

Common Measures in Gender Equality Plans at Catalan Universities from a Structural Change Approach

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Abstract

Despite the legal framework for gender equality in science developed by the European Union, significant territorial disparity in its implementation has been identified (Caprile et al., 2022; Krzaklewska et al., 2023). The situation in Catalonia is of particular interest in light of a governance system that promotes common gender equality measures across all Catalan universities. This governance system is rooted in the 2015 Catalan Equality Law, which imposed several mandatory requirements on universities. Within this system, the Women and Science Committee (WSC) of the Inter-University Council of Catalonia plays a key role. Our research employs qualitative and quantitative techniques to analyse the implications of common Gender Equality Plan (GEP) measures at Catalan universities. The qualitative analysis involves two steps: Our first step consists of a documentary analysis of GEPs implemented at all Catalan universities from 2006 to 2023, followed by a qualitative comparison between the first GEP and the most recent one approved. From a quantitative standpoint, we proceed with an aggregated regional data analysis of the “Women in Science” Indicators to assess the position and conditions of women in Catalan academia between 2015–2016 and 2022–2023. On the one hand, we detected that agreements under the WSC framework are incorporated into the GEPs of Catalan universities. On the other hand, the findings capture the persistence of gender imbalance in academic positions while also showing a trend towards gender equality with some specific areas of resistance, such as in the case of single-member decision-making positions.

Keywords

academic careers; gender balance in decision-making; gender in teaching; Gender Equality Plans (GEPs); monitoring impact

1. Introduction

The principle of gender equality is a fundamental tenet of legislation within the EU, which, from 1999, has promoted the incorporation of gender equality policies in science by member states and Research Performing Organisations (RPOs; European Commission, 1999). Since then, the development of European gender equality policies in science has been coordinated through the European Research Area (ERA) to “harmonise” R&I systems across Europe.

In terms of strategic goals for gender equality in science, the three main areas which European institutions have focused on have been: (a) the promotion of equality in academic careers, (b) the establishment of gender balance between men and women in decision-making processes, and (c) the integration of a gender perspective into the content of research and teaching (EIGE, 2016; European Commission, 2012, 2021a). Aside from these principal structural areas, in recent developments, EU policies have also addressed major areas of intervention such as gender-based violence, work–life balance at universities, and intersectionality (EIGE, 2024; European Commission, 2021b).

As shown by an empirical analysis of the implementation of gender equality measures in RPOs, European policies have been a driving force for the promotion and implementation of gender equality in science and universities (Anagnostou, 2022; Bustelo, 2023). This influence has been particularly pronounced in contexts where national governments display a lower level of commitment towards the development of gender equality policies (Anagnostou, 2022; Bencivenga & Drew, 2021; Caprile, 2012; Caprile et al., 2022; Krzaklewska et al., 2023). Gender Equality Plans (GEPs) have been a central strategic instrument employed by EU policies within framework programmes for research and technological development to ensure the effective development of gender equality measures across academia.

Despite the efforts to gender equality policies harmonisation through the ERA and the numerous good practices that have been developed therein, gender equality remains an unresolved issue at universities and in R&I. Indeed, analyses of gender equality policies in EU countries have identified major challenges to the achievement of structural change, as well as significant disparity among national contexts (Anagnostou, 2022; Caprile et al., 2022; EIGE, 2016; Krzaklewska et al., 2023).

This article aims to analyse and assess the implementation of gender equality policies at universities in Catalonia which rely on a particular system of governance for the promotion and implementation of GEPs. It consists of an analysis of the measures included in the GEPs of Catalan universities and the indicators on the progress of gender equality in academia published by the Catalan Government.

1.1. A Structural Change Approach to Gender Equality in Science

1.1.1. Conceptual Framework: A Structural Change Approach

Our research is based on a structural change approach (SCA) to gender in science (Bencivenga & Drew, 2021; Bustelo, 2023; Ferguson, 2021; Kalpazidou & Cacace, 2019). This approach focuses on two main dimensions to analyse gender equality actions: (a) it considers the path from the formal definition of gender equality measures to their effective implementation and transformative impact (Bencivenga & Drew, 2021;

Bustelo, 2023; Caprile et al., 2022; Kalpazidou, 2013); and (b) it centres inequalities when addressing the issue of gender and science. Beyond individual performance, this perspective focuses on the interrelationships between structural inequalities in terms of material conditions and cultural and subjective aspects of gender normativity. These interrelationships are considered at the social inequalities level (macro level), while also considering institutional contexts (Bencivenga & Drew, 2021; Bustelo, 2023; Ferguson, 2021; Kalpazidou & Cacace, 2019).

The SCA recognises that new public management tactics in the context of neo-liberal academia—which consists of applying the logic of for-profit business models to the public sector—have led to a highly technocratic culture of control and surveillance, with detrimental effects on the advancement of gender equality (Ahmed, 2007; Castaño et al., 2019). In this regard, studies from a SCA have identified that actions were often limited to bureaucratic box-ticking to comply with external accountability requirements but without generating real change within institutions (Bencivenga et al., 2021; Davis et al., 2012).

As Tardos and Paksi (2021, p. 49) argue: “Equality Plans, to be more effective in their impacts on gender equality, need to be embedded in complex organisational processes and infrastructures, including the commitment of top management to frame gender equality as a strategic priority.” Consistent with this finding, Clavero and Galligan (2021) highlight that one of the most critical aspects of ensuring effective measures towards gender equality is the commitment of senior management within universities. Other factors identified by the literature as particularly explanatory of the lack of measures for structural change being taken are the absence of incentives and sanctions, as well as the lack of accountability to ensure effective results (Bencivenga & Drew, 2021).

1.1.2. The EU Policies and the Role of GEPs from a SCA

The EU situates its policies on gender equality in science within the framework of structural change, as stated in *Reinforced European Research Area Partnership for Excellence and Growth* (European Commission, 2012). From 2010, these policies have shifted from an approach focused on the capabilities of women to be scientists to the progressive incorporation of social dimensions like structural inequalities and institutional barriers; the paradigm shifted from “fixing the women” to a further developed model based on “fixing the organisations’ policies” (Kalpazidou, 2013, p. 163). This approach was fully consolidated by 2012, when the three ERA priorities were established: gender equality in scientific careers, gender balance in decision-making, and integration of the gender dimension into the content of research and innovation (European Commission, 2012).

GEPs are considered key drivers in this process, having been defined as “gender mainstreaming tools that outline the specific actions an institution will take to advance gender equality in their organisation...through a process of structural change” (EIGE, 2024, p. 4). The value of GEPs lies in their comprehensive analysis of each institution’s specific context, combined with a strategic planning of targeted measures that institutions ought to address.

The implementation of EU gender equality policies in science comprises two stages: First, under the Framework Programmes for Research and Technological Development, work programmes are defined to fund projects aimed at developing methodologies and resources to design, implement, and evaluate

effective and transformative GEPs (Bustelo, 2023; Bencivenga & Drew, 2021; Caprile et al., 2022). The second stage introduces the compulsory requirement for participating organisations to design and implement a GEP to access funding (EIGE, 2016; European Commission, 2021a, 2021b).

The Commission has mandated that universities and research centres establish GEPs as a prerequisite to access funding. It has also made the integration of the gender dimension into the content of research and innovation compulsory for all proposals and projects submitted to European calls; however, more than half of the organisations have failed to meet these eligibility criteria (European Commission, 2021a).

One of the main weaknesses of EU policies is the lack of mandatory requirements in national policies. This is coupled with insufficient monitoring and accountability of organisations participating in European calls. This oversight hinders the effective implementation of GEPs and the gender dimension in their projects.

Finally, from the SCA, monitoring and measurement of the impacts of gender equality actions are crucial to ensure both the commitment of institutions and the development of effective measures to address gender inequalities in academia. At the institutional level, the EU specifically recommends the definition of indicators to monitor the progress of GEPs (European Commission, 2012, 2021a, 2021b). At the macro level, the EU has its own system of indicators to monitor gender equality in the European Research and Innovation system, which are published in the *She Figures* reports that are issued biannually by its Publications Office (European Commission, 2025). However, despite these recommendations and the data available at the European level, several studies from an SCA have highlighted the need to improve the monitoring and evaluation of the impact of gender equality measures and GEPs (Bencivenga et al., 2021; Kalpazidou, 2013; Palmén et al., 2020). The present research contributes to this field by focusing on the measures included in the GEPs of Catalan universities and analysing indicators on the progress of gender equality in academia published by the Catalan Government.

1.2. The Context of Spain: Early Legislation but Tardy and Heterogeneous Implementation

Spain was one of the first European countries to implement the EU recommendations on gender equality in academia into its legislation. The enactment of the Spanish Law for Effective Equality between Women and Men (Spanish Government, 2007) was a turning point in the institutionalisation of equality policies in Spain, including its higher education system. This act mandated the establishment of equality units and the formulation of GEPs, which were regarded as the principal instruments for articulating and implementing gender equality initiatives across Spanish universities (Caprile et al., 2022; EIGE, 2016; Pastor et al., 2020; Soto Arteaga et al., 2020).

Despite this early implementation of European regulations in Spanish legislation (Spanish Government, 2007), studies show that the requirements of Spanish Equality Law were not always effectively put into practice across the Spanish higher education system (Caprile et al., 2022; Pastor et al., 2020; RUIGEU, 2022; Soto Arteaga et al., 2020). According to the most recent data from the *Women Scientists in Figures* report by the Ministry of Science and Innovation (2023), 86.8% of Spanish universities had an Equality Plan in force, while others were in the process of implementing their first one. Equality policies are clearly not being introduced at the same rate across all Spanish universities. As Pastor et al. (2020) identified, these variations are primarily influenced by the commitment of the university structure towards gender equality and the

allocation of sufficient funding for the implementation of the GEPs. In this context, Catalonia, on which this article specifically focuses, presents particularities in terms of its coordination mechanisms and the actors that play a key role in implementing GEPs at universities.

1.3. Gender Equality Policies at Catalan Universities: The Role of Women and the Science Committee of the Inter-University Council of Catalonia

The situation in Catalonia presents particularities due to its governance system, which articulates common measures on gender equality to be developed by Catalan universities. This governance system consists of the approval of the Catalan Equality Law (Generalitat de Catalunya, 2015) that establishes several mandatory requirements for universities, together with the key role of the Women and Science Committee (WSC) of the Inter-University Council of Catalonia (CIC). The CIC is not only responsible for coordinating the Catalan university system but also advises the Catalan government on university matters and operates through different committees.

The WSC, created in 2005, is a collegiate body composed of representatives from public and private universities and research centres, as well as relevant governmental bodies, such as the Department for Research and Universities (DRU) and the Catalan University Quality Agency (AQU Catalunya). Its mandate is to ensure compliance with the equality objectives established in the current legal framework (DOGC, 2018). In 2018, it was expanded through the incorporation of AQU Catalunya, which extended its functions to include ensuring compliance with the equality objectives for higher education and research set out in the Catalan Equality Law that was passed in 2015 (DOGC, 2018; Generalitat de Catalunya, 2015).

In the twenty years since its creation, the WSC has coordinated and promoted different joint actions across the Catalan academic system (Berga, 2018), with one of its main contributions being the definition and agreement of common measures that Catalan universities are required to incorporate into their GEPs.

1.3.1. Common Measures for Structural Change to GEPs Established by the WSC

The actions agreed to within the framework of the WSC played a key role in the early implementation of GEPs at Catalan universities (Pastor & Acosta, 2016; Verge, 2021), as also explicitly outlined in the GEPs reports of a range of universities (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, 2024; Universitat de Barcelona, 2022; Universitat de Girona, 2021; Universitat de Lleida, 2008; Universitat Internacional de Catalunya, 2022; Universitat Oberta de Catalunya, 2020; Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya, 2022; Universitat Ramon Llull, 2021).

After the Spanish Equality Law was passed (Spanish Government, 2007), the WSC convened sessions to propose actions to embed GEPs in the Catalan university architecture and to establish indicators to assess their efficacy. As a result, by 2011, all Catalan universities had an officially endorsed GEP—just four years after the Spanish Equality Law was passed in 2007. At present, most Catalan universities have their third or fourth equality plan in force (RUIGEU, 2022).

One of the main actions of the WSC is the creation of methodological materials to support the implementation of GEPs. These include the document *A Decalogue for Equal Opportunities Plans for Women and Men in Universities* (CIC, 2013), which presents some of the good practices emerging from the earliest

equality plans and provides recommendations for the future. The WSC also works on fostering agreement and commitment to develop specific measures within GEPs. In alignment with the main strategic areas developed by European policies, the WSC particularly focuses on the promotion of gender equality in academic careers and gender balance in decision-making bodies, the incorporation of a gender dimension in teaching, and the definition of indicators to measure the progress of gender equality in science.

The WSC's many actions to foster equality in academic careers include its recent promotion of measures to intensify research among women returning from maternity leave. A working group has been set up to urge AQU Catalunya, which is responsible for evaluating academic careers in Catalonia, to consider the impact of maternity leave when evaluating women's research. The WSC is also promoting the implementation of specific measures aimed at making the labour conditions of university lecturers who have recently become mothers more flexible, which has been identified as a critical factor in terms of vertical segregation and the "leaky pipeline effect" of indicators (European Commission, 2025).

Concerning gender balance in decision-making bodies, the Catalan Equality Law (Generalitat de Catalunya, 2015) establishes that universities must "guarantee effective equality between women and men in teaching and research careers and promote the balanced representation of genders in the different collegiate bodies and at all levels of decision-making" (article 28). The Law stipulates that, within five years of its entry into force, public universities should achieve a balanced composition of the members of their decision-making bodies. Consequently, the WSC established a working group to analyse the data on each university and evaluate their degree of compliance with this mandate. In 2021, the WSC agreed to include the gender balance of collegiate decision-making bodies in its "Women and Science" system of indicators, thus generating an annually updated assessment of progress since 2015 (DRU, 2025).

In relation to the incorporation of a gender perspective in undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, gender mainstreaming has been a quality requirement in degree accreditation processes since the introduction of the Catalan Equality Law (Generalitat de Catalunya, 2015). The EIGE recognised this measure as a good practice in its Gender Equality in Academia and Research Toolkit (Benito & Verge, 2020; EIGE, 2020).

With the aim of turning this legal requirement into an effective implementation of a gender dimension transversally into all degrees, the WSC and AQU Catalunya worked together on the creation of an Interdisciplinary Commission of Experts from different fields of knowledge. The outcome of this initiative was a guide for universities, called the *General Framework for the Incorporation of the Gender Perspective in University Teaching* (AQU Catalunya, 2019), with a particular focus on the evaluation of Official Degrees. To provide an incentive and to generate visibility, the WSC created a new award for the best university teaching practices from a gender perspective, called the Encarna Sanahuja Yll Merit Award, presented by the Catalan Government (DOGC, 2019).

Finally, to monitor progress and help ensure real structural change, in 2018, the WSC defined the "Women and Science" Indicators to measure and evaluate the situation of women in Catalan universities and RPOs. These data, which are comparable at the European level, are obtained from the integrated data management system of all Catalan universities and published annually in the 'Women and Science' section of the Government of Catalonia's website (DRU, 2025).

Although several studies mention the specific situation in Catalonia regarding the agreement on common measures (Berga et al., 2022; Pastor & Acosta, 2016; Verge, 2021) further empirical evidence is required to account for the particularities of Catalonia and the role of the WSC in advancing gender equality measures in the GEPs and assess its implication in effective the gender equality.

In the following sections, we will analyse how these common measures are included in the GEPs of Catalan Universities to further the understanding of the implementation of such plans in Catalonia. It not only identifies the degree to which GEPs have been implemented but also presents a nuanced analysis of the measures adopted regarding the three main areas in which the WSC has reached central agreements over the years in alignment with the main strategic areas developed by European policies: (a) the promotion of equality in academic careers, (b) the establishment of a gender balance between men and women in decision-making processes, and (c) the integration of a gender perspective in teaching.

2. Methodology

This research employs a methodology that encompasses both qualitative and quantitative techniques to analyse the implications of the common measures of GEPs of Catalan Universities agreed in the framework of the WSC. We draw on the SCA to consider two levels of analysis. The first is a qualitative analysis of the measures included in the GEPs of the 12 Catalan universities by comparing the earliest approved version with the latest that incorporates the agreement reached by the WSC. Table 1 shows that the first GEPs were issued by Catalan universities in 2006, and most of the others followed suit within a year of the enactment of the Spanish Equality Law (Spanish Government, 2007), with the latest dated to 2011. As for the most recent plans, the oldest that is currently in place dates to 2016, while the newest plan was initiated in 2024.

Table 1. Dates of approval of the first and current GEPs at Catalan universities.

	First GEP: date of approval	Current GEP: date of approval
UB (Universitat de Barcelona)	2008	2020
UAB (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona)	2006	2024
UPC (Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya)	2007	2022
UPF (Universitat Pompeu Fabra)	2008	2018
UDL (Universitat de Lleida)	2008	2016
UDG (Universitat de Girona)	2009	2021
URV (Universitat Rovira i Virgili)	2007	2020
URL (Universitat Ramon Llull)	2008	2021
UOC (Universitat Oberta de Catalunya)	2011	2020
UVic-UCC (Universitat de Vic-Universitat Central de Catalunya)	2008	2022
UIC (Universitat Internacional de Catalunya)	2009	2022
UAO (Universitat Abat Oliba CEU)	—	2022

The documentary analysis is based on the flexible approach of grounded theory defined by Thornberg and Charmaz (2014). This involved the following steps. The first step consists of an analysis of the GEPs through open coding of the different types of measures identified. This is followed by selective coding to identify the measures relating to the WSC's areas of agreement. Finally, the third step entails a nuanced comparative

analysis of the first and the most recent GEPs. The second level of analysis consisted of a quantitative analysis of aggregated secondary data taken from the “Women and Science” Indicators produced by the Catalan Government (DRU, 2025) and agreed by the WSC to gain insight into the potentiality of GEPs as a means for structural change to the conditions and position of women in Catalan academia. Specifically, a comparative analysis was conducted by identifying differences between 2015, the year of the revised Catalan Equality Law (Generalitat de Catalunya, 2015), and 2023, the latest year for which data is available. The indicators analysed were those related to the main measures developed in GEPs and agreed by the WSC, with the exception of the gender dimension in teaching due to the lack of indicators for this area. As the microdata of these indicators is not accessible, a regional analysis was performed by analysing the percentages of women and men in the different positions, the associated conditions, and how they have evolved over time. Doing so revealed different patterns and turning points in terms of gender equality in Catalan academia, which can be directly linked to the measures that the WSC agreed should be included in subsequent GEPs.

3. Results

The results of the study are structured in two sections, corresponding to the two levels of analysis: the qualitative documentary analysis and the analysis of “Women and Science” Indicators (DRU, 2025).

3.1. Analysis of the Measures Included in the GEPs of Catalan Universities

The qualitative analysis of GEP measures is structured around the WSC’s three main areas of agreement: gender equality measures in academic careers (a) the promotion of equality in academic careers, (b) the establishment of a gender balance between men and women in decision-making processes, and (c) the integration of a gender perspective in teaching.

3.1.1. Gender Equality Measures in Academic Careers

The current GEPs of all Catalan universities contain specific measures to achieve gender equality in academic careers, in terms of access and promotion. The centrality of these measures was already present in the initial GEPs (11 of 12 universities had specific measures in place).

In current GEPs, measures pertaining to gender equality in academic careers have undergone a 21% increase in comparison with the initial GEPs (from 67 measures to 81; see Table 2). Specifically, the incorporation of a gender perspective in selection processes has been identified as a primary measure designed to prevent gender bias (13). This involves introducing mechanisms to prevent exclusion and gender bias in selection processes, such as the review of communicative actions related to the publication of the job offer. The analysis of data on selection processes has been identified as a secondary measure (12), with a particular emphasis

Table 2. Number of measures and universities with gender equality actions on academic careers (Catalonia).

	First GEPs	Current GEPs
Number of measures on gender equality in academic careers	67	81
Number of universities with gender equality measures in academic careers	11	12

on gender impact reports, which investigate differences in application and hiring rates between women and men. In the first GEP, several universities developed studies to identify the obstacles impeding women from progressing in their academic careers, with UVic-UCC's investigation into objective and subjective barriers being of particular interest.

However, it is also important to note that while positive actions are advocated by many universities (10), these are not always binding. In fact, only two universities state their obligation to ensure gender balanced representation in academic positions. The UPC is noteworthy in this regard. Its recent strategy included an action to "modify the plan for the promotion of chairs to guarantee a minimum of 35% of positions for female professors" (Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya, 2022). This could serve as a pioneering example for other universities seeking to advance gender equality in academic careers.

Another common measure among Catalan universities concerns the balanced gender composition of selection committees responsible for hiring processes (9). Finally, we also identify measures aimed at promoting training and mentoring programmes to improve women's qualifications and foster their professional advancement (6).

3.1.1.1. Work-Life Balance Measures to Foster Equality in Academic Careers

Specific actions related to work-life balance to foster equality in academic careers, such as making teaching hours more flexible and allowing staff to focus more on their research careers, deserve special analysis in the GEPs of Catalan universities, since 10 out of 12 have interventions in this area. Specifically, Catalan universities have 29 such measures in the latest approved GEPs as opposed to 13 in their earliest plans.

The central actions in this area are those that include a corrective factor for researchers returning from maternity leave. Specifically, six out of the 12 universities are considering measures to promote the research careers of women and/or those who have taken a career break for care reasons. Moreover, all public universities in Catalonia (7) signed a commitment to draw up a plan of action to allow teaching and research staff to focus on research after maternity leave.

The main measure concerns modified schedules and reduced teaching hours for people returning from maternity/paternity or care leave (9). The case of the UPC is noteworthy, where teaching and research staff are freed from teaching or management responsibilities for a certain period of time; meanwhile, the UDG includes actions such as giving priority to candidates returning from maternity leave in the event of a tie in selection processes for associate professorships, and extending the period for the excellence in research accreditation processes. Also, UVic-UCC has a particularly innovative measure, whereby chronological age is replaced by academic age in order to mitigate the impact of maternity on women's academic careers.

Other actions include studies to assess the impact of maternal leave and work-life balance policies on academic careers (6); positive action to facilitate access to training courses (2); and the inclusion of leave not only to care for children, but also for dependent and elderly persons, such as the case of UAB.

3.1.2. Measures on Gender Balance in Decision-Making Bodies

All Catalan universities have specific measures in relation to gender balance in decision-making bodies, and all but one have a specific section dedicated to this in their GEPs.

The number of measures on gender balance in decision-making bodies has experienced an increase of 57% from the initial plans to the most recent ones; the number of measures on gender balance in decision-making bodies rose from 23 to 36 (Table 3), reflecting how this issue is a primary concern among Catalan universities.

Table 3. Number of measures and universities with actions on gender balance in decision-making bodies (Catalonia).

	First GEPs	Current GEPs
Number of measures on gender balance in decision-making bodies	23	36
Number of universities with measures on gender balance in decision-making bodies	11	12

The number of universities employing language that implies an obligation to accomplish parity has increased substantially between the first and current GEPs. A significant shift in terminology is particularly noted in the latest GEPs at the main public universities (UAB, UB, UPC, and UPF), with terms like “encouraging” or “promoting” being replaced by others that express a stronger commitment, such as “correcting” or “ensuring.” Furthermore, specific actions are being designed for this purpose, as evidenced by the examples of the UAB and the UB. Another measure that has been widely implemented is the production of studies and analyses to identify the causes of the gender imbalance in decision-making bodies: 12 initiatives of this type are identified. Finally, the last widespread action in this area is training to overcome the obstacles posed by the lack of gender balance. This training has evolved from being a minor action in the earliest GEPs to being a prominent feature of more recent ones (10). Two key actions have been identified: training on incorporating the gender perspective in positions of responsibility, and leadership training to enable women to overcome obstacles and reach decision-making positions.

3.1.3. Measures on the Gender Dimension in Teaching

From the outset, the GEPs of Catalan universities paid particular attention to the integration of the gender perspective in teaching. This ensures the transversal inclusion of a gender dimension across the content and methodology of all degree programs. This is one of the issues that has evolved the most from the first GEPs to the most recent ones. While nine of the 12 Catalan universities included integration of the gender perspective in teaching as one of their strategic lines in their initial plans, with 51 actions in total, the number has since increased by 121% to 113 measures in the plans currently in force. All universities currently include actions in this area, and only one does not consider it to be a core strategy in its GEP.

The most recurrent actions identified in the latest plans are: training for teachers on the incorporation of the gender perspective in teaching content and methodologies (12), the promotion of transversal competences in terms of gender in all university studies (7), the creation of specific subjects or specialised training programmes on gender or equality (11), and prizes or awards for final degree or master’s projects that incorporate the gender perspective (9; see Table 4). Some universities, such as the UAB, have adopted an innovative approach by integrating the gender perspective into their internal quality assurance system.

Table 4. Universities with measures on the gender dimension in teaching in their GEPs (Catalonia).

	First GEPs	Current GEPs
Number of universities with measures on the gender dimension in teaching	9	12
Number of measures on the gender dimension in teaching	51	113

3.2. Analysis of “Women and Science” Indicators

A quantitative aggregated data analysis of the “Women and Science” Indicators (DRU, 2025) agreed upon by the WSC reveals an increase in the presence of women in different areas of the Catalan knowledge system, particularly in the case of permanent academic positions. Women have gone from occupying just 19.8% of such posts in Catalan universities in 2015–2016 to 29.3% in 2022–2023, an increase of 48% (Figure 1).

	2015–2016		2022–2023		Ratio of percentage increase	
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men
Bachelor's Degree (ISCED 6)	54,7%	45,3%	58,7%	41,3%	7,3%	–8,8%
Master's Degree (ISCED 7)	56,0%	44,0%	57,8%	42,2%	3,2%	–4,1%
Predocctoral Researchers (ISCED 7+)	49,2%	50,8%	47,6%	52,4%	–3,3%	3,1%
Defended Thesis (ISCED 8)	52,6%	47,4%	50,1%	50,1%	–4,8%	5,7%
Grade D (Adjunct Professors)	45,1%	54,9%	48,6%	51,4%	7,8%	–6,4%
Grade C (Postdoctoral positions)	42,0%	58,0%	44,2%	55,8%	5,2%	–3,8%
Grade A & B (Permanent positions)	19,8%	80,2%	29,3%	70,7%	48,0%	–11,8%

Figure 1. Proportion (%) of women and men in a typical academic career and percentage increase, students and academic staff, Catalonia, 2015–2016 and 2022–2023. Source: Own calculation based on “Women and Science” Indicators (DRU, 2025).

Despite the improvement of conditions for women in terms of consolidated positions at university, as shown in Figure 2, their representation decreases later in academic careers, in line with the persistent trend of the “scissor diagram” of women in science (European Commission, 2025). Thus, in 2022–2023, it is identified that women are in the majority at university up to the master's degree stage (57.8%, versus 42.2% for men), with the figures levelling out by the time of the defence of doctoral theses (50% women and men) and the presence of women decreasing from there on, representing 48.6% of adjunct professors (men, 51.4%) and only 29.3% of permanent academic staff, while men represent 70.7% (see also Figure 1).

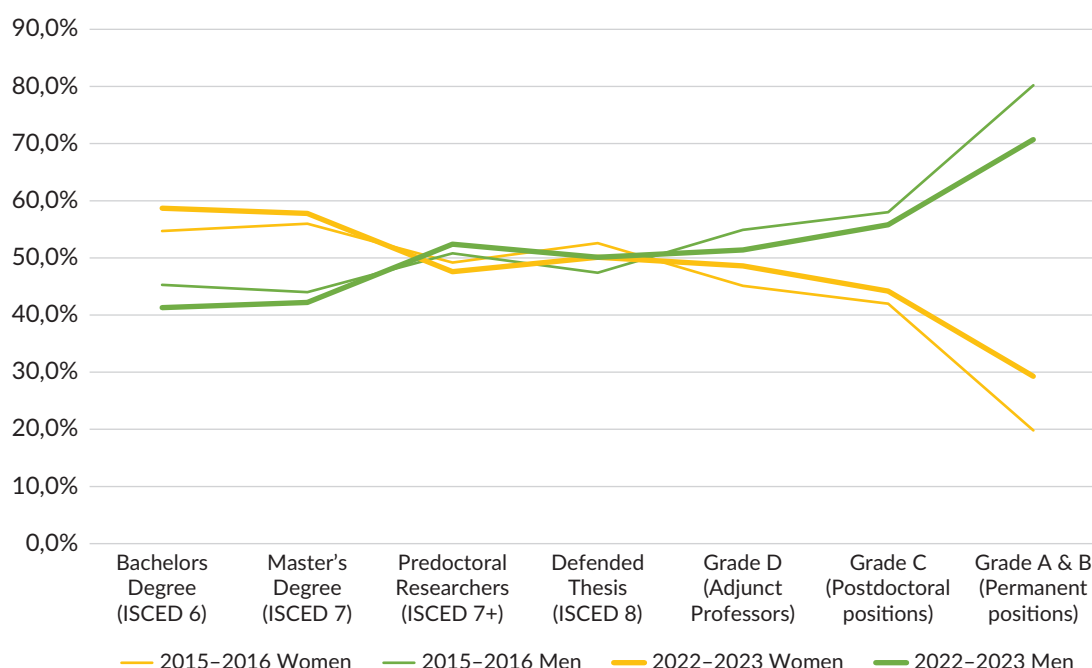


Figure 2. Proportion (%) of women and men in a typical academic career, students and academic staff, Catalonia, 2015–2016 and 2022–2023. Source: Own calculation based on “Women and Science” Indicators (DRU, 2025).

Regarding university decision-making bodies, it is detected that the imbalance between women and men is still significant, but is tending towards gender balance, with significant progress in the last decade. Women went from representing 33% of collegiate decision-making bodies in 2015 to 39% in 2021, an increase of 18%. This improvement is mainly observable on Executive Councils, where the presence of women rose from 31% in 2015 to 42% in 2021, an increase of 35% (Figure 3).

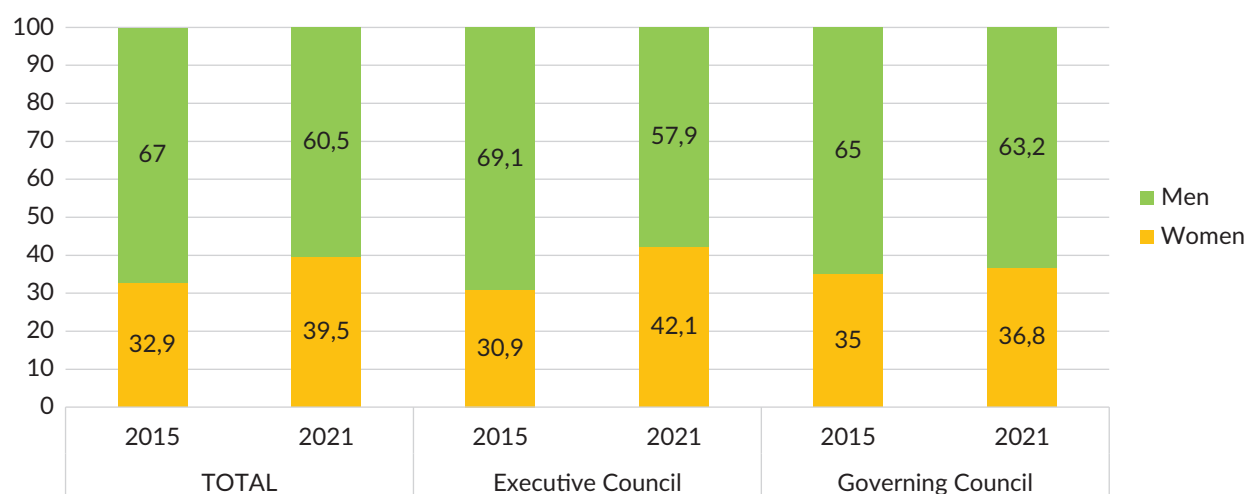


Figure 3. Proportion (%) of women and men in collegiate decision-making bodies at universities. Catalonia. 2015 and 2021. Source: Own calculation based on “Women and Science” Indicators (DRU, 2025).

Despite the trend towards gender balance in collegiate bodies, it is in single-person bodies where we find the greatest gap. Women rectors are still unusual. In 2015, there were none, and in 2021, there was just one (8.3%). In the case of executive directors, the situation has worsened, with a decline of 2.7%. Furthermore, the proportion of female (34.6%) compared to male (65.4%) deans has not changed in this period (Figure 4).

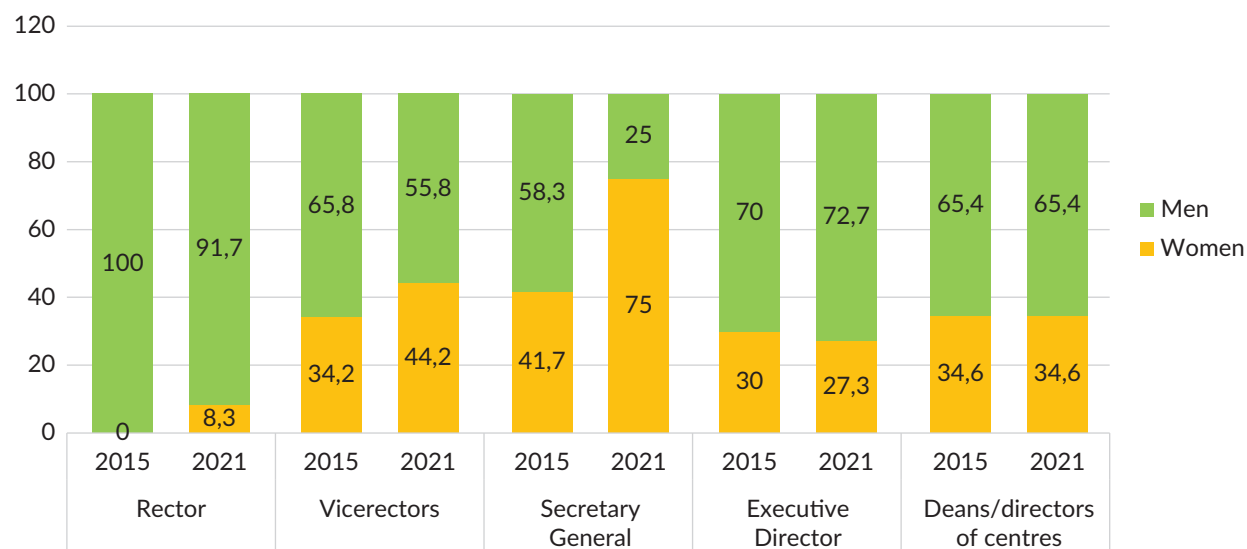


Figure 4. Proportion (%) of women and men in single-member decision-making positions. Catalonia, 2015 and 2021. Source: Own calculation based on “Women and Science” Indicators (DRU, 2025).

However, the number of women serving as secretaries general or vice-rectors is higher and continuing to rise. In 2015, there were 41.7% female secretaries general, and in 2021, there were 75%, while the number of female vice-rectors rose from 34.2% to 44.2%.

The “Women and Science” Indicators do not provide data on the incorporation of the gender dimension in teaching. However, according to the latest report from the Xarxa Vives Universities Network of Catalan-speaking regions (Rodríguez Jaume et al., 2021), 11 out of the 12 Catalan universities offer specific subjects focused on gender studies in their undergraduate degrees. Specifically, 90 of the 493 degrees in the Catalan university system as a whole include such a subject, which represents 18.2% of the overall undergraduate offer. In the case of postgraduate studies, the percentage is 13%. In addition, 12 master’s and postgraduate programmes specialising in gender are offered.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

This study’s findings provide evidence on two levels regarding the common measures of the GEPs of Catalan universities from an SCA. On the first level, it has been found that the agreements in the framework of the WSC have been incorporated into the GEPs of Catalan universities. At the second level, the findings capture the persistence of gender imbalance in academic positions while also showing a significant trend towards gender equality, with some specific areas of resistance.

The findings show that the governance system developed in Catalonia to implement the legal framework on GE introduced early gender mainstreaming policy instruments, as previous studies also pointed out (Pastor & Acosta, 2016; Verge, 2021), and that these have been demonstrated to be effective. Most Catalan universities had their first equality plan approved by 2009, just two years after Spain’s Equality Law (Spanish Government, 2007) was enacted, and all of them followed suit by 2011. In contrast, as of 2023—16 years post-enactment—only 86.8% of all Spanish universities had an approved GEP (Ministry of Science and Innovation, 2023). The governance system is based on the approval of the Catalan Law (Generalitat de Catalunya, 2015), which introduced mandatory requirements for universities in terms of GE in science, alongside the key role of the WSC in promoting agreed common measures to be implemented by all Catalan Universities.

This system of governance could be a good practice to be rolled out to other regions and countries to address the delay and disparities among universities in the implementation of the legal framework on GE, as identified by different studies across Spain and Europe (Caprile et al., 2022; Pastor & Acosta, 2016; Soto Arteaga et al., 2020).

The central measures on the first GEPs introduced by Catalan Universities were related to overcoming the obstacles to female academic careers (51 measures in total), and particularly those aimed at ensuring a gender balance in access to permanent university positions. The efforts made by universities in pursuit of this specific goal have impacted the data on career progression. As identified in the analysis of the “Women and Science” Indicators (DRU, 2025), the number of women in full professorship positions in Catalonia increased by almost ten percentage points (from 19.8% in 2015 to 29.3% in 2023) reaching the European average where women represent a third of all staff at Grade A level (European Commission, 2025). From an SCA, particularly noteworthy measures include those that focus on labour conditions and institutional

barriers, which have been identified in the literature as key aspects to ensure the effective impact of GE measures (Bencivenga & Drew, 2021; Bustelo, 2023; Ferguson, 2021; Kalpazidou & Cacace, 2019).

Some actions implemented by Catalan universities to address vertical segregation could serve as transferable good practices, such as the measures that address both the objective and subjective obstacles to women's academic career progress, in addition to interventions that guarantee a minimum number of full professorships for women.

The most salient actions of Catalan universities to overcome barriers to career progress among women are measures related to work–life balance, which is related to the incorporation of social structural inequalities from the SCA (Bencivenga & Drew, 2021; Bustelo, 2023; Kalpazidou & Cacace, 2019). In this case, it takes into account the gender division of labour that assigns women responsibility for care and domestic work.

The causes of vertical segregation are manifold, but the glass ceiling of academic careers is clearly exacerbated for mothers. This underlines the necessity of policy development to remove obstacles to career advancement for girls and women (Niemistö et al., 2021). The “maternal wall” that refers to the difficulties that women face in remaining competitive while also having care responsibilities is one of the main barriers to women's academic careers (European Commission, 2025; Paksi et al., 2022; Williams, 2005). In this regard, we find that 91% of Catalan universities are implementing specific actions to ensure greater equality in this area. The most innovative measures, which serve as examples of good practice, include a corrective factor in the academic careers of researchers returning from maternity leave and programmes to allow such women to put more focus on their research, allowing them a period without teaching responsibilities. The findings reveal specific measures that, although less common, are noteworthy for being good practice. These include the replacement of the chronological age with academic age in order to mitigate the impact of maternity on women's careers and to give consideration not only to care for children, but also for dependent and elderly persons.

The WSC establishes different mechanisms to promote common measures that supersede inequalities in academic careers at Catalan universities. The main one is the creation of a working group to urge the AQU Catalunya to consider the impact of maternity leave on women's research careers when evaluating their research and to encourage universities to establish specific actions to correct this.

As for decision-making positions, the findings based on the “Women and Science” Indicators show that Catalan universities are moving towards gender balance in collegiate bodies. In line with the mandate of the Catalan Equality Law (Generalitat de Catalunya, 2015) that gender balance be achieved in the collegiate bodies of public universities within five years of its enactment, even the earliest GEPs of Catalan universities included a section on such matters, and since then, measures in this regard have been augmented. However, a significant difference is observed between public universities, in whose current GEPs such parity is mandatory, and private universities, which also mention the intention of promoting gender balance in decision-making positions but without making any specific commitments.

Despite the improvements concerning collegiate decision-making bodies, it is noteworthy to highlight that in single-person bodies (such as deans or rectors), where the law does not establish any regulations, practically no progress has been made in the analysed period, except among vice-rectors and secretaries general. This could be explained by the fact that these individuals are members of the Executive Council and, in the case of

public universities, the rector is duty-bound to form gender balanced teams. The position of secretaries general saw an increase in the percentage of women from 2015 to 2021. These positions merit particular analysis in terms of their functions and consideration, because, as critical studies from a feminist perspective point out, in academia, the gender division of labour is reproduced in management, with women undertaking the greatest burden arising from the increased bureaucratisation and management workload (Castaño et al., 2019).

From an SCA, it is also important to focus on the incorporation of a gender perspective in academic studies. Indeed, Catalan academia has made remarkable progress from the first GEP to the most recent. In their earliest GEPs, only eight of the 12 Catalan universities discussed the integration of the gender perspective in teaching, while all of them now include actions in that area.

European and Spanish regulations recommend that universities include the gender perspective in undergraduate and postgraduate studies; however, it is not mandatory in teaching. In contrast, research requires that this be done, as it is a prerequisite for participating in European Horizon calls for proposals. The Catalan Equality Law (Generalitat de Catalunya, 2015) and the contributions of the WSC have played a key role in this regard, making the gender perspective a quality requirement in study accreditation processes, a significant advancement that can be regarded as an innovative practice (Benito & Verge, 2020; Palmén et al., 2020). A notable development was the establishment, following an agreement with the WSC, of the AQU Catalunya as the entity responsible for evaluating the incorporation of the gender perspective in study programmes.

Despite the central role of the gender dimension of teaching in the GEPs of Catalan universities, and unlike the other main measures that they have developed, there are no available “Women and Science” Indicators to monitor how successfully it has been incorporated. The only available data comes from the report by the Xarxa Vives (Rodríguez Jaume et al., 2021), which indicates that the gender dimension is present in only 18.2% of undergraduate subjects.

In terms of measuring the impact, our findings support an SCA by showing how important it is to have a system of indicators to monitor and ensure accountability for structural change (Bencivenga & Drew, 2021; Bustelo, 2023). The “Women and Science” Indicators offer a key mechanism for monitoring the impacts of GEPs at Catalan universities on academic careers and decision-making bodies to identify the situation of women but it would be also necessary to introduce an intersectional approach (EIGE, 2024) to consider also differences among women taking into account other axis of inequalities and including also the situation of non-binary people.

Furthermore, the definition and implementation of indicators to capture the gender dimension in teaching remain challenging. Finally, it should be noted that accountability can only be fully refined with microdata broken down by university. Such statistical analysis would provide far more complete insights and enable the incorporation of an intersectional approach (EIGE, 2024). One recommendation in this regard is the release of open data sets of “Women and Science” Indicators to enable statistical analysis based on microdata.

In conclusion, our research shows that the governance system in Catalonia has successfully combined concrete regulatory frameworks with the key contributions of platforms to ensure that inter-university and institutional coordination can play a pivotal role in promoting gender equality by implementing common advancements of

GEPs' across all Catalan universities, with some effective improvements in the position of women in Catalan academia. From an SCA, we have highlighted the need for accountability indicators and for the results to be reported publicly. A culture of equality is a priority strategy in order to foster structural change and should be regarded as a central notion of scientific excellence at universities.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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