people is one of the reasons why reasons we do not give up, but keep going to navigate and dismantle resistance. As a collective, we can achieve a great deal—and heal together. Strengthening this network remains a priority.

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# TRANSFORMING CHARLES UNIVERSITY INTO A CARING INSTITUTION: THE IMPACT OF EDI IN A POST-SOCIALIST CONTEXT

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## Introduction

Equality, diversity and inclusion are key preconditions for a democratic and sustainable future and universities must play a central role in teaching, cultivating and disseminating these values. In the context of post-socialist East Central Europe, such a change is more relevant than elsewhere. This chapter discusses the experiences and progress so far achieved at Charles University (CU) in this area, as well as the systemic obstacles and challenges still ahead on the road to turning CU into an equal, inclusive, diverse and above all truly *caring* institution.

In the past five years, CU has been actively improving in the EDI area. In its Strategic Plan for 2021-2025, CU states: “The core of a university are people... and care for people, their talents, experience, intuition, and expertise must be our top priority.” As the guiding principle, this commitment has served as the basis for key initiatives recently implemented at CU. In 2019, CU received the HR Award. In 2021, it conducted its first-ever gender audit and in 2022 adopted its first Gender Equality Plan (GEP). In the same year, CU founded its Equal Opportunities Board. In 2024, it launched a university-wide survey on caregivers’ needs. This focus on care resonates with critiques of academia that have identified it as a “careless” culture (Lynch) rooted in meritocracy and false gender neutrality (Gaudet et al.), neglecting the real needs and diversity of the academic community, which indicates that there is a need for fundamental transformation of academic cultures. This chapter examines the introduction of equality policies at CU and evaluates their impact on promoting organizational change towards an inclusive community, social cohesion and equal opportunities in the context of a wider post-socialist transformation.

## **Why Now? Post-socialist Context and the Alchemy of a Particular Moment**

Due to their experience of a recent Communist past, universities in post-socialist countries occupy a specific position compared to other European universities, perhaps even more so in the context of EDI agenda than in other areas. Not only implementations of EDI measures but, more importantly, the understanding of the concept of EDI itself in East Central Europe takes place under particular circumstances in socio-cultural environments with unique historical genealogies of the Communist rule during the past four decades (Havelková and Oates-Indruchová). It has been more than 30 years since the collapse of communist regimes in Eastern Europe in 1989 and during this time universities in post-socialist countries have undergone dramatic changes. Most importantly, they have – once again – become bastions of free speech, critical thinking and independent, autonomous research. In all East European countries of the former Soviet bloc, university students and scholars, along with other intellectuals, played pivotal roles in bringing the communist regimes down. After 1989, East European universities have kept this leading role in the decades of post-socialist transformation as well (Torpey).

Fairly quickly after the demise of state socialism, major universities in post-socialist Central Europe joined international research networks, academic mobility programs and umbrella organizations. Already in 1991, at the General Assembly in Heidelberg, the most prominent universities in the Central European post-communist region joined the Coimbra Group: Charles University in Prague, in (then still) Czechoslovakia; The Jagiellonian University in Krakow, Poland; Eötvös Lorand University of Budapest, Hungary and Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena, in former East Germany (Coimbra Group Website). After the integration into the international academic structures, and especially combined with the entrance of these countries into the European Union in 2004, universities became important bridges between EU values and priorities, scientific progress and social development in the post-socialist countries (Siri). Much has changed in the post-socialist academic culture, including the abilities of major East Central European universities to be competitive and successful in the international financing schemes and research context, to be active in academic mobility programs or to be open to international evaluations and assessment (Linková et al.).

However, one area of academic culture has been resistant to surrounding development and slow to change: the area of equal opportunities, diversity, and inclusion. Considering the decades of censorship and ideological interventions in academic freedoms during the Communist era, as well as post-socialist efforts of universities to stay free from state control, this is perhaps not surprising. Post-socialist societies, and academic institutions especially, have been suspicious of policies that target and critically analyse habitual institutional structures and personal behaviour as privileging or discriminatory (Miroiu). During state socialism, structural inequalities, sexism and gender-based violence in academia were escaping analytic scrutiny for decades due to censorship and absence of international debates. As a result, unequal representation and unequal opportunities in East European universities have been seen by many as legitimate outcomes of individual abilities and success. Openly expressed dislikes and disapprovals of EDI measures have been celebrated as steps to safeguard alleged academic neutrality (Hughson Blagojević, Linková et al.). While in other areas post-socialist academia was open to change and quickly started to thrive during the transformation period since 1989, in the area of EDI the institutions of higher education stagnated and it took them more than two decades to meaningfully engage.

The reasons why post-socialist countries have been so stubbornly reluctant to embrace feminist policies and progressive agendas in many areas of life have been analysed in detail by a rich array of scholarship focusing on the topic (Korolczuk and Graff 2017, Oates-Indruchová). In the context of post-socialist academia, a successful introduction of EDI measures rests on several factors. The case study of Charles University shows how much an active embracement of EDI agenda depends on the interplay of international context, pressure from below and individual actors in the decision-making positions. It is the synergy of these three phenomena that have helped to gradually transform Charles University into an increasingly more caring institution. In order to contribute to answering the question *Why EDI Matters* through a discussion of the changes of institutional academic culture at Charles University, it is instructive to at least briefly look into the circumstances of when EDI actually started to matter and why then.

A noticeable change of academic culture in post-socialist Central European universities towards a visible integration of EDI agendas started to occur only about five years ago, around 2020. Besides internal circum-

stances, this was directly linked to external factors, mainly the introduction of gender equality plans as an eligibility criterion for major European grant schemes (Linková et al.). However, this positive development was accompanied also by increasing and aggressive attacks on gender theory and gender studies as ideological tools allegedly destroying European values and a traditional social order (Corredor). Additionally, particular national political developments played a dramatic role in creating obstacles for EDI agendas in higher education in different post-socialist countries. In 2018, Viktor Orban's government banned gender studies programs in all Hungarian universities, officially removing Gender Studies masters and doctoral degrees from the list of accredited subjects in the country (Barát). This act initiated a wave of international solidarity across the world and resonated also in the neighbouring post-socialist countries. Orban's actions, flagrantly rejecting the EU's vision of liberal democracy, multiculturalism and human rights, were correctly understood as a deliberate and ideological attack on academic freedoms (Korolczuk and Graff 2018). Academic institutions in post-socialist East Central Europe, including Charles University, which until then did not support equal opportunities and considered topics connected to care as individual rather than systemic matters, started to recognize the connections between Orban's attacks on academic freedoms and EDI agenda as a necessary precondition for democracy and freedom (Grzebalska, Kováts and Petö, Nyklová).

It was in this context that the General Assembly of Coimbra Group in 2019, hosted by the Jagiellonian University in Krakow, Poland, picked as the main topic of the annual conference "Women in the University" (Coimbra Group website). From the point of view of EDI as a topic and strategic direction in international academic collaboration within the Coimbra group, the conference and its aftermath were pathbreaking. The keynote speech on intersectionality was given by Patricia Hill Collins, followed by an interdisciplinary panel on gender equality in academia. Notably, all invited panel speakers were from post-socialist countries: Marina Hughson (Blagojević) from the Serbian Academy of Sciences, Beata Kowalska from the Jagiellonian University in Poland and Věra Sokolová from Charles University in the Czech Republic. All speakers pointed out similar challenges and barriers produced in their home countries and academia by the lack of critical debates, ideological subjugation of social sciences, and the absence of coherent feminist grassroots movements during the

communist period. Thereby they joined other post-socialist scholars in a shared argument that in the East Central European region it is indeed universities and higher education that play the most important role in building gender equality across societies in post-communist transition (Miroiu, Havelkova, Siemienska, Slavova). In the informal talks after the conference, interest in EDI connected scholars and administrators from half of Coimbra Group universities, and in 2020, the Equality and Diversity Working Group was formally approved by the CG executive board and launched as the 12<sup>th</sup> official working group of the Coimbra Group (Coimbra Group website).

The beginnings of the transformation of Charles University into a caring institution are situated in this particular moment around 2020. The post-socialist context and the long-term priorities of the European Commission provided a crucial backdrop for the first visible changes. Student initiatives began to raise their voice, demanding safe academic environment that is free from gender-based violence and promotes equal opportunities for everyone (Linková et al.). The third ingredient is rarely mentioned but the case of Charles University illustrates how crucial it is: the presence of a charismatic leader who understands the agenda and is able to convincingly articulate to the academic community why the culture of care and emphasis on equal opportunities will, in the long run, benefit the whole institution. At Charles University, these three essential components finally converged in 2021, when prof. Milena Králíčková was elected as its first-ever female rector.

### **Charles University on its Way to Equality, Diversity, Inclusion and Care**

Charles University adopted its first gender equality policy in April 2022, following a complex gender audit that was carried out in cooperation with the Institute of Psychology of the Czech Academy of Sciences and the gender centre NORA. This Equal Opportunities Plan covered a three-year period until 2024. Currently (2025), CU is at the beginning of the implementation of the second Plan. As in the case of many other institutions across Europe, and in post-socialist East Central Europe in particular, the policy was adopted as a result of the new requirements of the European Commission, which introduced gender equality plans (GEPs)

as an eligibility criterion for participation in the Horizon Europe (HE) programme (Linková et al.). As Hana Tenglerová and Anna Donovalová persuasively demonstrated in their analysis, this requirement alone caused a significant shift in the spread of GEPs in the Czech Republic: between 2021 and 2022, the number of GEPs adopted by Czech research institutions increased from 11 to 69 (Donovalová and Tenglerová). Nevertheless, as mentioned above, this external factor coincided with the change of the university management. Crucially, the focus on equal opportunities, and explicitly *caring university*, was one of the key points of the election programme of the new rector, prof. Králíčková.

However, bringing the notion of care as a key concept for the transformation of the academic culture into the forefront of attention in the rector's election was risky and far from obvious. Concepts that traditionally dominate and shape organizational power, knowledge production and policy making to which academia is linked are the ideals of excellence, competitiveness, and seemingly gender-neutral meritocracy. Hughson Blagojević even argued that rather than being permeable and caring, academic structures, both internationally and nationally, represent prime "hierarchies of exclusion" (Hughson Blagojević). It is only recently that an increasing number of scholars have started to use the concept of 'the caring institution', originally described by Joan Tronto (2010), to advocate for the recognition of care within academia, and to articulate social justice and equality as an integral part of quality education and research excellence (e. g. Gaudet et al.; Johansson et al.; Baker and Burke). Care in these terms is not considered in the conventional way as a work-life balance issue or obligations connected with family life. Rather, care is conceptualized both as a practice and as a value, building on the work of care ethicists who emphasize the relationality of human beings, in contrast to individualist ethical frameworks (e. g. Held; Tronto). Confidently presenting care as a legitimate managerial concept working side by side with competitiveness and striving for excellence, as rector Králíčková did, takes courage.

The contrast between individualist and relational ethics is also reflected in the conflict between the prevailing culture of meritocracy and competitiveness. There is still strong emphasis on "autonomous choice" and individual merit on the one hand, and a caring culture of cooperation and mutual listening on the other hand, with an acknowledgement that excellence is built on functioning communities, rather than on iso-

lated individuals. The first one is inherent and supported by the current systems of science evaluation and career progression, and in Central and Eastern Europe is also fostered by post-socialist development as described above. The second one is proposed by the ‘care’ scholars as preferable, fostering equal opportunities and supportive, inclusive culture. As Williams and Norton argue, it is desirable to build academic excellence through gender equity (Williams and Norton).

Caring culture also recognizes caring activities as an important part of academic life. Gaudet et al. describe care within academia, building on Tronto’s categories of care: *caring for* undergraduate students (teaching); *caring about* and taking charge of the graduate students (mentoring, supervising); *caring with* colleagues to protect shared values (administrative tasks, community work); and *self-care* (which is often neglected in the culture of competitiveness) (Gaudet et al.). Linková characterizes these essential practices and values as “collegiality, respect, listening, recognition, accountability, fairness and justice, and sometimes even solidarity.” (Linková et al. 68). These caring practices are an integral part of academic work. Another important layer of care identified within academia is epistemic care, a “knowledge of and for care; caring for/about knowledge, [which] foregrounds how connected our being is with our knowing” (Baker and Burke). This “care-as-knowing” is strongly manifested in decolonising narratives in universities and challenges one’s perception of “what ‘counts’ as knowledge and who ‘count’ as knowers (68).

Since 2022, the term “care” is identified as one of the core priorities in the strategic documents of Charles University. Care is described as a condition for the full development of the potential of people within the university. According to the annual reports on the implementation of the Strategic Plan, this commitment is fulfilled through the activities of the HR Award<sup>1</sup> Plan. An important part of this HR strategy is also the EDI policy – the Equal Opportunities Plan. In the following sections, we will link and analyse the concepts of care and caring institution, as described above, within three concrete examples of main achievements and activities implemented at CU so far: the establishment of an Equal Opportunities Board in 2022, the appointment of the first university Ombudsperson in 2023, and an implementation of a survey of caregivers’ needs in 2024.

<sup>1</sup> HR Excellence in Research.

### **EDI Principles in Practice: Equal Opportunities Board**

The establishment of the CU Equal Opportunities Board in 2022, conceptualized as an advisory body to the newly elected rector, was one of the first structural EDI measures implemented at the university. Since CU is the largest university in the Czech Republic, consisting of 17 faculties with considerable autonomy, gathering more than 50,000 students and 13,000 employees, there was a strong desire to find a way to effectively promote EDI and to communicate the process of implementation of the Equal Opportunities Plan across the university. Together with the creation of the Equal Opportunities Coordinator position, who also serves as the secretary of the Board, these steps formed the basic infrastructure for the implementation of the EO Plan and signalled a clear commitment of the new university management to the institutional culture of care. Even though the Board has no executive powers, it carries the influential tasks of formulating recommendations in the area of equal opportunities and mediating information between the rector, the CU rectorate and the individual faculties and other university units (CU Equal Opportunities Board). Importantly, it was the explicit request of the rector that the Board is not a small expert group working top-down detached from the academic community, but that it is a large body including representatives of all faculties of the university, who work in both academic and administrative positions, have different professional backgrounds and various levels of seniority. Already in its foundation, the Board thus followed the basic EDI principles as well as the key axiom of feminist pedagogy that the form follows the function (Felman).

The Board's activities have developed dynamically. According to its Statute, the Board should meet at least three times a year but already after the first year of its existence the Board members agreed to meet at least four times a year, as the agenda expanded extensively. During the first year, three working subgroups were established, focusing on pedagogical competencies, safe academia, and academic discourse. To ensure expert leadership of this advisory body, both chairs of the Board appointed by the rector so far have been gender studies scholars. Such choices underscore the rector's understanding that despite various efforts in many post-socialist universities to purge the EDI agenda of a gender dimension (Clavero and Galligan), it is indeed inextricably interlinked with gender and carries a specific, and legitimate, field of expert knowl-

edge. Moreover, the rector herself, the member of the Rector's Board for social affairs and sustainability, the university ombudsperson, and the heads of the relevant rectorate departments are all permanent guests of the Board and attend all its meetings. This system, which brings together the highest management of the university, the executive departments of the rectorate, and the faculty representatives, is designed to ensure that equality, diversity and inclusion is addressed as a transversal agenda throughout the university.

In 2024, the Board played a leading role in the creation of a new university prize for the contribution to equal opportunities – the Carl and Gerty Cori Prize. The Prize was established with two objectives in mind. First, to celebrate noteworthy achievements in the field of EDI, and second, to formally recognize exceptional individuals within the university community. Ultimately, the Prize serves to demonstrate the university's commitment to promoting equality, prioritizing it as a key concern of its management. In the inaugural year of the Prize, the Board, which serves as the evaluation committee, received 14 nominations from a diverse range of fields, including EDI, disability, students with special needs, women in medical fields, student parents and numerous others. The broad range of topics and the substantial number of nominations indicate that EDI indeed matters to the CU community.

The establishment of the Board itself might be seen as an act of care – care about involvement in decision-making, care about mutual understanding and connection. The Board, including all faculties, other units, the highest management and executive departments, creates an environment for sharing and discussion. Baker and Burke argue that “for institutions to be caring, they (as a collection of people, rather than a ‘thing’) first need to create the space and conditions to discuss, debate, negotiate, contest, and craft consensus on what care can/should/will look like” (Baker and Burke 6). The establishment of the Board can be interpreted as laying the foundations for such a space. The space to craft consensus not only about the care, but about broadly defined EDI itself.

### **Caring for Safe Academia: the University Ombudsperson**

Another milestone in the building of a caring institution was the establishment of the ombuds position and the appointment of the first CU

ombudsperson in 2023. Although sexual harassment and gender-based violence in Czech higher education, along with unaddressed power asymmetries between students and teachers, have been articulated in Czech gender scholarship since 2009 (Kolářová et al.), followed by visible and loud student initiatives since 2016 (Linková et al.), it took more than ten years for Charles University to appropriately react. In the meantime, several faculties had created their own ombuds systems at faculty levels but a university-wide ombuds position for the whole university was missing. The appointment of the first university-wide ombudswoman in January 2023 was accelerated and cheered on by the bottom-up activities of students, who called for action in the name of prevention of gender-based violence and other forms of ethical misconduct. It was, however, also accompanied by sceptical voices calling the step a waste of public funds, unnecessary bureaucratization, and destruction of academic freedoms by political correctness. In the post-communist context, such concerns always resonate highly (Hughson, Miroiu).

The position of ombudsperson should bring “fairness and justice”, but also provide “listening”, as a matter of care for the whole institution. The Rector’s directive stipulates that the ombudsperson does not have any executive power and primarily should “act preventively and methodically” (Rector’s directive no. 28/2022). The directive contains a set of activities designed to ensure a safe environment for all at CU. One of the weaknesses of the new ombudsperson appointment at CU was its initial conceptualization and isolation as a single-person position. Clearly, no university can ensure the safety and fairness for everyone through the work of one individual. This would not be caring for anyone, including the ombudsperson herself. Within the first several months in office, the ombudswoman dealt with 67 cases of complaint from across all faculties (Report of the CU ombudsperson 2023). Based on this report from 2023, the network of faculty ombudspersons was created and the rector’s directive was updated in 2024 to create a more robust system of the ombuds office. Each CU faculty has a dedicated person of trust, that cooperates closely with the university-wide ombudswoman.

Faculty ombudspersons receive regular training and supervision with the aim to provide the same service to both students and staff, regardless of which faculty they come from. In order to standardize the work of all ombudspersons, but also to inform potential reporters of misconduct, the “Methodology for Investigating Complaints of Inappropriate Behav-

our by the Ombudswoman of Charles University” was released, which outlines the fundamental principles for ensuring a safe, respectful, and non-threatening environment at Charles University (Office of the Charles University Ombudswoman). During the first two years in office, the ombudswoman, together with the ombudswoman of the Masaryk University in Brno, has also developed a training course for employees on social safety,<sup>2</sup> which has become compulsory at CU.

Care and trust go together and the appointment of an ombudsperson at university level was a crucial step towards building wide-spread trust in the institution (Lynch). It was the foundation for the creation of safe space and care for the most vulnerable, a step that students in particular called for. The establishment of the ombuds position demonstrates the synergy between top-down and bottom-up initiatives, which characterizes the post-socialist region (Linková et al.) but cannot happen without a caring leader in the rector’s chair. The ombudsperson’s activities are consistently challenged by a backlash from within academia, and the lack of executive power remains a major limit. On the other hand, open communication, transparency and activities aimed at overall change of the university culture are explicitly appreciated by those in whose benefit they were created.

### **Transforming the Terms of Care: Survey on Caregivers’ Needs**

In 2024, CU realized a unique university-wide survey on caregivers’ needs. Remarkably, the survey did not predictably focus only on parents, but also included those caring for another dependent person (whether it be family, disability, seniority, inter-cultural and international care, etc.) as well as on those, who currently do not have care obligations. The aim was to redefine the customary categories of care from below, to find out who is providing care, what kind of care, for whom, how many people are in this life situation, whether they receive appropriate support from the univer-

<sup>2</sup> The term „social safety“ is broadly used for example in Dutch academic environment, but it has become known in the Czech Republic during the past two years, namely during the collaborative projects of Czech universities funded by Ministry of education, youth and sports that focused on academic ethics (<https://www.akademickaetika.cz/en/project-results/>). The social safety is defined „as an ideal state of the environment in which the behaviour and actions of everyone present are naturally guided by the principles of collegiality, integrity, equality, respect, openness, and attention to others and where any form of unwanted behaviour, intimidation, aggression, bullying, or discrimination is considered unacceptable, regardless of whether it involves students or employees.“ (Smužová 5).

sity, and what kind of support they would like to receive. The survey was distributed to all employees and a sample of 10,000 students, both Czech and international. Among employees, there was a significant proportion of carers (81 % share a household with a child and 12 % care about another adult for at least one hour per day). Among students, the proportion of carers was lower, but still 14% of respondents revealed they were parents of minors and 7% looked after an adult. Although the survey focused on caregiving within family contexts, the survey itself can be considered as an act of “institutional caring”. The university, through realization of this kind of research, makes it clear that it cares about caregivers’ needs, that it listens and wants to embrace care as a part of the university life.

Accordingly, the university decided to incorporate the findings into its future strategy. The results of the survey served as a starting point for formulating the current Equal Opportunities Plan (for 2025-2027) for the area of work/study-life balance, which increased in terms of the number of measures. Compared to the first GEP with 6 measures, the new GEP contains 16 measures. These are grouped in order to support four main goals: first, raising awareness of available support activities for caregivers; second, shaping an environment where caring for loved ones is perceived as a normal part of life and is not stigmatized; third, practical facilitation of combined study/work and caregiving; and fourth, support of the harmonisation of study and childcare for student parents in accordance with current legislation (CU Equal Opportunities Plan 2025-2027).

Care and caring responsibilities have also been taken into account in issues such as career advancement or equality in decision making (e. g. working with career breaks in career progression rules, or making meetings of boards and university bodies carer-friendly in terms of time, place or form). On the other hand, the survey revealed challenges still faced by the university. Although several steps have been taken, for example in terms of harmonising flexible working conditions, the culture and real support for caregivers remain dependent on the leadership of a faculty or a department due to the large size of the university, the autonomy of faculties and the fragmentation within them. Another crucial topic is the precariousness of academic work, where the repetition of fixed-term contracts leads to an uncertain financial situation for families. For example, this can result in barriers for obtaining a mortgage to secure stable housing or a workload that does not correspond with contracted working hours (Vohlídalová).

The survey also examined perceptions of organisational culture and support for caregiving. The findings were not wholly positive, showing that in certain fields care is still not considered a core value of academic life or a complementary practice for pursuing a successful academic or research career. The idea that one must choose between a research career and parenthood (particularly for women) is still prevalent at CU. Although these findings do not reflect well on the university, their acknowledgment is crucial for change. Given that the EDI agenda is increasingly incorporated into the university strategies and visions, and given its aim to achieve higher (ideally equal) representation of women in senior academic positions and abandon the meritocracy myth, embracing care as an integral part of life, including a research and academic career, appears to be key. As the caregivers' survey indicated, the caring university is also an approach that has a potential to bring together management, faculty, staff and students into one community with shared values and goals.

## **Conclusion**

As Marina Hughson Blagojević argued, gender equality in academia, and within knowledge production broadly conceived, is inseparable from development of critical thinking, diversity, cooperation and meritocracy in science. Contrary to the ideals of meritocracy, however, scientific and academic systems have been mainly created in the spirit of exclusions, in which all vulnerable and minority groups suffer from additional risks. EDI in post-socialist countries, according to her, is in especially fragile position due to this long-term development. Moreover, present-day global and transnational flows are only increasing such exclusions, rather than decreasing them (Hughson Blagojević). Consistent and rigorous attention to EDI agendas and the struggle for caring academia thus might be one of few ways of turning the tide of such trends.

This chapter followed the key milestones in pursuing the EDI agenda at Charles University and analysed them as a part of CU's goal of becoming a 'caring institution'. Although it does not encompass all activities or progress implemented and achieved so far, it gives a good overview of the encouraging direction of CU, which provides a reason for optimism. Importantly, however, this is just the beginning of a long process of in-

corporating these values into day-to-day life and interactions at the university. Future changes in the university management as well may have unpredictable effects on the position of the EDI agenda at CU. Given the post-socialist context, the university's hierarchical structure, its long history and its size, it is crucial to stay aware of any backlash to the changes CU have introduced, and wishes to introduce in years to come.

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# THE ROLE OF UNIVERSITIES IN PROMOTING EDI AMIDST THE UKRAINIAN CRISIS: CHALLENGES AND INITIATIVES AT JAGIELLONIAN UNIVERSITY

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## Introduction

Jagiellonian University (JU) in Kraków, one of Poland's oldest and most prestigious higher education institutions, plays a pivotal role in addressing the challenges related to the increasing diversity of its student body. In particular, the Institute of European Studies (IES) at the Faculty of International and Political Studies (FIPS) has become a central space for integrating students arriving from Ukraine amidst recent geopolitical developments. The phenomenon of inclusion in higher education is fundamentally about creating an environment that guarantees equal opportunities and the active participation of all students, irrespective of their social, cultural, ethnic, or health-related differences. Inclusion goes beyond merely removing physical or procedural barriers<sup>1</sup>; it involves the ongoing adaptation of curricula, teaching methodologies, and institutional practices to meet the diverse needs of a pluralistic student population. As noted by Varga et al.<sup>2</sup>, inclusion is an equality-oriented approach that demands institutions foster environments where marginalized groups—such as individuals with disabilities, ethnic minorities, migrants, and refugees—can fully participate and thrive.<sup>3</sup>

The significance of inclusive practices is particularly heightened in the context of migration and displacement. Following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia in February 2022, Poland rapidly became the

<sup>1</sup> See: Korthals Altes, T., et al. "Higher Education Teachers' Understandings of and Challenges for Inclusion and Inclusive Learning Environments: A Systematic Literature Review." *Educational Research Review*, vol. 43, 2024, p. 100605. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2024.100605>.

<sup>2</sup> Varga, Aranka, et al. "Diversity and Inclusion in Higher Education." *Képzés Gyakorlat / Training and Practice*, vol. 2021, no. 1-2, 2021, pp. 70-81. DOI: 10.17165/TP.2021.1-2.7.

<sup>3</sup> Gajda, Kinga Anna. "Introduction." *Together Through Culture*, edited by Kinga Anna Gajda and Aniel Radecka, Instytut Studiów Europejskich, 2023.

primary destination for millions of Ukrainians fleeing the war. This resulted in a significant influx of Ukrainian migrants, including a growing number of university students seeking academic continuity and social integration. Migration, however, is not merely a physical relocation; it is a complex intercultural process in which both the migrants and the host society undergo transformations. Integration, therefore, is a bidirectional process involving not only the adaptation of migrants to their new environment but also the modification of institutional structures and cultural frameworks within the host community. This dual adaptation is essential to fostering truly inclusive environments that respect and celebrate cultural diversity.

Research increasingly emphasizes the importance of the “local turn”<sup>4</sup> in integration policies, which highlights the critical role of local communities, governments, and institutions—particularly cultural and educational ones—in facilitating successful migrant integration<sup>5</sup>. Beyond national migration policies, the everyday experiences of migrants in their new localities, including academic institutions, shape their sense of belonging and participation. Universities are uniquely positioned to implement integration strategies that go beyond access, focusing on participation, support services, and intercultural dialogue. Such strategies may include language assistance, psychological and social counselling<sup>6</sup>, intercultural workshops, and the promotion of cultural diversity through events and student initiatives.

This chapter aims to analyze the initiatives taken by Jagiellonian University, with a focus on the IES at FIPS, in response to the challenges posed by the growing Ukrainian student population. It evaluates JU’s efforts to create inclusive and integrative spaces that support equality and foster a sense of belonging among Ukrainian students. The analysis covers the impact of these initiatives not only on the academic community but also on the broader social context, considering the ongoing Ukrainian crisis as a critical backdrop.

<sup>4</sup> Gebhardt, Dietrich. “A Local Turn in Migrant Integration Policies? Local Citizenship and Integration Policy Approaches in the Context of Multi-Level Governance in Europe.” *CORDIS*, European Commission, 2015. <https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/330057/reporting/pl> (accessed: 20.06.2025).

<sup>5</sup> Waśkiewicz-Firlej, Emilia. “Language and Education Policy as One of the Main Challenges of Migrant Integration in Poland.” *Glottodidactica*, vol. 48, no. 2, 2021, pp. 111–129, doi:10.14746/gl.2021.48.2.07.

<sup>6</sup> Stentiford, Lauren, and George Koutsouris. “Critically Considering the ‘Inclusive Curriculum’ in Higher Education.” *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, vol. 43, no. 8, 2022, pp. 1250–1272, doi:10.1080/01425692.2022.2122937.

Methodologically, this study adopts a descriptive approach utilizing multiple data sources. It includes a comprehensive review of existing reports on Polish-Ukrainian relations, an examination of JU's inclusive practices—such as integration programs and cultural events—and participant observation of university activities aimed at fostering inclusivity. Central to the research are the survey results from 2022 by Gajda and Galent, which provide valuable quantitative and qualitative insights into Ukrainian students' experiences and attitudes within JU. Moreover, in-depth interviews conducted in 2025 with both Polish and Ukrainian students from the IES offer a nuanced understanding of integration processes and perceptions of the academic environment's inclusiveness.

The findings of this chapter seek to contribute to a deeper understanding of how higher education institutions can effectively respond to migration-related challenges through inclusive policies and practices. The conclusion reflects on the successes and areas for improvement in JU's approach, highlighting the critical role universities play in shaping inclusive societies amidst complex social and political transformations in Poland.

### **Inclusion and Solidarity Amid War: Experiences of Ukrainian Students at Jagiellonian University**

In times of crisis, higher education institutions play a crucial role as agents of civic engagement and social responsibility<sup>7</sup>. Universities not only fulfill educational functions but also serve as centers of social support, actively engaging in efforts to assist local and global communities during difficult times. A clear example of such engagement is the response of Polish universities to the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Poland, as one of Ukraine's closest neighbors, quickly became a primary destination for millions of refugees. In response to the humanitarian crisis, universities took concrete actions to support Ukrainian students and refugees by organizing language courses, facilitating integration, and providing information about Ukraine's history, politics, and culture. At the same time, the Polish government introduced

<sup>7</sup> See: Kymlicka, Will. *Multiculturalism: Success, Failure, and the Future*. Migration Policy Institute, 2012. Kuh, George D., Jillian Kinzie, John H. Schuh, and Elizabeth J. Whitt. *Student Success in College: Creating Conditions That Matter*. Jossey-Bass, 2015.

legal provisions enabling refugees to stay legally, while non-governmental organizations and volunteers provided critical everyday assistance. Through these efforts, universities reaffirmed their social mission, becoming key actors in crisis management and fostering social solidarity<sup>8</sup>. Along with the influx of refugees, many Ukrainian students also arrived in Poland. Poland had already been a popular educational destination for Ukrainians, but since the onset of the full-scale war, the number of Ukrainian students has significantly increased. According to a report by the Ministry of Education and Science, approximately 60,000 Ukrainians were studying in Poland in 2022, representing a significant rise compared to previous years. Ukrainians came to continue their studies at Polish universities, taking advantage of simplified recruitment procedures and the opportunity to gain student status without the need for a visa. Some students, particularly from larger cities, decided to settle permanently in Poland, where they could more easily find employment while staying in close contact with their families and loved ones in Ukraine.

One of the first responses from Polish universities to the full-scale war, which was also adopted by JU, was a statement by the Conference of Rectors of Academic Schools in Poland, the Main Council of Science and Higher Education, the Polish Academy of Sciences, and other academic organizations in connection with Russia's aggression against Ukraine. The statement condemned this act of violence and expressed solidarity with the Ukrainian people. The university pledged to assist Ukrainians, both those in Ukraine, refugees, and those residing in Poland. The JU Senate appealed to Russian academic communities to condemn the war and call for peace talks. In light of the war, until the cessation of hostilities, the university suspended cooperation with Russian universities and research centers.

Polish universities have redefined their social role, shifting from purely educational institutions to centers of social and emotional support. In doing so, universities have fulfilled their function as spaces of social inclusion and community engagement, especially during times of crisis.<sup>9</sup> In response to the needs of refugees, universities organized assistance programs, language courses, and training sessions aimed at facilitating integration and fostering solidarity and inclusivity. Jagiellonian Univer-

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Slaughter, Sheila, and Gary Rhoades. *Academic Capitalism and the New Economy: Markets, State, and Higher Education*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004.

sity actively participated in these efforts by implementing numerous initiatives, including funding projects for Ukrainian doctoral students and launching the “For Ukraine” program, which supported Polish-Ukrainian scientific cooperation. These activities highlight the role of the academic environment as a space for transnational solidarity and knowledge exchange.<sup>10</sup>

The topic of the war was also addressed in academic debates and classes, where lecturers facilitated open discussions carefully moderated to prevent emotional escalation and to promote attitudes of openness and empathy toward all individuals, regardless of nationality. This approach aligns with critical intercultural education theories by Kenneth Cushner and Jennifer Mahon<sup>11</sup> or James Banks<sup>12</sup> that emphasize dialogue, openness, and emotional safety in diverse classrooms. The university also played a practical role in supporting refugees through fundraising, assistance in finding accommodation, family reunification efforts, and language courses. Faculty members actively participated in translation, logistical support, and delivering lectures on the history and politics of Ukraine, demonstrating the institution’s multifaceted engagement. A study conducted by Gajda and Galent<sup>13</sup> among students of the FIPS, particularly students of the IES, revealed that more than half of the surveyed students considered the university’s active stance and prompt support response as an inspiration for their own involvement. Furthermore, the research indicated that students recognized the university’s engagement in providing aid and supported this initiative, viewing it as the fulfillment of the institution’s social mission.

The war also influenced Polish students’ perception of Ukrainians. Research by Gajda and Galent indicated that nearly half of the students noticed positive changes in attitudes toward Ukrainians, thanks to the activities of universities, although negative experiences related to integration difficulties and historically rooted perceptions of Ukrainians in Poland still existed. Among the students, mixed opinions about

<sup>10</sup> Rizvi, Fazal, and Bob Lingard. *Globalizing Education Policy*. Routledge, 2010.

<sup>11</sup> Cushner, Kenneth, and Jennifer Mahon. “Intercultural Competence in Teacher Education—Developing the Intercultural Competence of Educators and Their Students: Creating the Blueprints.” In *The SAGE Handbook of Intercultural Competence*, edited by Darla K. Deardorff, SAGE Publications, 2009, pp. 304-320.

<sup>12</sup> Banks, James A. *Cultural Diversity and Education: Foundations, Curriculum, and Teaching*. 6th ed., Routledge, 2015.

<sup>13</sup> Gajda, Kinga Anna, and Marcin Galent. “Up to the Task – University in the Face of War.” *University and War in Ukraine*, edited by Alicja Zofia Nowak and Kinga Anna Gajda, Peter Lang, 2023.

their Ukrainian peers emerged. On the one hand, many noticed positive changes such as solidarity and heroism displayed by Ukrainians, especially given the war and the difficult circumstances they face. However, alongside these positive attitudes negative opinions also surfaced. These primarily related to a perceived sense of entitlement among some Ukrainians, meaning an expectation of special treatment or privileges. Additionally, some students observed a lack of respect for Polish culture from certain Ukrainians, which may stem from misunderstandings or cultural differences. Language barriers also posed challenges, making communication and integration more difficult. Furthermore, some students noted a growing reluctance or tension between Ukrainians and Poles, along with controversies related to Ukrainian nationalism and military symbolism, which could cause discomfort and social tensions within the local community.

While many students appreciate and admire the resilience and attitudes of Ukrainians, there are also social challenges and tensions that need to be recognized and addressed to foster better integration and mutual understanding. Solidarity with Ukraine was visible in politics, but in everyday social life, difficulties arose that required attention and resolution. Gajda and Galent highlighted that an important finding in their research was the necessity of recognizing and addressing these tensions to prevent the escalation of conflicts in the future. It is important to note that in order to support the inclusion of refugees and individuals with migration experiences in universities, cultural diversity must be integrated as a fundamental element of the curriculum, treating it as a value that enriches the academic environment. Universities should emphasize the significance of this diversity in their cultural events, recognizing its richness and impact on the academic community. It is also crucial to organize multicultural events such as exhibitions, concerts, or workshops that showcase diverse cultures and encourage interaction between people from different backgrounds. Avoiding segregation and separate classes for individuals with migration experiences will help integrate all groups, creating a more cohesive community.

To further enhance the integration process, universities should partner with local groups and organizations that connect people with migration backgrounds or work on migration-related issues. Organising joint events with local groups that engage in actions for migrants fosters the exchange of experiences and encourages relationship-building. Univer-

sities should also collaborate with organizations supporting individuals with migration experiences to better understand their needs and cultural preferences, which allows for the adaptation of cultural and educational programs.

Another important step is to support multilingualism, both by promoting the learning of the Polish language and offering informational materials in various languages. Employing multilingual staff or volunteers will help improve communication and increase the accessibility of events and programs. Universities should also organize events that promote mutual understanding between different cultural groups, contributing to the development of shared understanding and integration.

Creating spaces for cultural exchange, where students can share their experiences, will help build a more open and inclusive environment. It is also beneficial to run educational workshops that help students understand the history, culture, and society of individuals with migration experiences as well as their new peers. Regularly gathering feedback from individuals with migration experiences about university activities allows for continuous improvement, making the activities more aligned with the community's needs. An important aspect is also creating an environment where everyone, regardless of origin, feels accepted and valued. To this end, universities should support anti-discrimination policies that prevent the marginalization of minority groups. It is also valuable to support migrant community leaders, who play a key role in organizing cultural events and promoting integration within local communities. Encouraging individuals with migration experiences to actively participate in various events allows their voices and perspectives to be heard, contributing to greater inclusivity.

### **Social Polarization and Challenges in Polish-Ukrainian Relations**

After three years of an ongoing warfare in Ukraine, Polish society is exhibiting signs of fatigue, and increasing division with regard to the issue of support for Ukrainian refugees, in which a growing polarization between Poles and Ukrainians is evident. The widening polarization can be attributed to a combination of external and internal factors. On the one hand, external factors such as disinformation and fake news propaganda promoted by Russia have had a significant impact. On the other

hand, internal factors, including the Polish political climate, economic pressures and the legacy of past traumas, have also contributed to the exacerbation of existing divisions. At the onset of the war, Poles, motivated by their historical experiences, particularly the communist period following World War II and former periods under partition, were inclined to extend the hand of assistance.

A key factor is the changing perception of Ukrainians in Poland. Initially viewed as “guests” needing help due to the war, Ukrainians are now seen by many as increasingly influencing the country’s social and economic life. This shift has raised concerns about the strain on social welfare, healthcare, and education, fueling fears and dissatisfaction. Political debates about ongoing support for Ukraine further deepen social polarization. While some view military aid as a moral duty and show solidarity, others stress the importance of protecting Poland’s national interests.<sup>14</sup>

Among nationalists and populists, there are also fears of an “invasion” of foreign cultures that could threaten traditional values. Finally, the chasm of social polarization is further deepened by the growing role of the media, especially digital forms, which often broadcast controversial and anti-Ukrainian content. The media, especially internet and social media platforms, are spaces where stereotypes, hate speech, and disinformation can spread. Statements about Polish fears of the “Ukrainization” of Poland, crime, and the misuse of social benefits by Ukrainians have emerged. Anti-Ukrainian rhetoric has been particularly exploited by far-right politicians and radical movement leaders, who have disseminated content online, such as the hashtag “#StopUkrainizationofPoland.”

<sup>14</sup> Mioszowski Centre. (2025). *Polacy o Ukrainie i stosunkach polsko-ukraińskich 2025* [Poles on Ukraine and Polish-Ukrainian Relations 2025]. Retrieved from <https://mioszowski.pl/upload/2025/03/polacy-o-ukrainie-i-stosunkach-polskoukrajinskich-2025.pdf> (Accessed: 20.06.2025). Additional sources used in this section include: Mioszowski Centre. (2024). *Polska i Polacy oczami Ukraińców 2024* [Poland and Poles through the Eyes of Ukrainians 2024]. Retrieved from <https://mioszowski.pl/upload/2024/11/polska-i-polacy-oczami-ukraincow-2024.pdf> (Accessed: 20.06.2025); Rzeczpospolita. (2025). *Polacy krytyczni wobec Ukraińców bardziej niż Czesi i Węgrzy* [Poles More Critical of Ukrainians than Czechs and Hungarians]. Retrieved from <https://www.rp.pl/spoleczenstwo/art41674391-badanie-co-drugi-polak-ocenia-negatywnie-wplyw-ukraincow-na-dzialanie-panstwa> (Accessed: 20.06.2025); Broszko, K. (2025). *Rdzewienie solidarności. Polacy, Ukraińcy i empatia ulegająca polityce, historii oraz codziennym problemom* [The Rusting of Solidarity: Poles, Ukrainians, and Empathy Subject to Politics, History, and Everyday Problems]. Magazyn Fundacji Polskiego Godła Promocyjnego. Retrieved from <https://magazynterazpolska.pl/pl/a/rdzewienie-solidarnosci-polacy-ukraincy-i-empatia-ulegajaca-polityce-historii-oraz-codziennym-problemom-kamil-broszko> (Accessed: 20.06.2025)

While social polarization exists among students, the university's inclusive policies mitigate its severity compared to broader society. Still, the academic environment is not free from tensions and divisions. Declining public enthusiasm, job market competition, and concerns about long-term costs have influenced how Ukrainian students are perceived. This shift is visible in the media, where worries about them taking spots meant for Polish students have become more common. Nonetheless, Ukrainian students are still largely viewed through the lens of the war and their difficult circumstances. That said, this change in public sentiment has not meant total rejection—many Poles, particularly in academia, continue to support Ukrainians in their studies and integration efforts.

This is supported by the results of interviews conducted by Gajda in March 2025 with Polish and Ukrainian students at the FIPS. In the study, both Ukrainian and Polish respondents shared their experiences and opinions regarding current relations between Poles and Ukrainians. Most Ukrainians, despite noticing changes in Polish attitudes toward Ukrainians, did not indicate that they had personally experienced such changes. Respondents noted that Polish-Ukrainian relations, initially enthusiastic after the outbreak of the war, remained unstable due to unresolved political, national, and historical tensions. These changes were particularly noticeable in the public space, where negative comments, especially from far-right circles, were increasingly appearing. Respondents pointed out that during the initial wave of migration from Ukraine, Poles showed more compassion and willingness to help, but the initial enthusiasm then waned, and attitudes toward Ukrainians became more neutral or cautious. An important aspect pointed out by representatives of both groups was the language barrier. Many Poles felt excluded when Ukrainians spoke to each other in their language in university corridors, and when they approached groups of Ukrainians who, despite knowing Polish, continued to speak in Ukrainian. It was noted by students (responders of interviews) that concerns about integration and growing tensions might stem from a lack of communication and understanding rather than any deep-seated hostility. Ukrainians, in turn, emphasized that they sometimes feared using the Ukrainian language because of the risk of discrimination and certain national symbols were sometimes hidden. Polish students, repeating discourse found online, pointed to concerns that Ukrainian students were given priority in getting access to

dormitories and scholarships, which they felt negatively affected Polish students and restricted their access to social benefits.

It seems that actions taken exclusively within the university have yielded results, to a limited extent. As seen, students derive information and behavioral patterns not only from the academic environment but also from other sources, particularly the internet. The internet has become the dominant medium where young people seek knowledge, form opinions, and shape their attitudes. Unfortunately, not all information available online is reliable, and some may contribute to reinforcing negative stereotypes and prejudices. Therefore, it becomes crucial not only to educate students in the traditional academic context but also to develop their critical thinking skills and encourage responsible use of online resources. The introduction of inclusive attitudes and the fight against hate speech requires not only educational initiatives but also social activism, including across the media space. Inclusion also extends to the media, which can be a crucial tool in combating hate speech. Education about the proliferation of fake news, the post-truth society, and disinformation<sup>15</sup> is a key element in the fight against hate speech, as disinformation and false information are among the primary tools enabling the spread of hate speech. Information on the post-truth society we now find ourselves in is particularly important in the battle against disinformation; facts and truth are increasingly marginalized in favor of emotions and personal beliefs. By teaching both young people and adults to recognize these phenomena and promoting critical thinking, society can become more resilient to manipulation and better prepared for constructive dialogue based on facts and mutual respect.

### **University Initiatives and Inclusive Strategies for Integration**

Rather than reinforcing negative stereotypes, the media can promote positive stories of cooperation and solidarity between Poles and Ukrainians. By collaboratively creating media reports, promotional videos, and working with professional journalists, filmmakers, and podcast creators, students have the opportunity to familiarize themselves with the tools of the media world, image-building methods, and narrative creation.

<sup>15</sup> It is important to make the difference between 'misinformation' - unwilling spreading false info and 'disinformation' - willingly and strategically doing it

At the IES, a media expert was invited to conduct a course titled “Multimedia Expression and Communication Tools for Building Personal Image and Social Campaigns.” The goal of this course was to enhance participants’ awareness and equip them with the necessary skills to create social campaigns in new media. During the classes, which were conducted as case studies, students created a social campaign related to Europe, which represented the final result of their work. After gaining theoretical knowledge, participants then practically applied it by creating multimedia materials for the social media campaign, using professional equipment and software for production and postproduction.

The classes had an international dimension, with students from both Poland and Ukraine participating. Through this collaboration, all participants had the opportunity to speak in front of the camera in their native language, which was translated into Polish, English, and Ukrainian. This approach facilitated the creation of a joint narrative based on diverse experiences and perspectives. The classes not only taught students how to effectively use media to build an image and create social media campaigns but also fostered international cooperation and integration by working together on a project that bridged different languages, cultures, and experiences. Dialogue, collaboration, and understanding between various cultures and social groups are essential. Taking education beyond the university’s walls, as well as inviting external voices into the university space, can be highly practical and effective methods of inclusive action<sup>16</sup>. Inclusion, in the context of hate speech directed against Ukrainians, involves not only implementing educational policies but also challenging social attitudes. Therefore, collaborating with external institutions and experienced trainers is beneficial.

Collaboration between the university and external stakeholders, including non-governmental organizations and the media, helps promote values based on respect, understanding, and openness, which are essential in combating polarization and hate speech. While the university can play a significant role in promoting equality, respect, and integration, its actions should extend well beyond its walls. Collaboration with external stakeholders takes place on two levels. On the one hand, it involves

<sup>16</sup> Morales, Gabriela, Elizabeth Bromaghim, Amy Kim, Caitlin Diamond, Annalisa Maggini, Anna Everhart, Sofia Gruskin, and Andrew T. Chase. “Classroom Walls and City Hall: Mobilizing Local Partnerships to Advance the Sustainable Development Agenda.” *Sustainability*, vol. 13, no. 11, 2021, article 6173, <https://doi.org/10.3390/su13116173>.

organizing open meetings for the local community, promoting attitudes of openness, tolerance, and inclusivity, as well as integration. Such collaboration can help reach a wider local audience, including those who are not directly connected to the university but still form an important part of society. Actions that go beyond the university, such as organizing joint initiatives, workshops, exhibitions, or projects between the university and other institutions, can significantly improve relations among students and contribute to the integration of the entire local community. This approach also allows for the development of deeper understanding and cooperation, rather than merely limiting actions to solving internal university problems.

Such initiatives are developed and funded by the FIPS through an JU scholarship scheme designed to foster cooperation with the university's external environment. This initiative aims to strengthen relationships between the academic community and various external stakeholders. The project aims to foster closer collaboration between research teams and external entities, such as public institutions, non-governmental organizations and businesses, in order to develop joint projects and research initiatives that will have a tangible impact on social and economic development.

A key objective of the internal scholarship is to support researchers in developing skills for effective collaboration with the socio-economic sector and in translating research into practical solutions that address real societal needs. The program also focuses on building long-term partnerships with external institutions to enhance research, foster innovation, and facilitate the transfer of knowledge and technology into everyday practice. Strengthening the university's social impact is an important part of this initiative, achieved by actively engaging in broader social, cultural, and economic challenges.

At the FIPS, the scholarship enables cooperation with representatives from the socio-economic environment who are invited to contribute to university activities. This includes organizing workshops and training sessions focused on anti-discrimination, intercultural competence, and promoting tolerance, integration, and inclusivity among both students and staff. Through these efforts, the university aims to turn academic research into meaningful social action and respond more effectively to the needs of the community.

These actions are aimed not only at education but also at actively

shaping attitudes and values within the academic community, supporting the creation of an atmosphere of mutual respect and openness to diversity. Joint initiatives, such as organizing language courses, cultural workshops, or collaborative projects for Poles and Ukrainians, can serve as an effective tool for integration and prejudice reduction. Such projects are crucial in the process of creating an inclusive university that prioritizes dialogue, collaboration, and understanding of different cultures and social groups. In line with the reconstructionist approach, which emphasizes structural change in education, inclusion is not merely about adding new elements to traditional curricula but involves a fundamental revision of how education is organized and its impact on social attitudes towards minorities.<sup>17</sup> Only such a holistic approach can bring about lasting changes in the perception of Ukrainians and minority groups in Poland.

Inclusive initiatives at universities are not only initiatives aimed at ensuring equal access to education for individuals from diverse social groups, but also participatory endeavors that involve the active engagement of members of the academic community—both students and faculty—in decision-making processes and in creating an academic environment that is open and accessible to all. Participatory actions at universities may include consultations with students and university staff, facilitating an understanding of the needs and expectations of various social groups. Jointly developing policies that aim to increase the accessibility of educational programs, infrastructure, or psychological support, taking into account the voices of all concerned parties, is a key element of such actions. Ultimately, fostering a campus culture in which students and staff co-participate in creating and implementing projects for greater equality is crucial for the development of an inclusive environment.

Initiatives such as organizing open days, discussion panels, or training sessions are designed to promote the values of equality, openness, and respect. In this context, peer-to-peer activities also play an important role, promoting collaboration and support between students. Within such initiatives, students can share experiences, support one another, and co-create projects aimed at introducing structural changes at the university that will foster greater inclusion. Through student involvement, universities can develop programs for psychological support, ca-

<sup>17</sup> See: Stentiford, Lauren, and George Koutsouris.

reer counseling, or organizing integrative events that promote equality and mutual understanding. Peer-to-peer activities in this regard provide direct support among students, nurturing the development of bonds and a sense of community. These activities, where students take on the roles of leaders, mentors, or event organizers, allow for their direct involvement in decision-making processes. This results in the inclusion of a broad group of individuals in creating a space that is open and accessible to everyone.

In the group of Polish- and Ukrainian- speaking students, collaboration based on mutual respect and cultural understanding is crucial for creating a space conducive to integration and effective teamwork. An example of a participatory and inclusive initiative in this context could be a media-related project that engages students from various environments and cultures in joint educational activities, promoting cooperation and the exchange of experiences. Another significant example involves activities that are prepared, planned, organized, and executed by student groups aimed at integrating and actively involving different social groups in university life.

These initiatives, in which students themselves play the roles of leaders and organizers, provide an excellent way to shape an inclusive academic culture where everyone has an equal voice and influence in decision-making processes. These actions are also carried out by student scientific circles, which engage students in creating and implementing projects aimed at integration and promoting equality values. For instance, at the FIPS, there is a student scientific circle dedicated to Polish-Ukrainian relations. The Scientific Student Association of the Polish-Ukrainian Studies at JU, “Wernyhora,” is a university-based student organization operating within chair of Polish-Ukrainian Studies at the FIPS. Its goal is to promote knowledge about the history, culture, and traditions of Ukraine, as well as to foster students’ and youth’s interest in Ukrainian topics, improve Polish-Ukrainian relations, and introduce students to scientific and research work.

The activities of the “Wernyhora” serve as an excellent example of participatory inclusive actions that promote collaboration, integration, and mutual understanding between students of different nationalities. They also allow students to actively participate in discussions about important social and political issues. The circle not only expands knowledge about Ukraine but also supports building bridges between Poland

and Ukraine, which is an essential step toward deepening international and cultural cooperation.

The “Wernyhora”, like other student circles at the FIPS, carries out its activities in close collaboration with the “Initiative of Excellence – Research University” program, which supports the development of actions related to integration, knowledge exchange, and the promotion of cooperation among students. The “Grants for the Future” competition is an initiative aimed at student scientific circles within the FIPS. Its purpose is to support scientific research, the development of students’ academic competencies, the organization of conferences and workshops, as well as the preparation of scientific and popular science publications.

This initiative serves as a platform for workshops, meetings, and integration projects, enabling students to actively participate in building bridges of understanding and cooperation between universities and communities, including Polish and Ukrainian students. One of the actions financed under the “Grants for the Future” competition was the popularization of methods for combating disinformation related to the Russo-Ukrainian war of 2022, carried out by the Political Journalism Scientific Student Association. This project, implemented by students of the FIPS, aimed to educate society and students on how to recognize and counter disinformation in the context of armed conflict, emphasizing the importance of reliable sources of information during wartime.

## **Conclusion**

Inclusion is considered an essential component of contemporary education systems, as it addresses the integration of diverse social groups and ensures equal opportunities for all in the learning process. Achieving authentic inclusivity necessitates concerted action across multiple levels, encompassing teacher education as well as extensive social education. Furthermore, this endeavor must transcend the confines of the university and permeate the broader community. It is only through such a comprehensive approach, encompassing all layers of the educational and social fabric, that transformative results can be achieved.

The initial phase in the process of fostering inclusivity is the preparation of teachers and university personnel. In the absence of adequate training and awareness, educators are unable to provide effective sup-

port to diverse learners. It is imperative that educators possess a comprehensive understanding of the challenges confronting migrant students, and are furnished with the requisite pedagogical instruments and inclusive attitudes to facilitate their effective integration into the educational milieu. It is evident that workshops, ongoing professional development, and structural support systems are of pivotal importance in the cultivation of this capacity.

The subsequent step in this process involves the education of the students themselves. It is imperative that students are introduced to the concepts of equality, diversity, and social justice at an early stage. These concepts should be taught not only as abstract values, but also as practical competencies. The implementation of inclusive curricula, complemented by extracurricular engagement, facilitates students' capacity to recognize and address exclusion, fosters appreciation for cultural diversity, and cultivates soft skills such as empathy, teamwork, and conflict resolution.

Ultimately, however, the objective is to extend inclusive values to the societal level. It is imperative that students, staff, and alumni function as agents of change beyond the confines of the campus. This entails engagement in social campaigns, volunteer initiatives, and grassroots activism. The transfer of academic knowledge into public life is pivotal for the establishment of a more equitable society. Furthermore, it is of the utmost importance to empower students to assume leadership roles. The concept of inclusivity should not be imposed from the top down, but rather nurtured as a core value that is deeply ingrained in student culture. Projects that foster diversity, such as those supported by JU's internal scholarships have been shown to both build skills and contribute to real social change. Evidence suggests that inclusivity strengthens both the individual and the institution by enriching perspectives, increasing resilience, and fostering a sense of shared purpose.

In the case of Jagiellonian University, it is evident that local action can have far-reaching implications. Through its partnerships with community organizations, student initiatives, and commitment to inclusive education, JU has demonstrated the capacity of universities to lead the way in countering polarization and building cohesive, diverse societies. These efforts, situated within a distinct historical and geographic context, bear universal significance. In an era characterized by mounting globalization, marked by conflict, migration, and identity politics, higher

education institutions are compelled to assume a dual role, functioning not only as centers of learning but also as anchors of empathy, dialogue, and democratic values.

Inclusion is not a static goal but a continuous, participatory process. It demands the engagement of every stakeholder, including teachers, students, administrators, and society at large. The assertion is that by fostering collective endeavor and sustained reflection universities possess the capacity to bridge divides, transform attitudes, and create inclusive spaces where individuals of all origins feel valued, supported, and empowered to thrive.

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# *GENDER EQUALITY PRACTICES IN THE IRISH HIGHER EDUCATION SECTOR: UNIVERSITY OF GALWAY AND TRINITY COLLEGE DUBLIN AS CASE STUDIES*

LAURA LOFTUS, SIOBÁN O'BRIEN GREEN

## **Introduction**

Irish Universities have made significant strides in gender equality over the past decade. This progress is due, at least in part, to national Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) governance frameworks, which have fostered collaboration and unity among institutions working toward shared goals and financially incentivised this work via pre-requisites to accessing state core institutional and research funding. Supported by national initiatives and the Higher Education Authority (HEA), these collective efforts have established a strong foundation for lasting change in advancing gender equality across the sector. The Irish higher education (HE) model offers valuable lessons in navigating institutional resistance to change for longstanding universities with traditionally conservative contexts, demonstrating how centralized governance can create a cohesive strategy, underpinned by connection to funding, that drives systemic EDI reform while accommodating diverse institutional cultures.

The Irish HE system is governed by the HEA, a centralized body responsible for overseeing governance and the allocation of public funding to higher education institutions (HEIs), including universities. The HEA has been responsive to sector stakeholders, playing a key role in shaping EDI policies. It conducted two reviews of Gender Equality in Irish HEIs: the first in 2016, followed by an Action Plan (2018-20) to address gender inequalities across institutions. The second review (2022) assessed progress and impact. Key changes from 2016 to 2022 include the establishment of the HEA Centre of Excellence for EDI,<sup>1</sup> gender balance requirements on decision-making committees, mandatory publicly visi-

<sup>1</sup> Changed from the name “the Centre of Excellence for Gender Equality” to “the Centre of Excellence for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion” in 2020.

ble Gender Action Plans, funding linked to equality targets, integration of the Athena Swan Charter,<sup>2</sup> and reforms to recruitment and promotion practices. How universities as organisations interact with the HEA and other statutory and regulatory bodies, as well as funding organisations, will be outlined in relation to gender equality in this chapter.

The Irish national HE strategy incorporates EDI into the governance and financial structures of HEIs, incentivizing progress, which is particularly relevant in today's uncertain European Union (EU) and global climate. By linking funding to specific EDI outcomes, Irish HEIs are motivated to prioritize EDI. The HEA and Irish HEIs' involvement in initiatives like Athena Swan further supports goals such as increasing female leadership representation. While the sustainability of these efforts requires ongoing resources, these initiatives have fostered a culture of accountability, sustained activity and collaboration. This chapter will explore how this system works in practice, using University of Galway and Trinity College Dublin (TCD) as case studies to illustrate its impact on gender equality and local EDI programs. These universities were selected as they offer valuable insights in relation to how the Irish HE sector has addressed gender equality over the past decade. The University of Galway played a pivotal role in prompting sector-wide change after a landmark gender equality case was brought against the institution in 2014. The case led to increased awareness, critical reflection, and proactive efforts to address gender inequality across the Irish HE sector. While, TCD was instrumental in introducing the Athena Swan Charter to Ireland. University of Galway and TCD are active members of the Coimbra Group Equality & Diversity (E&D) Working Group and both joined the Coimbra Group in 1986. The Coimbra Group E&D Working Group commenced in 2020 and focuses on how to incorporate EDI into university teaching, learning and operational practices and supports collaborative research projects and activities between its members. The network via the Working Group provides a place to share mutual experiences on GEP development, EDI policies, Athena Swan progress and related activities

<sup>2</sup> Athena Swan is an internationally recognized program that supports and celebrates institutions working to advance gender equality and diversity in academia and research. The Athena Swan Charter provides a framework for institutions to assess their progress in achieving gender equality, and it encourages them to produce detailed action plans focusing on areas such as recruitment, career progression, and work-life balance. Institutions are awarded bronze, silver, or gold awards based on their commitment and efforts toward fostering gender equality.

and forge new collaborations to further develop and accelerate EDI work in universities.

### **The Irish Higher Education Landscape and the Role of the Higher Education Authority**

Higher education (HE) in Ireland has become in recent decades a positive success story for the country, as over 60% of school leavers participate in higher education and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) rank Ireland's third-level participation, completion and attainment among the highest in the EU. In Ireland there have been several changes to the higher education landscape in the last decade that impact on policy and the functioning and funding of the sector (OECD 2022, RIA 2021 (b)). The Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) established in 2020 and is housed in the Department of Education. The current DFHERIS strategic statement outlines the Departmental commitments to equality for students and for staff, in particular in relation to gender equality in staff appointments and career progression in the higher education sector (2023).

DFHERIS oversees the work of a range of relevant state agencies including the HEA and the newly formed Research Ireland. The HEA predated DFHERIS and became a statutory body in 1971. It acts as the state planning organisation for higher education and research in Ireland and through it state grants are provided, via DFHERIS, to HEIs directly to fund the operation of the sector (Curry, 2011). The HEA also has a policy advisory role to the government ministers and state departments. The remit and function of the HEA, including its sectoral regulatory role was enhanced and broadened through the enactment of the HEA Act 2022 which specifically includes references to the equality and gender equality requirements in HEI policy and activities. Universities in Ireland are primarily public sector bodies, there is only one University with private status currently in the country and both TCD and University of Galway are public universities and considered public sector bodies. The Irish University sector has also expanded significantly since 2019, from seven bodies to 13 universities making a total of 22 higher education institutes in Ireland. This is due to the merger of regional institutes into newly constituted technological universities, and the Royal College of

Surgeons in Ireland, a medical school, being allowed to use the title “University”, making it the first non-public University in the state (OECD). The national research funding terrain has also changed with the merger of two state funding bodies, the Irish Research Council and Science Foundation Ireland, into *Taighde Éireann - Research Ireland* a DFHERIS agency in August 2024. Their Eligible Research Bodies Policy states that compliance with HEA Athena Swan accreditation, or evidence of a Gender Equality Plan (GEP), is a core eligibility requirement to be considered for research funding.

The HEA’s role in policy development and commissioning and collating sectoral reporting also relates to EDI. As part of this work, the Centre of Excellence for Gender Equality was established in 2019 in the HEA and in 2020, this was changed into the Centre of Excellence for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion. This Centre provides support for HEIs, runs small competitive grant calls to stimulate and fund collaborative EDI projects, collates annual EDI data and reports from HEIs and supports Athena Swan Ireland to roll out their Charter and awards processes as well as hosting EDI national networks and committees. In addition, the Centre commissions surveys for staff working in the HEI sector and to students in relation to areas such as sexual violence and harassment and race equality. The HEA launched their revised Principles of Good Practice in Research within Irish Higher Education Institutions in 2022, and for the first time included ‘Gender Equality and Inclusiveness’ in these Principles (HEA, 2022). Commencing in 2023, all HEIs are required to commit to anti-racism principles set out by the HEA and to develop an institutional action plan to address race and ethnic equality. These combined legal, research funding, departmental changes have expanded the scope, reporting, and compliance requirements within a relatively short space of time relating to EDI within HEIs in Ireland (RIA, 2021 (a), O’Brien Green et al, 2025).

### **National EDI Governance and Institutional Collaboration**

Given the changing focus on mainstreaming gender equality and EDI approaches into higher education, the changing legal and regulation context, the expansion of the Irish University sector, external shifts, driven by European Commission (EC) and EU requirements and directives, the

cohesion and collaboration across Irish HEIs is remarkable. This is, at least in part, due to the journey towards the adoption of the Athena Swan Charter and awards in Ireland, led by a coalition of three universities (Trinity College Dublin (TCD), University College Cork (UCC) and University of Limerick (UL)) all undertaking FP7<sup>3</sup> projects in conjunction with the Irish Universities Association (IUA). This group lobbied the HEA collaboratively and collectively to set up and support through funding a National Coordination Committee (EC 2025 P205). This co-development approach has continued since then partly through the number and range of EDI and Athena Swan working groups (many led by Athena Swan Ireland), Committees (both IUA and HEA led), Practitioner networks and advisory groups whose membership often includes subject matter experts beyond academia. The HEA offers EDI grant schemes annually, which support Athena Swan, EDI initiatives and, more recently, race equality and intersectional approaches. This scheme mandates inter-HEI collaboration as applications must list at least three HEI partners to be eligible for the grant funding (HEA website).

This early adoption of GEP development, ongoing leveraging of European and national funding streams to progress gender quality work through collaborative projects and the sustained attention to gender equality has led to acceleration in Ireland, as noted by the European Commission (2024), especially in relation to influencing national policy and the research funding environment (2024). The European Union Award for Gender Equality Champions commenced in 2022 led by the European Commission, demonstrates that the Irish approach and commitment is internationally recognised with Ireland now holding five of the 11 Awards. Ireland is one of nine EU countries where a GEP requirement is mandated by national higher education policy and this is demonstrated via the Athena Swan Charter and award processes. This has segued into preparedness by Irish HEIs and research performing institutes as the EC GEP requirements to access Horizon Europe research funding became obligatory in 2022. The EC She Figures report on Ireland notes the influence of Athena Swan on research performing organisations, the alignment with the HEA's financial support for the Athena Swan Charter

<sup>3</sup> FP7 or the Seventh framework programme of the European Community for research and technological development and demonstration activities ran from 2007 to 2013 and provided funding for the FESTA (UL) INTEGER (TCD) and GENNOVATE (UCC) gender equality plan development projects in these HEIs.

to the actions in the national Gender Equality Strategy for Ireland and how Ireland is outperforming other EU countries in many areas related to gender equality (EC, 2025). The effect of these interventions over time and via an established national framework, is evidenced in the changing gender landscape of Irish HEIs with 47% of Irish HEIs now having female Presidents from a baseline of 24% in 2015. Similarly, 88% of HEIs now have gender balance on their Governing Authority, 100% have gender balance on their Academic Council, and 59% have a balanced Executive Management Team (Higher Education Authority, 2023). This comes from significantly lower percentages of 65%, 42%, and 27% in 2015 (Higher Education Authority, 2016). The tangible impact of these changes at institutional level will be explored in more detail in the case studies section of the chapter. In advance of exploring the two university case studies the context for gender equality accreditation in Ireland through the Athena Swan awards and Charter will be outlined. In addition, the place for peer and university networks and member groups, such as the Coimbra Group, to support and amplify this work nationally and in Europe will be referenced.

### **Athena Swan and its Impact on Irish Universities**

The Athena Swan Charter, originally launched in the United Kingdom (UK) in 2005, aims to promote gender equality in higher education and research. It focuses on creating a culture that values diversity and ensures gender parity across all levels within an institution. In Ireland, the Athena Swan initiative was introduced in 2015 targeting HEIs to improve the representation of women in senior academic roles and leadership positions. Athena Swan is built on a framework of principles that guide institutions towards addressing imbalances. These principles include a commitment to addressing gender inequality, creating supportive work environments for all, and ensuring that policies are implemented in a way that leads to sustainable change. The Charter awards institutions with bronze, silver, or gold awards based on their progress in gender equality initiatives, with each level reflecting increasing commitment and achievement. Athena Swan is managed by Advance HE and was adopted in Ireland in 2015. While it is overseen by Advance HE, Ireland has its own dedicated Athena Swan coordination team to support imple-

mentation across Irish higher education institutions. Following extensive consultation with EDI practitioners from across the sector, the Irish Athena Swan Charter was re-developed in 2021. The new Irish Charter places additional emphasis on intersectionality, sustainably embedding and advancing EDI, and providing support for both academic and administrative and research staff and aligns with the equality legislation landscape in Ireland rather than the UK which became more important after the UK left the EU (Brexit) (O'Mullane, 2023).

The effectiveness of Athena Swan in driving long-term systematic change has been debated internationally (Black, 2020; O'Connor, 2020; Leathwood, 2019; Fitzgerald, 2019), with Drew and Bailey (2020) and Graves (2020), among others, noting that while higher-level Athena Swan awards are associated with more comprehensive gender equality strategies, the actual impact in terms of institutional reform remains a subject of ongoing debate. O'Connor and Irvine (2020) however posit that Ireland's centralized higher education governance, under the HEA, may facilitate more effective implementation of the Athena Swan Charter. Charter participation, for example, is a core pillar of Ireland's national strategy for gender equality, and the HEA has committed to paying the subscription fee for all Irish HEIs until 2029 to Advance HE (Athena Swan Ireland FAQs, 2025). Athena Swan progress has also been linked by the HEA to institutional eligibility for funding from Ireland's major research agencies. This financial incentive encourages HEIs to prioritize gender equality by embedding it into their strategic planning and institutional policies. Additionally, the visibility of gender issues has been raised to being a core priority for institutions, fostering greater awareness and commitment among staff and leadership. HEIs are also required, as is the case under EU Horizon Europe funding, to develop publicly visible Athena Swan/Gender Action Plans. These plans outline the institution's commitment to achieving gender parity, with clear targets, timelines, and accountability measures. Requiring these plans to be publicly accessible provides transparency and encourages institutions to commit to measurable progress. This visibility gives an additional layer of accountability, ensuring that universities continue to make meaningful progress toward gender parity.

Considering the current state of play in the Irish HE sector in 2025 O'Connor and Irvine's 2020 prediction that Irish HE's approach to gender equality and Athena Swan could lead to progress predominantly not

seen elsewhere is increasingly validated by recent developments. Irish universities have made significant strides in adopting the Athena Swan principles leading to greater gender diversity in decision-making roles and senior academic posts. The Athena Swan framework has enabled the Irish HE sector as a whole to take a coordinated approach to tackling gender inequality in a sustainable way. The framework takes an evidence based approach which encourages institutions to take an honest reflection of their current practices and the impact of the actions being made on a regular basis.<sup>4</sup> The impact has been transformative in many ways: institutions have re-evaluated promotion and recruitment practices, improved support structures for female staff, and focused on career development initiatives that cater to the needs of women in academia (Drew, 2020). There are currently 131 Athena Swan award holders in Ireland (115 Bronze; 16 Silver). This includes 20 institutions (16 Bronze; 4 Silver). One national research institute holds an award and 111 departments/units also hold awards (95 Bronze; 16 Silver) (Athena Swan Ireland, 2025). The Irish model offers HEIs across the EU an example of how collective action and the sustained embedding gender equality in the fabric and leadership of HE organisations can have long-term impact, as is evidenced in the case studies below.

### **Case Study: University of Galway**

University of Galway (formerly known as National University of Ireland, Galway) has faced significant challenges related to gender equality. A landmark case of gender discrimination in academic career progression was filed against the University in 2014 which acted as a catalyst for the national focus on gender equality driven by key stakeholders and the HEA mentioned earlier in this chapter. While challenges remain, considerable progress has been made over the past ten years.

The aforementioned case resulted in a finding that discriminatory practices existed within the University's academic promotions process, and University of Galway took a proactive approach to address the issues identified. Despite some resistance, the University Management Team sought to tackle its gender equality issues head-on and established a Gen-

<sup>4</sup> Athena Swan action plans originally spanned four years, this was extended to five years since 2024 (Frequently Asked Questions, 2025).

der Equality Task Force (2015) chaired by Professor Jane Grimson, former Vice-Provost, Trinity College Dublin. The remit of this Task Force was to examine University of Galway's policies and practices and make recommendations to advance gender equality across the institution (Loftus et al, 2025). This effort led to the creation of the University's first Gender Action Plan (GEAP 1) in 2016. The Task Force was a precursor to the HEA's review of Gender Equality, and many of the recommendations made by the HEA's review were inspired by University of Galway's review.

Members of the University of Galway 2016s Gender Equality Task Force, under the leadership of Professor Grimson, carried out an in-depth literature review, and engaged in extensive staff consultation, in order to develop an evidence-based set of recommendations to achieve gender equality in the institution. The impact of implementing the recommendations from the Report of the Task Force (Grimson, 2016), and subsequent gender equality action plans (2017 and 2021) alongside extensive Athena Swan applications has had a demonstrable impact on progressing gender equality in the University of Galway community (University of Galway 2021 and 2024). Between 2016 and 2024, the University responded reactively to various challenges but also made significant progress and achieved real systemic change through proactive efforts. These efforts included the establishment of the University's EDI infrastructure, the development of an EDI program, and the embedding of EDI governance structures across the University.

University of Galway appointed the first Vice President for EDI in the Republic of Ireland, Professor Anne Scott, in 2016. Since the University's first GEP the Office for the Vice President for EDI, Institutional Athena Swan Steering Group and action leads have attended rigorously to action implementation. Progress updates are monitored and reported regularly to the University Management Team, the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Campus Committee (EDICC), and to the EDI Committee and HR of the Governing Authority- the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Committee (EDIHRC). These progress reports are made publicly available via the Office of the Vice President of EDI (OVPEDI) website (University of Galway, 2025).

Institutional-level efforts are complemented by initiatives at the School and Unit levels, with the Athena Swan framework playing a key role in promoting a unified, whole of organisation approach. Each School has its own EDI/Athena Swan Committee and the chairs of these Commit-

tees are members of the University Athena Swan Champions Network, which meets twice a semester. Any concerns identified are raised at the more senior IASSG meetings and can be escalated to EDICC or higher, if necessary. This structure facilitates a synergy between a bottom up and top down approach, fostering effective integration of gender equality throughout the organisation (University of Galway, 2025).

The University's engagement with Athena Swan has resulted in the implementation of evidence-based action plans informed by extensive consultation with stakeholders and analysis of quantitative and qualitative data. Every level in the University is involved in the design, implementation and assessment of the resulting GEAPs and there is a clear flow from the student population to every staff category, to School and College level, including the highest levels in the organisation.

The University has achieved a lot in a short period due to the tremendous energy and commitment from across the institution. Some actions include the introduction of grants of up to € 10,000 for academic staff who have taken extended leave to restart their research following maternity leave, and a "Promotions Project" which offered specific purposeful workshops on academic promotion (University of Galway, 2025). The impact of these gender equality efforts is evident in several ways. For instance, promotions and recruitment campaigns since 2016 are continuing to transform University of Galway's gender profile. In quantitative terms, the University has made significant strides in increasing the number of women in senior leadership positions. The University has increased gender balance on all senior leadership committees:

***Increased Female Representation on Senior Leadership Committees  
at University of Galway***

	<b>Percentage Female 2015</b>	<b>Percentage Female 2023</b>
<b>Údarás na hOllscoile - Governing Authority</b>	43%	53%
<b>Academic Council</b>	20%	52%
<b>University Management Team</b>	25%	44%

There have also been notable increases in the number of women acting as Heads of School across the institution, even in traditionally male dominated disciplines. In 2017 35% of Heads of School were women, this

has increased to 56% in 2025. Similarly, the number of Executive Deans of College has increased from 14% women in 2017, to 50% in 2025. The academic pipeline is also growing stronger, with significant increases across the board:<sup>5</sup>

***Increased Percentage of Women Across Academic Grades***

<b>Academic Grade</b>	<b>Percentage Female 2015</b>	<b>Percentage Female 2023</b>
Established Professor	13%	27%
Associate Professor/Prof In	11%	67%
Senior Lecturer	31%	45%
Lecturer	52%	56%

While progress is ongoing, the University of Galway has emerged as a leader in embedding gender equality and EDI into institutional practice. Its sustained commitment has resulted in tangible, systemic change. Initiatives such as mandatory Equality Impact Assessments, rigorous recruitment monitoring, and regular audits of critical processes like academic promotion demonstrate a proactive, structured approach that keeps gender equality central to decision-making at all levels (University of Galway, 2025).

### **Case Study: Trinity College Dublin, the University of Dublin**

Trinity has been at the forefront of progressing gender equality in the HEI sector in Ireland over the last decade. Of note is the election of the first woman Provost and President in Trinity in 2021 when Dr Linda Doyle took up this role, the first woman leader since the University was established in 1592 by Queen Elizabeth I. As a crucial early advocate for the Athena Swan Charter, awards and processes to be adopted in Ireland liaising with colleagues in UCC and UL, Trinity assisted in creating the framework within which all HEIs now need to function within to secure state core and research funding. To inform this work, Trinity initially did site visits to other Coimbra Group universities which were working on Athena Swan

<sup>5</sup> The “leaking academic pipeline” refers to the progressive loss of women and other underrepresented groups at successive stages of the academic career path, from postgraduate study through to senior leadership, resulting in their significant underrepresentation at the highest levels of academia (Shaw & Stanton, 2012).

awards and action plans and had progress and achievements that Trinity could learn from, including the University of Edinburgh. This outward focused and European orientation has remained a key feature of the Trinity EDI approach. Gender equality progress in Trinity has been guided by a series of Action Plans (2015, 2018 and 2023) which have accompanied detailed applications to Athena Swan to bring TCD from bronze institutional award status and three school awards in 2015 to silver institutional award status in 2023. Trinity currently holds the first professional unit in Ireland bronze award and has four schools with silver awards and 18 schools with bronze awards in 2025 (TCD EDI website). This means that 22 of the 24 Schools in Trinity now hold an Athena Swan award and all have local GEPs and active Self-Assessment Teams (SATs) to drive their work forward. Much of the acceleration has occurred since 2020 when the Trinity EDI Office and an Athena Swan/EDI Data Analyst role were both established.

Within Trinity the work of school or unit level Self-Assessment Teams is informed by a unique community of practice, the Athena Swan Champions Network established in 2019, which meets frequently, hosts invited guest speakers and provides a peer learning forum for a community of practice to develop (O'Brien and Williams, 2024). The Chair of the Champions Network sits on the University Athena Swan Committee, along with all Faculty Deans and the Head of Human Resources which facilitates the sharing challenges at school level for potential scale-up and resolution across the University. This collaborative approach extends to award application submissions which involve a phased review process led by the EDI Office in conjunction with Human Resources (HR) senior staff. This helps to ensure a coherent approach to Athena Swan, GEP development and harmonisation with the Trinity institutional GEP as well as observance of Irish equality and employment legislation and requirements (O'Brien Green, et. al.). Such close collaboration is also needed to drive HEA required changes such as the target to have 40% of full professors to be women. Trinity commenced monitoring this area in 2008 with 12% female full professors which has risen to 38% in 2025. This sustained increase over time required multi-faceted approaches to recruitment which Trinity HR colleagues spearheaded and included unconscious bias observers as standard at all stages of recruitment processes and the development of applicant brochures for appointments designed to ensure that tone and content appeal to all potential candidates.

Trinity was named an inaugural European Union Sustainable Gender Equality Champion 2022, following a competitive application process by the European Commission (O'Brien Green, et. al.). This recognised Trinity's demonstration of significant, sustained activity and achievement through the implementation of a GEP over time and brought attention to the Irish HEI sector as three of the four winners in the inaugural award ceremony were from Ireland. It further stimulated gender equality commitment within TCD as it made the Athena Swan efforts and work of the EDI Office more visible across the College community and indeed acted as a reference point for this work within the Coimbra Group network.

Trinity has reduced its hourly gender pay gap from 11% in 2022 to 7.6% in 2024 and reports, as is required in line with the Gender Pay Gap Information Act 2021 (TCD HR website). This reduction and planned next steps to continue the downward trend are aligned with actions contained in the Trinity GEP and require ongoing collaboration between the EDI Office and Trinity HR in addressing issues such as; under-representation of men in certain work roles and ensuring all staff can avail of part time and statutory family and caring leave entitlements.

In April 2023, Trinity hosted the first ever national equality charter symposium, funded via the HEA competitive grant call and in collaboration with four project partners: UCC, University College Dublin, University of Galway and Technological University Dublin. (Sy, et.al). The event was open to all staff working in equality, diversity and inclusion within the higher education sector in Ireland but was particularly relevant to staff working on Athena Swan applications at School, unit and institutional levels in Ireland and those active on Athena Swan SATs. The Symposium consisted of a range of presentations from national and international experts, multiple facilitated networking opportunities and held a specific session titled "Getting to Athena Swan Silver- What does it take? Lessons Learned and Shared when Aiming Higher". The Symposium had over 120 attendees from across Ireland and the post-event participant survey highlighted that participants found it an engaging and stimulating event.

As noted by the European Commission (EC 2021, EC 2022, EC 2025) and the European Institute of Gender Equality (2022) Trinity has played an integral role in gender equality in higher education and Athena Swan adoption and embedding in the sector. Maintaining this momentum, resourcing and sustaining it to include an intersectional dimension and

to work into changing economic and political climates will be the next challenges for the University.

## **Conclusion**

Over the past decade, Irish universities have made significant progress in advancing gender equality, underpinned by national policy frameworks, institutional commitment, and collaborative sectoral efforts. The Higher Education Authority (HEA) has played a central role in integrating gender equality into the governance and funding architecture of the sector. Key milestones—such as the establishment of the HEA Centre of Excellence for EDI, national adoption of the Athena Swan Charter, and gender-balanced leadership structures—have contributed to demonstrable shifts in gender dynamics. Institutional case studies, including those from University of Galway and Trinity College Dublin, illustrate how centralised governance and monitoring, and incentive-based funding can foster systemic change while allowing for institutional specificity.

Yet, while the sector has made commendable progress, gender equality should not be viewed as a goal to be achieved and completed, but as a continuous, evolving process that must remain responsive to changing contexts. Structural inequalities are not static, and their persistence requires sustained attention. As gender equality becomes more embedded in institutional practices, the sector must expand its focus to include inequalities across intersectional dimensions (race, ethnicity, sexual orientation etc.) and develop more nuanced responses— challenges that demand continued investment and innovation.

In this context, funding and structural support for gender equality initiatives must not be seen as temporary or finite. Rather, they should be recognised as essential, ongoing investments in the overall quality, credibility, and inclusivity of the higher education system. Initiatives like Athena Swan, while currently resourced through time-bound mechanisms, play a critical role in building capacity and institutional awareness. Their long-term value lies not only in advancing gender equality but in strengthening governance, leadership, and staff engagement across the sector. Questions about future funding—such as the current end date for Athena Swan funding in 2029—should therefore be reframed: this is not a question of whether gender equality deserves support, but of how

to best resource and evolve it for the benefit of all. This aligns closely with the Coimbra Group's emphasis on gender equality as a cornerstone of institutional excellence and sustainable academic leadership, reinforcing the need for long-term, strategic commitment at national and European levels.

Crucially, collaboration between institutions—particularly between TCD, the University of Galway, and other Irish universities—has been central to the sector's progress. By sharing learning, coordinating approaches, and collectively advocating for change, Irish institutions have demonstrated the power of a unified, sector-wide response to structural inequality. These experiences offer valuable case studies for Coimbra Group members, illustrating how sustained collaboration and shared commitment can translate policy into lasting impact.

In short, education, oversight, accountability, and—arguably most crucially—funding must remain permanent features of the higher education EDI landscape. Irish higher education's gender equality journey illustrates that cultural and structural change is possible when resourced and coordinated effectively. As other institutions and countries look to replicate or adapt this model, the Irish experience underscores that lasting progress is not self-sustaining without continued leadership, investment, and commitment at all levels.

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The title of this book - *Why EDI Matters* - is a statement, not a question. It asserts that equ(al)ity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) are fundamental to democratic societies and strong institutions. Yet today, these principles face growing resistance, from backlash in U.S. higher education to conservative reactions targeting EDI in parts of Europe.

This timely collective volume provides a critical yet constructive analysis of EDI in prestigious European universities, situating these challenges within a broader global context. It examines the political pressures, institutional complexities, and transformative potential of embedding EDI in higher education.

At a moment when social justice, academic freedom, and democratic values are under threat, *Why EDI Matters* states that advancing EDI is not optional. It is essential for building resilient institutions and safeguarding the principles that sustain equitable, inclusive, and egalitarian societies.

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