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The Importance of Equality Plans and Practices in Higher Education Institutions: Analysis of Equality Plans of Spanish Universities

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Abstract

'Gender equality', 'equal opportunities' and all kinds of 'equality' between individuals are important issues that need to be improved for sustainable development. 'Equality Reports' have an important role in the development of equality practices. The practices of universities, which have direct and indirect impacts on social development through their education and research-development activities, are of key importance in this regard. This research aims to reveal the importance of equality practices in universities and provide a general framework on what universities can do in order to promote equality culture by examining Gender Equality Plans (GEPs) of the top three Spanish universities, known for their high performance in this area. It is hoped that these findings will serve as a useful guide for other universities looking to implement or publish their own GEPs.

Keywords: Equality, Gender Equality, Equality Plans, GEPS, Equality in Universities, Higher Education Institutions

1. Introduction

Gender equality and all equality issues are within the scope of human rights. Inequalities on earth have persisted since the dawn of humanity. However, over the course of changing historical processes, many positive developments have been achieved for ensuring gender equality. Nevertheless, gender equality has yet to be fully achieved globally, despite being more prominent in certain countries. According to the World Bank Report 2022, globally, women still have only three quarters of the legal rights afforded to men (The World Bank, 2022a). If we look at education figures, one of the most basic levels of equality, latest United Nations (UN) statistics show that girls and boys are equally likely to enroll in primary and secondary education. The dropout rate for girls in primary school is 9%, while it is 7% for boys. The percentage of female students enrolled in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) programs, typically described as predominantly male, is 35%. The ratio of female researchers is 30% (UN, 2020).

Gender equality in terms of educational participation and educational achievement has been achieved in most OECD countries. However, in many developing countries, girls still have poorer educational attainments, especially at the secondary and tertiary levels. Young women are less likely to choose STEM fields than young men and, women who complete these fields are less likely to work in these sectors. Achieving gender equality in education in these countries will not only ensure equality in employment, but will also help to postpone early marriages, reduce infant mortality rates and improve the health conditions and education of future generations (OECD, 2011: 2).

On the other hand, even though statistics are important, numbers can sometimes be indicative. Gender inequality is a perception, a cultural and personal perspective and a code embedded in the socio-political structure. At this point, it is

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reasonable to argue that inequality stems from deeper systemic issues rather than mere statistics. While the number of female students has significantly increased, it is crucial to recognize the structural inequalities that extend beyond numerical representation. Miriam E. David calls these statistical tables, which emphasize numerical equality, the 'numbers game' and states that this is a structure used to mask the power games that continue to be played against women. According to David, the rules of this game need to be transformed to develop a more feminist-friendly or egalitarian future (2015: 23).

In our contemporary world, although women in developed countries have nearly equal rights to men in education, law, economics, politics, and social spheres, gender inequality persists in many other parts of the world. The lower social status and subordinate position of women remain global challenges that must be addressed in the pursuit of gender equality (Bayhantopçu, 2021: 114). In addition, significant steps must be taken to achieve global progress, not only in gender equality but in all areas of human equality. At this point, schools play a crucial role in fostering the necessary changes in awareness and behavior. Universities hold an especially valuable role in driving this transformation.

The issue of gender equality has become an increasingly important policy requirement for academic institutions. University leaders, facing ongoing inequalities between male and female academics and administrators at all levels, are tasked with identifying action strategies to reduce and eliminate gender bias within their organizations (Rosa et al., 2020: 1).

Investing in formal education is essential to promote equal employment opportunities and strengthen economic growth. This investment enhances cognitive and non-cognitive skills and productivity, providing individuals with more abilities to develop their knowledge and skills throughout their lives (OECD, 2011: 2). Therefore, it is particularly important to evaluate and improve women's conditions in higher education. Over the past 20 years, positive changes have occurred with the increasing number of highly qualified women in academia and the labor market (Rosa et al., 2020: 1). According to the latest data provided by THE (Times Higher Education) index in 2022, there is a growing performance and interest in achieving the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including SDG 5 - "achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls." A total of 938 institutions provided data on their contributions to SDG 5 in 2022, showing a 21% increase compared to 2021 (UNESCO, 2022). However, research indicates disparities such as men receiving higher research funding, publishing more articles, having higher representation in STEM fields, and women facing more difficulties in work-life balance (such as not being able to resume their careers after maternity leave, lack of flexible working hours, lack of childcare support), higher representation of men in senior positions in their careers, and men receiving higher salaries than women in the same positions (Rosa et al., 2020). Research shows that, in proportion to their grades, female students' mathematical skills are underestimated and overlooked, while male students' are overestimated; that female teachers receive less favorable evaluations than male teachers in all disciplines; and that women are less likely than men to

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obtain tenure or be honored with an endowed chair, even if they are equally successful in academic achievement. Additionally, research shows that male academics are more likely to receive research grants or awards and receive more funding, while women spend more time on teaching and committee work and are more likely to receive service awards (Buitendijk et al., 2019: 24). Similar findings have also been highlighted in development reports published by the EU, particularly concerning academia and sustainability.

Universities are powerful institutions for promoting gender equality, diversity and inclusion, not only in their institutions but also in society (Rosa et al., 2020). Universities are in a position to develop measures to break down existing societal biases and counterbalance stereotypes and reduce existing inequalities. By recognizing the problems faced by underrepresented groups in society and academia, universities can help to reduce existing inequalities and close achievement gaps between groups (Buitendijk et al., 2019: 11). In particular, it is essential to change students' perceptions of equality. Raising students' awareness and sensitivity about gender equality contributes to changing their attitudes, behaviors and cultures both within higher education institutions (HEIs) and in other aspects of their lives. It helps to eliminate their gender-based prejudices, if any. Secondly, some students can be drivers of change, in the informal process of change with their perspectives (EIGE, 2022a: 19). By emphasizing equality, diversity and inclusion, universities can create an environment where everyone works together and individuals feel valued. With this understanding, people's sense of belonging, daily satisfaction, performance and innovative capacity can be increased (Buitendijk et al., 2019: 19). At this point, it is important for universities with a holistic approach capable of facilitating comprehensive transformation to address the issue.

This research aims to reveal the importance of equality practices in universities and provide a general framework on what universities can do in which areas in order to establish a culture of equality. To achieve this, the study discusses Equality Plans, which play a crucial role in developing these practices, and analyzes the equality plans of high-performing Spanish universities in this regard. Additionally, the study aims to serve as a valuable resource for universities preparing their own equality plans.

2. The Importance of Laws and Protocols Regarding Equality Plans in Universities

2.1. Policies

A research which has been conducted within the scope of the INVITED project, led by the European University Association (EUA), with the partnership of the European University Continuing Education Network (eucen) and the support of the European Students' Union (ESU) aiming to support universities in developing strategies towards equality, diversity, and inclusivity, aims to establish a database on HEIs' approaches, success factors, challenges, and required support. In a survey responded by 159 HEIs, when asked "How do you support students during their studies to ensure diversity, equality, and inclusivity?", 87% of universities mentioned

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studies to ensure diversity, equality, and inclusivity?", 87% of universities mentioned 'guidance, counseling, mentoring'; 77% mentioned 'accessible structures/activities'; 70% mentioned 'language courses'; 68% mentioned 'psychological support'; 63% mentioned 'inclusive learning and teaching methods and tools'; 62% mentioned 'part-time education options, flexible courses'; 58% mentioned 'financial support'; 39% mentioned 'childcare on campus'; another 39% mentioned 'remedial courses'; 32% mentioned 'housing support'; 8% mentioned 'other', and 1% stated that they did not have specific activities (EUA, 2019: 28). As seen, there are many different methods to ensure diversity and equality. However, specific guidelines are necessary to present these within a cohesive framework.

David argues that despite feminist contributions in academia over the last 50 years, the patriarchy or hegemonic structure in HEIs is still felt and experienced by women, and at this point, the question of how to transform universities to achieve real gender equality among all students and academics should be asked (David, 2015: 1). While there are many answers to this question, it is reasonable to assert that the legal regulations and strategic plans established by countries is the most important factor.

For example, in its 'National Strategy on Gender Equity and Equality' report, the United States states that girls' education affects their future economic security and thus the nation's security. It is noted that sexual and gender-based violence, including harassment and abuse, hinders economic and political participation and negatively affects health and well-being. It also undermines women's ability to advance in the workplace and leadership in all sectors. The report states that these strategic objectives are inherently linked and must be addressed in concert to achieve their vision for gender equity and equality (The White House, 2021: 9).

In another example, Swedish Council for Higher Education stated that 'all activities in HEIs must promote sustainable development, which means ensuring a healthy and good environment, economic and social well-being and justice for present and future generations' according to the Higher Education Act 1992 (Swedish Council for Higher Education, 2021). According to the Act, "equality between women and men must always be taken into account and promoted in the activities of HEIs". Furthermore, the 'Swedish Discrimination Act' requires all workplaces in Sweden, including research organizations, to document their active measures to prevent discrimination and promote gender equality between employees and students (EIGE, 2022b).

Six countries in Europe require gender equality planning across all sectors, including HEIs, while 12 countries have specific requirements for higher education. France, Ireland, Spain and Switzerland are among the countries with the most comprehensive requirements for equality plans set by law (European Commission, 2021a). One of the best examples is the Spanish government's legislation requiring institutions to publish equality plans and reports. In Spain, the 'Equality Law', published as 'Organic Law 3/2007', is one of the most important laws ensuring gender equality. One of the most important points of this law is that organizations

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with more than 250 employees have to publish an equality plan (BOE, 2007). Moreover, the new law requires that institutions with more than 50 employees to publish an equality plan (BOE, 2020). Therefore, each university in Spain is required to have an equality plan. Each institution regularly reports its policies and activities in accordance with its own structure in these plans. The Ministry of Universities, which supports these laws, is responsible for promoting the principle of gender equality in university education and aims to guarantee the prioritization of gender equality in all university policies, programs and projects (Ministro de Universidades, 2022). CRUE - The Conference of Rectors of Spanish Universities - also encourages gender issues to be on the agenda of many Spanish universities (CRUE, 2022). The importance of the existence of laws is reflected in numerical performances.. According to RUIGEU (Network of Gender Equality Unions for University Excellence), 54 Spanish universities have an equality plan (RUIGEU, 2022).

All research organizations, universities and funding agencies in Spain are obliged to comply with specific legal obligations related to equality and gender equality. Therefore, although legal and policy frameworks differ between countries, violations of existing regulations can lead to fines, legal proceedings and liabilities, reputational damage, loss of attractiveness and/or internal conflicts. Therefore, the existence of laws and internal procedures is important (EIGE, 2022a: 32). At this point, laws, guidelines and expectations of international organizations, SDGs and regulations developed by universities within their own internal systems are important tools to ensure equality.

2.2. Networks, Committees & Projects

There are also different networks that bring universities together to promote gender equality. For example, EQUALITY is a network of 23 HEIs from 18 Latin American countries and 4 European countries to develop strategic measures to promote gender equality and the representation of women in leadership positions in research, academia and society in general (EN, 2022).

Universities also carry out many different activities on equality within their own organizations. For example, at the University of Amsterdam, the Faculty of Science has a special scholarship program for female talents to increase the number of female scientists. The Sorbonne University works to improve the quality of life of disabled students and staff and to reduce the impact of this disability on their careers. The University of Helsinki has had an 'Equality Committee' chaired by the rector since 1990 and the university published its first equality plan for 1995-1999 (Buitendijk et al., 2019: 42, 50, 60). Cambridge University has a full-time 'Sexual Assault and Harassment Advisor' who provides psychological and practical support to students who have been harassed. The 'Breaking the Silence' Initiative, which has been implemented at Cambridge University since 2014 as a result of research conducted by students on the prevalence of sexual harassment in universities, is a campaign to prevent the problem, support victims and improve reporting mechanisms by drawing attention to harassment both within the school and in society. The project's communications campaign for cultural change produced more than 500 media articles, tweets reached five million accounts and the

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accompanying film series was viewed 90,000 times on Facebook. Student incidents reported to the university increased by 1000% in 18 months during the campaign period, with the university receiving 350 anonymous reports of harassment and misconduct. Thousands of students were informed and more than 200 students received training on how to safely intervene in harassing situations. More than 250 staff members received training on how to respond appropriately to disclosures of sexual harassment (Buitendijk et al., 2019: 42-43). University Paris 7 Diderot integrated a mandatory 3.5-hour awareness-raising session on gender equality for incoming first-year students into its orientation program, applicable in every department (EIGE, 2016: 36).

Some of the other projects conducted in this field are as follows: 'GARCIA (Gendering the Academy and Research: Combating Career Instability and Asymmetries)' focuses on promoting gender culture and combating gender stereotypes and discrimination in European universities and research centers. 'Combating Career Instability and Asymmetries' project works on gender-sensitive approaches in education and training. 'INTEGER (The Institutional Transformation for Effecting Gender Equality in Research)' project aims to create sustainable structural change to improve the career paths of women researchers. Similarly, the 'EGERA (Effective Gender Equality in Research and the Academia)' project brings together higher education institutions from 8 countries to develop and monitor equality plans (European Commission, 2022a). Created in 2005 to promote and transform gender equality in higher education (HE) and research worldwide and to encourage a commitment to advance women's careers in science, technology, engineering, mathematics and medicine (STEMM) employment, the UK-based 'Athena Swan Charter' has begun to address gender equality more broadly across the globe. For example, it provides guidelines and roadmaps for monitoring and collecting data on diversity and it facilitates the ease of university management efforts in this regard (AdvanceHE, 2022).

The European Commission argues in the 'Structural Change in Research Institutions' report that gender-responsive management of universities and research organizations will have a positive impact on policies and practices related to the recruitment, promotion and retention of both women and men. The report's recommendations for universities and other institutions are as follows: (1) Integrate a gender dimension into undergraduate and postgraduate curricula across the university (especially in engineering and science); (2) Develop an Equality Plan and include audit results (sex-disaggregated statistics) in annual reports, including gender pay gap, staffing statistics and senior committee membership; (3) Engage in and follow up good practice projects; (4) Develop skills for career development and research content (European Commission, 2012).

Horizon Europe also addresses gender equality at three main levels: (1) Having a Gender Equality Plan (GEP) in place; (2) Integrating the gender dimension into research and innovation content; (3) Achieving the target of 50% women in Horizon Europe-related boards, expert groups and evaluation committees and increasing gender balance in programs. It also proposes five thematic areas: (1) Work-life

balance and organizational culture; (2) Gender balance in leadership and decision-making; (3) Gender equality in recruitment and career progression; (4) Integration of the gender dimension into research and teaching content; (5) Measures against gender-based violence, including sexual harassment (European Commission, 2021b).

To ensure the sustainability of gender equality measures, it is essential to integrate these practices into the organizations' routine procedures and to establish them structurally. This can be done by introducing new roles/positions, such as a gender equality officer, and modifying or structurally replacing existing routines and procedures in the organizations. Furthermore, creating links with other strategic planning processes and/or embedding the 'Gender Equality Plan' directive in other, broader strategic documents will contribute to its sustainability (EIGE, 2022c).

3. Framework for Equality Plans

According to Hussain et al. there are seven key performance areas of a university: (1) Teaching quality, (2) Research culture, (3) Technological capacity/talent development, (4) Accessibility, (5) Community engagement, (6) Internationalization and (7) Environment. Achieving sustainable excellence requires a university's commitment to transparency, fairness and accountability at all levels of governance, for which visionary leadership is essential. To ensure and advance sustainability, a university needs to establish a quality management system, i.e. a well-defined protocol for documenting, monitoring, evaluating and controlling its processes and systems (Hussain et al., 2019: 10). Equity Plans are one of the necessary tools within this framework.

Horizon Europe requires all public bodies, including national ministries or other public bodies, non-profit organizations, public or private HEIs and research organizations to have Equality Plans in place by the end of 2022 (Horizon Europe, 2021). At this point, Equality Plans are an important tools for universities to mainstream equality practices within their own organizations and then across society. EIGE (European Institute for Gender Equality) describes the preparation of equality plans in six steps: First - analyze the structure of the organization, identify potential experts in the field of gender equality; Second - examine the legal framework, identify different indicators to measure gender equality, map gender-based data; Third - set goals for equality, set specific objectives and indicators, take inspiration from what other organizations are doing, develop collaboration with stakeholders, and prepare a timetable; Fourth - implement these goals and ensure visibility of the work, again involving stakeholders in the process; Fifth - establish a monitoring and evaluation system, define key indicators to measure progress, and share results with the organization on a regular basis; The sixth step is to work on the next plan, decide on priorities and next steps, conduct benchmarking and adapt to changes in legal, national and EU frameworks (EIGE, 2022c: 4).

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Complementing this, according to the roadmap for the implementation of customized Gender Equality Plans by the GENERA (Gender Equality Network in the European Research Area) Project, there are six key steps to sustainable Gender Equality Planning. These are respectively as follows: (1) Learn: Understand the decision structures and rules of the organization and define the institutional framework within which decisions and actions will be implemented; (2) Analyze: Analyze the current situation through the collection of sex-disaggregated quantitative and qualitative data using various gender indicators; (3) Design: Design a customized 'gender equality plan' by identifying specific areas for action and development and draw up a realistic organization-specific timeline; (4) Implement: Work in partnership with decision-makers to promote the implementation of specific gender equality measures and make visible their place in structural changes; (5) Monitor and Harmonize: Monitor progress and how measures are being implemented and align them with measures and targets; (6) Final Evaluation: Making a final evaluation and taking the necessary measures to move forward according to the results. At the core of these steps is the establishment of an active top management leadership, and implementation team at all organizational levels, responsible for overseeing the implementation process and ensuring that all related activities are conducted by this team (Baraban, 2017: 8, 9).

A well-designed legal and institutional framework and good organizational management are essential for mainstreaming gender equality and delivering the expected results. In addition, it is equally important to equip staff with the understanding and tools to enable them to fulfill their gender equality mandate effectively. This is where gender equality competence development comes into play as one of the most important components of a gender mainstreaming strategy (EIGE, 2016: 4).

Based on the literature presented so far and the research content of the study, it can be suggested that the main areas that should be included in equality plans within the scope of the main fields of activity of universities can also be classified under the titles of (1) Governance Mechanisms; (2) Education-Training; (3) Research-Development, Innovation; (4) Equality in the Workplace; (5) Work-Life Balance; (6) Social Participation Activities; (7) Awareness and Communication Activities; (8) Reporting and Monitoring.

3.1. Governance Mechanisms

Evidence from HEIs, and similar research on gender equality more broadly, clearly shows that the engagement and commitment of senior institutional leadership is critical for advancing gender equality. Decisive and sustained action is needed to address gender inequalities. This should be accomplished through consistent, strong messaging that highlights the importance of gender equality and ensures that the issue remains on the agenda, even when other parties or partners may not be particularly interested (Mott, 2022: 14). It is therefore essential to have a strategy and a management presence in the first place. An effective Gender Equality Plan is a strategic document that involves the entire organization. Plans require top management leadership and support and formal commitment but work

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organization, including staff, students and stakeholders (Horizon Europe, 2021). At this point, gender budgeting, which is about identifying ways to redistribute resources for gendered management and financial decisions and ensuring equal opportunities for every individual in the organization (EIGE, 2022c: 45), is an important aspect to consider when setting relevant strategic goals for institutions.

To strengthen this system, it is essential to establish procedures and regulations, create a dedicated unit under the rectorate, form sub-committees, and implement management systems necessary for overseeing equality practices. This should be done within the framework of specific strategies, ensuring that equality plans are followed, and their objectives are disseminated throughout the university. Equality units, for example, are important hubs for Spanish universities to pursue equality goals for women and men. Gosálbez and Merino state that until the creation of equality units at the university, research groups on women, feminism and equality were the primary structures contributing to the issue of discrimination against women, and that now, in Spain, equality plans are the main instrument for transforming the realities of discrimination and inequality in universities (Gosálbez & Merino, 2011: 14). Therefore, the existence of a relevant unit is important for a holistic and realistic implementation.

3.2. Education and Training

It is important to structure the education system from a gender and equality perspective. Education with a gender perspective allows us to identify and problematize how the construction of images, symbols, discourse, regulatory systems, hierarchies and forms of subjectivity expressed in different disciplines reflect gender relations and contribute to the production and reproduction of particular models of femininity and masculinity (AQU Catalunya, 2018: 26).

Mott argues that there is considerable evidence that the curriculum content often constructs men and boys as the default subject. There are many consequences of leaving sex or gender and women/girls out of the curriculum. These include inappropriate and sometimes dangerous overgeneralizations of women from men's experiences and/or physiology, and misrepresentation of women's experiences and needs from what is constructed as 'normal' based on men's lives. Through training, where a more accurate picture of discrimination and disadvantage can be presented, sexist gender generalizations can be used to explain sex and gender differences (Mott, 2022: 9). Therefore, as Köseoğlu et al. note, as a first step, it is important to acknowledge the fact that women have unique struggles and issues that affect their educational journeys, the choices they make and the rewards they reap. With this acknowledgment comes the need to address and evaluate different dimensions of inequality (e.g., vital, resource, existential) (Köseoğlu et al., 2020: 11). Therefore, it is important to consider curricula from a gender perspective and to integrate an equality perspective into curricula by reviewing each department and each course content. At this juncture, there is a clear need for research on how gender equality and other related issues can be integrated into courses and teaching methods. This includes exploring new approaches and transferring relevant findings to academics through training

programs.

Moreover, equal representation of both academics and students in departments should be considered. For example, women continue to be underrepresented among graduates in STEM fields, accounting for just over a third (35%) of the world's STEM graduates. Women are also in the minority in scientific research and development, accounting for less than one-third (30%) of the world's researchers (UN, 2020). Based on this data, it is necessary to regularly report the number of female and male students in each department, especially in these areas, to identify the departments where the differences between the ratios are high, and to develop new strategies and projects to ensure equality in this regard.

3.3. Research and Development, Innovation

Analyzing the research results of a discipline from a gender perspective can help to show the importance of gender in a particular academic and social field. In other words, gender issues should be taken into account when conducting research or other academic work, both in producing the work itself and in benefiting from its results (Gonzalez & Conejo, 2020: 53).

GENDER-NET, the first European Research Area Network (ERA-NET) dedicated to the promotion of gender equality through structural change in research institutions and the integration of sex and gender analysis in research, has set 'Indicators on the Integration of Gender Analysis into Research (IGAR)' as part of the project. IGAR refers to the use of sex and/or gender analysis at all stages of the research cycle, taking into account the biological characteristics of both women and men and the evolving social and cultural characteristics of gender. The network publishes guidelines on this topic for use in research in different fields (GENDER-NET, 2022). Similarly, in a 2015 report, the League of European Research Universities (LERU) analyzed the role of gender and gender analysis in research and innovation (R&I) and recommended that gender should be better integrated into R&I funding, content and implementation. According to the report, taking gender into account in social and other science research leads to more effective and beneficial results. The report emphasized the importance of support, incentives and resources for gender inclusive research and innovation and provided a twenty-point list of recommendations for stakeholders to take action (LERU, 2015). In addition, it is of utmost importance that students who will work on research, projects, applications and undergraduate and graduate projects are trained with gender awareness. At this point, students should learn to use gender as an analytical and explanatory variable when identifying the research question, conducting a literature review, defining hypotheses, choosing the methodological approach, collecting and analyzing data, reaching and highlighting conclusions (AQU Catalunya, 2018: 17).

In addition to conducting research from a gender perspective, assessing research design from an equality perspective and increasing support for equality-based research, it is also important to support women researchers. In most European countries, research funding success rates are, on average, 3 percent lower for women than for male team leaders (European Commission, 2022b). Although

this gap has narrowed over time, gender differences persist (Rosa et al., 2020: 8).

3.4. Equality at Work

Ensuring equal representation of women in management at the same level as men, conducting hiring processes according to equality guidelines and standardized procedures, and revising recruitment, job announcements, and evaluation criteria within this framework are essential steps. Additionally, ensuring that career advancement, appointments, and other matters consider gender equality; reporting the number of male and female employees at all levels within both academic and administrative staff; taking corrective measures to achieve equal representation in positions with significant gender disparities; and reviewing all occupational health and safety issues from a gender equality perspective are crucial for universities to effectively integrate the equality systems they implement in education, research, and teaching into their internal cultures. Additionally, entrepreneurship is largely gender-based. Women have much lower probabilities than men in establishing and managing new businesses, and investors and funders are predominantly male-dominated. Therefore, specific entrepreneurship training for women, promoting innovation and encouraging graduates to start their own businesses have been identified as important areas that need to be integrated into higher education (Mott, 2022: 38). Women entrepreneurs tend to establish and manage firms in different sectors than men, own smaller businesses, operate with lower capital, and have slower business growth rates compared to firms owned by men (OECD, 2011: 6). Therefore, it is crucial to empower women in the field of entrepreneurship and encourage them by providing trainings, developing programs and projects.

3.5. Work-Life Balance

Another important area for advancing equality practices is work-life balance. According to the focus group research conducted at Trinity College Dublin in 2018, it is stated that it is women, rather than men, who prefer flexible working arrangements and take time off for family care. For this reason, it was reported that many female academics returning from maternity leave find it difficult to return to their posts after leave. Some mothers emphasized how isolated or overlooked they felt and noted how difficult it was for them to catch up with their academic research, especially after taking leave. Mothers reported a lack of appropriate support, including childcare, to help bring them back to the level they were at before in their teaching and especially in their research (Drew & Marshall, 2021: 65). Thus, flexible working hours, enabling employees on maternity leave to find a suitable working environment when they return to work and continue their careers, supporting the research careers of academics and researchers who have children, and child-care support should be included within the scope of equality practices.

3.6. Community Engagement Activities

Higher education projects should be engaged with women in local communities and disseminated through online activities to increase their visibility. E-learning projects and modules addressing gender inequality in higher education, including sexual harassment and violence, should be developed and widely

disseminated (Mott, 2022: 14). Universities should carry out joint projects with both public institutions and Nongovernmental Organizations (NGOs) and should be involved in relevant networks. They should conduct training on all issues that violate personal rights, particularly sexual violence and all forms of violence and harassment, both within and outside the university. This impact should extend to local communities through training programs and informative materials. Additionally, student clubs should be encouraged to engage actively in these efforts. By doing so, student awareness on these issues will increase, and effective practices can be disseminated. Furthermore, establishing volunteer programs for both academic and administrative staff, as well as students, should be included as part of these initiatives.

3.7. Awareness and Communication Initiatives

Communication initiatives play a crucial role in raising awareness of the issue. Awareness and communication activities that need to be carried out include highlighting the achievements of women and ensuring that they are announced through communication activities, developing volunteering programs, providing regular reminder trainings and communication about the procedures and regulations developed on equality, ensuring the announcement of projects through websites, notice boards within the university and social media, organizing more conferences on the subject, providing trainings to both academic and administrative staff. It is important that this awareness is conveyed to both academic and administrative staff through trainings and seminars that provide information on its inclusion in courses and curricula as well as learning techniques. One important criterion at this stage is the use of gender-sensitive language in the university and all communication activities.

3.8. Reporting and Monitoring

Horizon Europe states that organizations should have equality reports that are published on their websites and signed by senior management; a commitment of resources and expertise on gender equality to implement the plan; annual reporting on staff (and students for relevant organizations) based on sex-disaggregated data and indicators; and awarenessraising/training for staff and decision-makers on gender equality and unconscious gender bias (Horizon Europe, 2021). The existence of such a report can only be effective through monitoring, follow-up and measurement systems. Gender audits of existing and planned projects should be conducted systematically. Standardized reports should ensure that the points where there is (or is not) sex and gender analysis, are revisited and discussed (Mott, 2022: 13).

4. Methodology

This study aims to emphasize the importance of equality practices in universities and to provide a general framework for the types of activities they can undertake in this context. To achieve this objective, the research was structured around the question, "What are the main topics and subtopics in universities' equality plans, and what activities are being conducted in this area?" A multiple case study method, a qualitative research approach, was selected for the research.

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The sample was formed using purposive sampling method to align with the purpose of the study. To maintain the performance standard in this field, the global performance tables assessing universities based on the Sustainable Development Goals, specifically THE index, were used as a basis, and universities were selected according to the SDG 5 Gender Equality Performance Scale (THE, 2022a). Instead of focusing on a single university, the first three universities in the index (in Spain) were selected to access more data. Spain was chosen as the sample country because HEIs in this country are legally obligated to have equality plans, and Spain is among the countries with the highest performance in this area. According to THE 2022 index, in Spain, the 'Rovira i Virgili University (URV)' (70.8) is ranked first, 'Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB) University' (70.7) second, and 'Girona University (UdG)' (70.6) third (THE, 2022a). The most recent equality plans and relevant pages on the websites of these universities, which demonstrate advanced performance in equality practices and planning, were analyzed using content analysis method as the data collection tool.

5. Findings and Analysis

Rovira i Virgili University (Universitat Rovira i Virgili - URV) published its first equality report in 2007, and its third equality report in 2022. While the first two equality plans included approximately 50 measures, the third plan contains 35 measures since they have achieved most of their targets. The university has established the Gender Equality Unit to ensure the systematic implementation of these initiatives. This unit includes an advisory board, as well as the Gender Equality Observatory and the Gender Equality Commission. Additionally, there are people responsible for gender equality in faculties. The Equality Unit is responsible for implementing the measures outlined in URV's Equality Plan and works to disseminate awareness of gender equality within the university community and society at large. The Equality, Diversity, and Welfare Commissioner aims to promote gender equality, ensure respect for diversity at URV, and enhance the well-being of the university community (Universitat Rovira i Virgili, 2022a). The university conducts various activities to promote equality, which are integrated into its equality plans. For instance, the Faculty of Engineering and the Gender Equality Observatory of the University organize a "Girls' Day" to promote engineering as a career choice for girls.

Since 2005, at the Autonomous University of Barcelona (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona), the 'Equality Observatory' has been operating to cover inequalities between men and women, particularly those groups negatively affected by discrimination or economic and social situations (migration, age and sexual orientation). The University published its first report in 2006 and released its fourth equality plan for the years 2019-2023. Additionally, the University conducts numerous research and development projects on the issue (Universitat Autònoma

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The criteria for ranking are as follows: The university's research on gender equality (27%); the proportion of first-generation female students (15.4%); student access measures such as application, admission, and completion of school (15.4%); the proportion of senior female academics (15.4%); the proportion of female degree recipients (11.5%); measures to promote the advancement of women, including policies against discrimination, etc. (15.3%) (THE, 2022b).

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de Barcelona, 2022a).

The Equality Unit of the University of Girona (UdG) consists of representatives from eight faculties. The University published its first comprehensive plan in 2009 and released its second equality plan in 2021. Additionally, the University is a member of the 'Network of Universities for Diversity' (RUD), which brings together all Spanish universities to work on sexual and gender diversity (sexual orientation, physical and emotional diversity, gender identity, and gender expression) and diversity initiatives (Universitat de Girona, 2022a).

Each new report of the universities concerned has priority areas, and the relevant indicators are determined according to these priorities. According to the most recent reports, the issues and activities addressed within the scope of equality are as follows:

Rovira i Virgili University has compiled its equality plan under five main headings (Universitat Rovira i Virgili, 2022b). The first is 'The University's commitment to gender equality.' This section, which highlights the importance of the management process as mentioned above, includes: defining and establishing the Equality Unit and relevant commissions and working conditions; creating protocols to ensure equal representation and integrating a gender equality perspective into all regulations; disseminating online information about the plan and protocols; allocating the necessary financial budget to the unit; creating equality plans consistent with the strategic plan; continuously reporting the university's equality performance; informing students and academics about structures, equality, and abuse protocols; increasing the representation of women experts and academics in various disciplines, management, and the media; promoting the use of gender-sensitive language in all units and providing training on these issues; establishing a corporate profile related to gender equality and using it in official gender-sensitive language in all units and providing training on these issues; establishing a corporate profile related to gender equality and using it in official documents; and conducting the university's communication activities from a gender equality perspective. For example, in addition to all these, the University has included in its plan the goal of developing methods to determine the gender equality stance of its suppliers and to make supplier selection and evaluations accordingly. The second section is on 'Identifying sexism and raising awareness on equality'. This section includes the steps of Creating a culture of gender equality; Identifying people who are discriminated against because of their gender; Informing relevant authorities about equality plan activities; Identifying reports on discrimination cases; Organising and communicating internal and external campaigns on inequalities by using e-mails, digital newspapers, social media; Organising joint campaigns with public authorities, campaigning on these issues in secondary and high schools; Awarding prizes for relevant doctoral and bachelor's degree theses; and Promoting courses on this topic. The University has a protocol on discrimination, violence or harassment. Students who encounter such a situation can report it to the relevant center and receive support by filling out a form on the website. Third section is, 'Equality in selection, promotion and job assignment' and the main objectives under this heading are as follows: Preparing regulations on

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recruitment and ensuring that there is no discrimination in the relevant procedures; Identifying career barriers faced by women at the University, taking measures to address them; Identifying areas of gender bias, taking preventive and corrective measures; Providing training to academics and administrative staff; Identifying occupational and physical risks in terms of gender equality; Taking measures to balance wages; Developing mechanisms and campaigns to ensure work-life balance from a gender perspective; Ensuring that the way of working is organised according to equality; Arranging working hours agreements; Creating a section on campus for breastfeeding and dependent people. The fourth section is on 'Incorporating a gender equality perspective into education'. Under this heading, the main objectives are as follows: Including gender equality in undergraduate and graduate courses; Revising course regulations accordingly; Organising courses on gender equality; Incorporating a gender equality perspective into teaching methodology; Using inclusive language and organising trainings on these issues; Increasing the number of lectures provided to high schools and secondary schools in this field. The fifth section under the heading 'Women, science and gender equality perspective' includes: Including gender equality in research projects and taking it into account in research project evaluation; Promoting relevant PhD programs and theses; Creating incentive mechanisms for women's leadership in research groups; Creating funds to support the research of women returning to work after having children; Ensuring the visibility and distribution of gender perspective research and women researchers; Increasing the number of women in areas such as experts, invitees, speakers, trainers; Organising annual symposia, meetings, campaigns. For example, to highlight the importance of women in science, the University publishes an annual calendar dedicated to women in a specific field of knowledge as part of its communication efforts. This initiative helps to raise awareness of the contributions women make to the advancement of science.

Autònoma de Barcelona University (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, 2022b), which thoroughly outlines its general principles, the results of its previous report, awareness surveys on relevant studies, and their outcomes, has identified 38 new measures across five different areas compared to its earlier equality plans, based on the progress achieved. In the first area, 'Promotion of Culture and Equality Policies', measures include 'Making visible sexism and inequalities based on gender', which entails reporting the numbers and positions of student and administrative-academic male-female staff by departments; Promoting non-sexist and inclusive language in the University, in classes, and in all external communication channels; Disseminating equality policies and actions, conducting campaigns and activities related to raising awareness about gender-based inequalities. Other measures encompass ensuring the periodic assessment of the implementation degree of measures in the Gender Equality Action Plan, improving the governance of equality policies, and integrating a gender perspective into the University budget under the section 'Guaranteeing the development of the normative framework and equality policies at the University'. The University carries out different activities for all these areas and explains the outcome of each in its report. For instance, regarding the non-sexist use of language in institutional and

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academic communication, the University analyzed the language used in reports and news on their websites. The findings indicated no clear trend in language usage, but the rate of non-sexist language usage in texts was found to be below 50%. The University aims to evaluate all written texts within this scope and presents these rates with graphs in its report annually. The University also reports the number of social media content in order to make the work on equality known to everyone. The second area encompasses the main heading 'Equal Conditions in Workplace Employment, Access, and Promotion', which includes promoting the selection of candidates from underrepresented genders in recruitment processes; Identifying barriers and challenges to equal opportunities in work and education; Promoting regulations and policies for reconciling work, private, and family life at the University; Preventing the reproduction of gender stereotypes. Under the subheading 'Promotion of Gender Perspective in Education and Research', measures include: Integrating an equality perspective into education and research; Providing resources, training, and educational materials to academics for this integration; Increasing the academic recognition of relevant studies and including the University's performance in this area in all reports. For example, the University provides training on an egalitarian perspective and internal equality initiatives to students, academic, and administrative staff and reports the number of these trainings annually. It promotes advancements in this area by awarding prizes for student research on gender equality and equity. The fourth section, 'Equal participation and representation', includes: Promoting women's participation in governing bodies and balanced representation and leadership and creating tools to ensure this; Integrating a gender perspective in students' club and project activities; Encouraging women's participation in cultural and other activities. The final section, 'Promoting of an Organization free from Sexism and Gender-based Violence', includes the following: Developing the actions envisaged in the University protocol to prevent and take action against sexual harassment, harassment based on sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, and male violence; Disseminating existing protocols and resources on gender-based violence at the University; Preventing and combating sexist and gender-based violence in all activities developed at the University; Raising awareness of violence cases; Providing support to victims of gender-based violence among University employees or students.

The University of Girona (Universitat de Girona; 2022b) structures its report under six strategic areas, with the first strategic area focusing on 'Promoting a Culture of Equality throughout the University'. Under this section, activities include: Organizing regular events, awareness programs, and gender equality-based training sessions to demonstrate the University's sensitivity in this regard; Combating gender bias through training and awareness campaigns; Promoting the visibility of women in institutional events and among award recipients; Defining and strengthening a gender equality perspective in the University's quality system and various fields of education; Regulating practices; Making communication language and visuals gender-sensitive; Appointing student representatives for gender equality and supporting student clubs and related networks; Promoting gender-sensitive research and educational methodologies; Organizing training sessions for the effective implementation of equality plans; Creating regular forums

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for discussing and debating proposals; Increasing the University library's collection of books on gender equality and diversity; Promoting equal representation of men and women in management positions and monitoring wage disparities. In the section 'Education from a Gender Equality Perspective', initiatives include: Organizing training sessions for teachers on teaching from a gender equality perspective; Measuring the integration of the subject into various fields; Integrating it into course outlines and curricula; Encouraging innovation in teaching; Sharing experiences and promoting best practices in teaching. Additionally, efforts aim to increase relevant publications. In the 'Research from a Gender Equality Perspective' section, measures involve: Promoting research groups in this field, establishing databases; Providing training to researchers on integrating this dimension into their research; Promoting the topic in doctoral theses and awards. For instance, the University has published a book offering recommendations for integrating a gender equality perspective into teaching. Under the section 'Equal Rights, Access, Promotion, and Working Conditions', efforts include: Identifying and addressing barriers faced by University staff in their personal and family lives; Ensuring non-discriminatory recruitment regulations; Promoting equal representation in all areas; Providing gender-focused training for academics and administrative staff; Creating affirmative action plans to correct gender bias in academic positions; Establishing academic and educational management activities to balance personal, family, and work life, and safeguarding the status of active researchers in parenthood. The fifth section, 'Commitment against Discrimination and Violence', addresses: Disseminating resources and campaigns to prevent and respond to gender-based violence and revising protocols accordingly; Establishing inclusive care services for LGBT+ individuals; Improving lighting in dark areas on campus. Under the last section, 'Social Commitment and Gender-Sensitive Knowledge Transfer', initiatives include: Fostering inter-institutional partnerships to promote a culture of equality; Creating volunteer projects; Organizing awareness campaigns to combat gender biases; Establishing scholarships and awards associated with gender equality values. For example, the University organizes competitions for proposals aimed at developing awareness and training activities, conferences, and other initiatives to promote gender equality, awarding cash prizes for the best proposals. The University has also outlined its monitoring and evaluation mechanisms in its plan.

All these indicators highlight the issues that can be addressed within the scope of equality studies. Additionally, the headings offer insights into the scope of related sub-studies. Universities report their performance on these indicators annually and present development graphs for each area. This underscores the importance of conducting this process in a systematic and long-term manner.

6. Findings and Discussions

The study reveals that the indicators in the equality plans of the universities considered are aligned with the proposed index indicators for gender equality and sustainability. The indicators proposed by the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) in its gender equality index (EIGE, 2022e) in line with the indicators identified above are as follows: the gender ratio of employees at all levels; average

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years needed for equal career development for women and men; gender pay gap; number of women in decision-making bodies; distribution of male and female applicants for different job positions; distribution of maternity leave taken and number of returnees; distribution of types of leave taken; number of training sessions provided; distribution of male and female researchers; number of female applicants for research positions; work-life balance; maternity leave policy; flexible working hours, support for childcare, workload management, types and distribution of responsibilities taken; selection, promotion, appointment, and career policies; transparency in the selection of committee members, supportive actions to give women opportunities in management and leadership positions; review of recruitment procedures; examination of the gender sensitivity of announcements and advertisements; identification of areas with low female representation and strengthening of women's positions in these areas; integration of gender/social gender dimensions into research and teaching content; establishment of processes to ensure consideration of gender and social gender analysis in research and teaching design and outputs; support for researchers to develop methodologies that integrate gender/social gender dimensions; support for teachers to develop curricula that include gender/social gender dimensions; methods for reporting measures and policies against gender-based violence, including sexual harassment, disciplinary practices; education and awareness-raising; provision of training for researchers and academics on integrating gender/social gender dimensions into research design and teaching curriculum; continuous communication.

Apart from 'management processes', 'procedures', 'integrating equality into education and research processes', 'organising relevant periodical trainings', 'raising awareness on the issue by disseminating communication activities', 'using egalitarian language in all areas' stand out as common areas addressed in all three reports examined. Universities define relevant performance indicators for all these goals. The performances presented in the research also provide a framework for studies on this subject. However, it is important to note that the reports examined are the most recent ones from the universities. Given that these institutions have been working on the topic for many years, their goals have evolved to much more advanced and comprehensive levels. While it is possible to expand the indicators discussed here, each university can also establish indicators that align more closely with its own structure. It is hoped that this study will serve as a reference for universities looking to develop equality plans and systems, as well as a valuable source for academics interested in researching this field.

Establishing equality practices primarily requires a cultural shift. In addition to gender, individuals with different religion, sect, race, gender preferences or with disabilities may also be exposed to inequality. Therefore, it is important to create a perception of equality that considers intersectionality. Equality and gender equality policies, in addition to ensuring equal representation in all areas, require a holistic approach that addresses the roots of the patriarchal structure. Therefore, it is essential to frame the process within a realistic change strategy and support it with long-term goals aimed at transforming perspectives, habits, and awareness. A change in the perspectives of all stakeholders will enable the measures included in

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the plans to be fulfilled much more easily and sustainably. Universities are among the most important structures that will ensure this change.

Highlighting gender equality in higher education can be a significant driving force for the empowerment of women and girls, as well as for societal development. It is crucial to ensure that both boys and girls have equal and fair access to education, that individuals of diverse religions, sects, races, gender identities, or disabilities do not face violence or discrimination, and that they are not hindered in their career development or lifestyles. Furthermore, it is essential to challenge the notion that STEM fields such as mathematics, science, and architecture are predominantly male domains, and to redefine entrepreneurship as an inclusive space rather than a male-exclusive domain. Additionally, sexist and discriminatory language in all areas must be eliminated, consciously promoting inclusive language in classrooms and across the university and addressing heavy working conditions that disrupt work-life balance for all. Providing opportunities like maternity leave and childcare for both mothers and fathers, creating pathways for career development for employees who give birth, and conducting R&D activities that consider the needs of women and children are vital steps. Supporting women researchers and student clubs within these frameworks, along with raising awareness through communication and campaign efforts on relevant topics, are all necessary for advancing equality processes. The realization of these goals is only possible through the widespread adoption of an egalitarian mindset and culture. At this stage, it is essential to establish a commission and subgroups to coordinate these efforts, ensuring a systematic and centralized operation. Furthermore, the relevant commissions should be directly linked to the rectorate to demonstrate that top management prioritize and lead these initiatives. This connection will highlight the importance of the efforts, allowing progress to occur more effectively and swiftly. In addition to setting strategies and objectives in equality plans and planning operations, it is crucial to regularly monitor and report on these processes. Utilizing communication strategies intensively and effectively at this stage is vital for achieving goals more quickly and confidently, while also garnering support from all stakeholders.

Horizon Europe aims to transform processes and structures in research and innovation to reduce gender inequality, emphasizing that this transformation should be comprehensive, encompassing entire organizations and addressing all relevant stakeholders and gender equality issues (EIGE, 2022e). Jeff Hearn, who conducts critical studies on men and masculinity, observes that many men in academia commonly avoid engaging with gender issues and gender equality. This avoidance is often reinforced by slogans such as 'We are all human; we are all equal,' 'Men and women are not different, therefore...', and 'We are one big happy family here.' Hearn advocates for a perspective that reframes the discussion to view gender as a central focus, rather than portraying women as the sole 'problem' to be addressed or adopting a gender-neutral stance. He argues that this shift in knowledge production will lead to less patriarchal and sexist outcomes, ultimately resulting in more scientifically robust insights (Hearn, 2021:107). Therefore, creating structures that include men in the system is valuable.

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Creating a gender-sensitive university requires both behavioral and attitudinal changes; innovative thought systems, legal frameworks, data measurement, training, and campaigns can be used as tools for both types of change. Therefore, universities should share their equality plans with both staff and students and communicate this issue through methods such as social media, brochures, posters, videos, and seminars. They should expand stakeholder engagement activities by collaborating with various stakeholders such as the private sector, government, NGOs, student clubs, etc. Awareness campaigns and social media are important tools for increasing awareness and consciousness within this framework. Thanks to the advantages of accessibility, ease of use, and speed of social media, information disseminated through social media platforms can reach more people in a shorter time compared to other methods. This can enable support for the work done and create a comprehensive perception change.

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