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Beyond Policy: The Odyssey of Implementing GEPs in European Academia

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Abstract

This article investigates the design and implementation of Gender Equality Plans (GEPs) across nine European universities within a university alliance, emphasising the importance of context-specific interventions. It explores the diversity in GEPs' content, structure, and implementation, as well as the organisation of gender equality work, revealing how national policies, institutional priorities, and socio-cultural contexts shape these processes. Key challenges include gendered academic cultures, internal resistance, structural and organisational barriers, resource limitations, national commitment disparities, and deeply ingrained societal norms affecting gender equality. Drawing on complexity theory, this article advocates for gender-sensitive and context-aware frameworks to navigate the non-linear nature of institutional interventions in academia across diverse settings. Moreover, it offers insights into the implementation of GEPs within university alliances, a context underexplored in the literature. By examining the dynamics of GEP implementation across multiple institutions within a collaborative framework, the article uniquely contributes to understanding how alliances facilitate knowledge exchange, resource sharing, and collective learning, enhancing institutional capacity and fostering synergies to more effectively address gender inequalities.

Keywords

barriers to gender equality; complexity theory; context-aware approach; European universities; gender sensitivity; structural and cultural change; university alliance

1. Introduction

In recent years, gender equality (GE) has become a central focus in European research policy, with strong commitments driven by the European Research Area and Horizon Europe (EIGE, 2024). GEPs are now a

formal requirement for EU-funded research, positioned as key mechanisms for structural change and promoting inclusion in academia (Caprile et al., 2022). However, their effectiveness depends on context and implementation, not just formal adoption (Hodgins et al., 2022; Palmén & Kalpazidou Schmidt, 2019; Tzanakou, 2019).

Despite the existence of countless GEPs in European universities, the literature reveals a critical gap in understanding how national and institutional contexts influence the implementation and effectiveness of GEPs. While there are a few studies—focusing mainly on the Nordic countries (Husu, 2015; Nielsen, 2017; Silander et al., 2024)—there is limited insight into how diverse European contexts shape GEP implementation and effectiveness. Research reveals that legislative support in certain countries may facilitate GEP integration in academia, whereas, in other countries, cultural norms and structural barriers may hinder progress despite existing GE policies (Benschop & Verloo, 2011). Focusing on the institutional level, research reveals that key obstacles to GE in universities include the persistence of patriarchal norms, rigid organisational structures, and exclusionary academic cultures (Morley, 2015; Nielsen, 2017; Van den Brink & Benschop, 2012). While the impact of these structural and cultural barriers is recognised, existing literature often overlooks how these challenges vary across different socio-cultural and organisational settings (Nelson & Zippel, 2021; Nielsen, 2016). Although research emphasises the importance of understanding local gender dynamics (Kalpazidou Schmidt & Graversen, 2020) there is still insufficient cross-national and institutional insight to support effective strategies tailored to specific contexts (Palmén & Kalpazidou Schmidt, 2019). Resistance—ranging from disengagement to active opposition—can also undermine progress (Powell et al., 2018; Snickare & Wahl, 2024).

Furthermore, while existing research has focused on the role of individual universities' efforts to promote GE through GEPs, there is a notable gap in understanding how collaborative frameworks, such as university alliances, can enhance these initiatives. These alliances may foster synergies, but comprehensive analyses and practical guidance for alliance-level strategies remain scarce (cf. EC2U, 2022).

This article addresses these gaps in the literature by exploring two primary research questions:

1. What are the common challenges European universities face in designing and implementing GEPs, and how do these challenges unfold in different contexts?
2. How can university alliances enhance the development and implementation of GEPs through inter-institutional collaboration and collective learning?

The first question focuses on identifying key obstacles—socio-cultural, legal, structural, and organisational—that universities encounter when implementing GEPs. Understanding these challenges in various contexts can inform more effective, tailored strategies for promoting GE in academia.

The second question explores how collaborations within alliances can strengthen the capacity of member institutions to address gender inequalities. Focusing on the role alliances can play may provide insights into collective approaches for achieving sustainable progress in GE and highlight the strategic importance of alliances in harnessing inter-university synergies.

2. Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework employed in this study is designed to navigate the complexities inherent in implementing GEPs within academia across national and organisational contexts. Recognising that GEPs operate within multifaceted systems, this framework adopts a complexity theory and gender-sensitive approach that stresses an understanding of the local dynamics and emerging conditions, and identifying the structural causes of inequality (Chen, 1990, 2012; Kalpazidou Schmidt & Cacace, 2017, 2019; Patton, 2011).

2.1. Complexity Theory

At the core of the conceptual framework is complexity theory, which acknowledges that GEPs are embedded in multilayered systems where numerous variables interact in dynamic, non-linear ways (Greenhalgh & Papoutsi, 2018; Halpern, 2014). Complexity theory emphasises that interventions—particularly those addressing GE—exist within and interact dynamically with complex, adaptive systems. This makes assessing GEPs challenging, given the complexity of gender norms and the multiple interacting factors involved (Bührer et al., 2020; Patton, 2020).

To address these challenges, it is essential to recognise and incorporate complexity as a foundational framework in assessment processes. This involves a number of key considerations (Halpern, 2014; Kalpazidou Schmidt & Ovseiko, 2020; Patton, 2020; Rogers, 2008), namely:

a. Multiple actions and areas of intervention: GE initiatives encompass numerous actions across various domains (e.g., the UK's Athena SWAN GEPs typically include over 30 actions across organisational culture, career development, and flexible working arrangements);
b. Focus on local dynamics: Interventions are tailored to the specific contexts to effectively challenge deep-rooted gender norms, a localised viewpoint that acknowledges that a universal approach is ineffective;
c. Non-linearity: Given the numerous variables and their evolving nature, it is challenging to directly link outcomes to specific interventions—effects emerge in a non-linear fashion, making straightforward attribution difficult;
d. Dynamic adaptation to emerging conditions: Continuous monitoring and adjustment of interventions are crucial, as this allows for modifications based on feedback, unforeseen consequences, and shifts in contextual conditions;
e. Probabilistic nature of change: The impact of GE interventions is better understood in terms of their contribution to change—rather than guaranteeing specific outcomes, interventions aim to create conditions that enhance the likelihood of achieving change.

According to complexity theory, great changes can also emerge from small actions, tipping points, critical mass momentum shifts, or turbulent conditions. Complexity thus involves non-linearity, emergence, adaptability, uncertainty, and co-evolution (Gamble et al., 2021; Greenhalgh & Papoutsi, 2018; Patton, 2011). Embracing this perspective helps GEP assessments reflect the interconnected, systemic nature of change—capturing indirect effects and cumulative impacts shaped by multiple influences (Chen, 1990; Pawson & Tilley, 1997). This enables continuous learning and redesign, essential for tailoring GE interventions to dynamic academic environments (Van Belle et al., 2010).

2.2. Gender-Sensitive Point of Departure

Addressing systemic inequalities requires interventions that target underlying structures rather than isolated events (Podems, 2010). This involves identifying the often-hidden inequalities that sustain these biases. It is therefore important to follow up on GE interventions and scrutinise the implementation process, identifying challenges and evolving conditions (Bustelo, 2017).

Integrating a gender-sensitive and reflexive approach is crucial for assessing GE interventions effectively (Bustelo, 2017). According to Espinosa (2013, p. 174), "gender-sensitive evaluation seeks to discover the structural causes of inequality between women and men in the context of intervention." This approach views inequality as systemic and structural (Bustelo, 2011; Seigart & Brisolara, 2002). Thus, the gender-sensitive perspective stresses structural awareness in addressing gender-specific barriers (Brisolara et al., 2014; Espinosa, 2013; Lombardo et al., 2017).

Bustelo (2017) points out the necessity of integrating a gender-sensitive and reflexive approach into intervention assessment to address inequalities, acknowledging the political nature of evaluation, its role in promoting social justice, the importance of stakeholder involvement, and the need for diverse methodologies. Reflexive assessment from a gender perspective adopts a critical viewpoint during the entire process, questioning the neutrality of policies and interventions. By critically examining the neutrality of GE interventions, such an approach ensures that assessments are attuned to the structural factors perpetuating gender disparities. This comprehensive approach not only assesses outcomes but also scrutinises implementation processes, challenges, and policy design, recognising that policies and interventions themselves can construct and perpetuate inequalities. In developing the conceptual assessment framework presented here, we have adhered to these principles, focusing on structural and systemic factors.

3. Methodology

To address the research questions, this study looked into a university alliance consisting of nine European universities. Specifically, we conducted qualitative case studies consisting of two main methods (Creswell, 2009; Flyvbjerg, 2013): The first method consisted of desk research that involved examining existing university GEPs, national legislation, and other relevant information on GE. This phase took place in 2022, and the data therefore reflect the legislation and GEPs that were in effect during this period. The second method included interviewing employees engaged in GE work at each university. The approach of qualitative case studies was chosen due to the complexity of the research questions being examined (Gerring, 2017; Rog, 2012). This approach had to capture both the contextual factors at the national level, the role of this in GE work at the universities according to the interviewees, as well as the interviewees' understandings of GE, i.e., their interpretations of the causes and manifestations of inequality within the university, and approaches to and goals of GE work (Espinosa, 2013).

The desk review of the national context across the nine member countries utilised various national and European sources, including prior EU projects—such as STAGES (http://www.stagesproject.eu), GARCIA (http://garciaproject.eu), and EFFORTI (https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/710470)—to investigate relevant legislation and cultural factors that could affect GE initiatives within the universities. The focus was on understanding legislative frameworks related to GEP requirements, national funding, parental leave,

recruitment, and anti-discrimination policies (EIGE, 2024). This country-specific information, capturing both supportive and challenging aspects of the legislative landscape that impact the universities' equality efforts, was validated by administrative staff at each university. By examining these elements, the study achieved a more nuanced view of how national contexts shape GE work within the alliance institutions. This contextual understanding informed interviews with university staff involved in GEP design and implementation, which illustrated their on-the-ground experiences and insights.

Furthermore, the study comprised an analysis of each university's GEP, some of which required translation. To summarise the actions outlined in each GEP, a 15-category template was used, including detailed sub-questions on items like the public accessibility of the GEPs. Information was gathered from GEP documents, university websites, and direct communication with university staff. Insights from this process informed the interview guide by highlighting questions arising from the GEP analysis and the translation process, ensuring an accurate understanding of each university's GE efforts.

A total of 26 semi-structured interviews were carried out to identify university strategies for advancing GE and explore employee experiences and challenges with GEP design and implementation (for an overview of interviewee distribution see Supplementary File, Table 1). A general interview guide was crafted based on insights from the country reports and GEPs. This was later customised for each university and, in some cases, adjusted for individual interviewees, depending on their roles in GE work. Participants included GE committee members Consisting of academic and administrative staff, as well as a combination of staff working with GE in addition to their full-time academic or administrative responsibilities, and a few who worked full-time with GE. Notably, all interviewees were women, likely reflecting the predominance of women involved in GE work.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis, which was conducted using NVivo software. The initial coding followed a deductive approach, focusing on predefined themes such as the organisation of GE work, practices, facilitating factors, barriers, and challenges. A second round of coding was then performed, incorporating new codes that emerged from the insights gathered in the first round of analysis.

A key consideration in the interviews was ensuring the anonymity of employees. To protect their identities, all universities and interviewees have been anonymised. Furthermore, the positions used to describe the interviewees have been categorised by the authors to remove any identifiable titles. Additionally, transparency and informed consent were prioritised by offering interviewees the possibility to review the interview guide beforehand, address questions, and receive a data information sheet outlining their rights regarding data usage. To ensure further accuracy, the relevant sections of the first draft of the findings were shared with all interviewees, giving them the opportunity to review and correct any misunderstandings that may have arisen during data collection.

4. Findings and Analysis

4.1. Contextual Mapping Across Nine Countries

To map the national context of the nine countries studied, short distinct reports were produced. Table 2 in the Supplementary File summarises the GE policies organised into general laws, labour market policies, HE initiatives, recruitment practices, and GE funding. In HE, policies vary widely, reflecting national

characteristics and highlighting diverse perspectives and attitudes to GE. Absence of robust governmental policies and financial support undermined efforts to advance GE in universities. Interviewees highlighted that lack of financial support worked against the willingness of people to engage with GE work: "We don't have enough human resources to help with [GE] work. We are lacking resources to move forward with people's willingness to engage" (member of GE committee, University G). A closer look at the countries involved reveals that while all share some foundational commitments to GE as regards general national and labour market laws, as well as gender mainstreaming in HE, there is notable variation in specific approaches and levels of regulatory and non-regulatory support as to HE and GE funding. All countries have anti-discrimination laws, public or subsidised childcare provisions, parental leave, and wage transparency/equal pay regulations. Countries like Germany, Norway, the UK, and Austria show extensive frameworks across all sectors, while others like Serbia and Belgium have fewer comprehensive policies, especially as to higher education recruitment, and France as to GE funding.

GEP requirements vary slightly, with Serbia and Belgium implementing these on a more limited scale. Gender budgeting in HE and a certification and award system are rare, while gender quotas in the labour market are used in Germany, Austria, Norway, France, and Italy. Denmark, Serbia, and the UK do not enforce this measure. This indicates variance in approaches to actively increasing representation. The UK is the only country with a certification system for GE (Athena SWAN), suggesting the use of a more structured approach.

Leadership gender quotas, promoting female representation in higher hierarchical positions, are implemented in Germany, Belgium, Norway, France, and Austria. Monitoring and reporting of GE initiatives are common in HE in all countries except Serbia. Only Italy has gender budgeting specifically for higher education. Finally, while open advertisement for positions and gender-balanced assessment panels are common across most countries, only Austria has a clear policy on gender-balanced shortlists, indicating a targeted effort toward balanced representation in candidate selection.

4.2. Nine GEPs

The nine universities' GEPs were significantly diverse as to their content, structure, and approaches. Table 3 in the Supplementary File provides a concise overview of each GEP, highlighting their respective characteristics, and similarities and differences in focus areas. The nine GEPs reveal shared priorities but also distinct approaches influenced by local contexts and institutional goals. The plans differ in scope, focus, and methodology, reflecting both national influences and organisational trajectories.

For instance, University A grounds its GEP in a strategic focus on high-quality research. It identifies four key areas: recruitment, career development, management, and workplace culture. Each activity is systematically mapped out, complete with timelines and responsibilities, although compliance is not enforced with penalties. In contrast, University B's GEP represents an initial step toward institutionalising GE. Emerging from a self-assessment exercise, this plan emphasises capacity building, data collection, and awareness-raising. It reflects a developing, sincere effort to align with international standards while addressing local challenges. University C adopts an evolutionary strategy, building on a legacy of GE initiatives dating back to 2008. Its GEP extends earlier efforts, focusing on women in leadership, family-friendly policies, and equality in natural sciences. This iterative approach highlights the value of sustained, long-term investment in GE goals.

Diversity of scope and focus is evident in other plans as well. University D's GEP during the studied period focused on governance, personnel policy, education, research, and societal outreach. University E integrates external standards through the Athena Swan framework, demonstrating a robust approach to advancing equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI). Similarly, Universities F and G take a broader approach, embedding diversity within their GEPs. University F's GEP addresses gender, ethnicity, disability, and socio-economic background, reflecting a nuanced understanding of inclusivity. Similarly, Universities H and J adopt detailed frameworks. University H's plan emphasises thematic areas such as work–life balance and measures against gender-based violence, including timelines and evaluation metrics. University J's legally binding plan extends equal opportunities to marginalised groups, including those with disabilities and non-binary individuals.

The GEPs underscore shared themes, including recruitment, leadership, and career development, while demonstrating tailored approaches that reflect institutional and national contexts. Together, they highlight the dynamic nature of GE work, where institutions adapt and refine strategies to meet emerging societal and organisational needs.

4.3. Organisation of GE Work

The organisation of GE work across the nine universities reflects unique approaches, each tailored to institutional needs and priorities (for a brief overview see Supplementary File, Table 4).

At University A, GE is overseen by a Committee for Diversity and Gender Equality, which includes the Rector and Pro-Rector, alongside representatives from all faculties. This committee meets regularly to drive initiatives, follow up on progress, and manage the GEP, though faculty-specific committees operate separately. In University B, a newly established Committee for Gender Equality brings together members from faculties, institutes, and the student body. Their work, while unpaid, signals the university's intent to align with broader equality goals. Similarly, University C employs a dual structure, with a Central Women's Representative team dedicated to GE work full-time and decentralised representatives balancing their equality roles with other duties.

Some universities have opted for a staffing model over committees. At University D, five professionals spearhead GE work, including drafting and implementing GEPs. University E integrates GE into its wider EDI framework, involving full-time governance roles and part-time project officers. Elsewhere, committees include dedicated individuals. University F relies on a full-time Gender Equality Adviser, supported by a Coordination Group chaired by the Pro-Rector, which includes diverse stakeholders. Similarly, University G adopts a collaborative mission-driven model, engaging faculty representatives and specialists to raise awareness, monitor GEP initiatives, and address discrimination. In University H, a Committee on Equal Opportunities and an Equality and Diversity Office work in tandem to address a range of inclusion efforts, from work–life balance to anti-discrimination measures. Lastly, University I has decentralised its efforts across three units: a Human Resources & Gender Equality Department, a Gender Equality & Diversity Unit, and a Working Group for Equal Opportunities.

Across all universities, the size, composition, and focus of these bodies vary significantly, from single units to multiple interconnected teams. The level of leadership engagement, ranging from full-time professional staff to voluntary contributors, further underscores each institution's commitment to GE work.

4.4. Challenges, Obstacles, and Barriers

4.4.1. University Culture and Gender Stereotypes in Academia

Interviews across the alliance universities underscored persistent challenges in advancing GE, revealing common systemic barriers (for a summary of key barriers to GE see Table 1). Interviewees stressed that the culture, practices, and procedures of most universities discourage women from pursuing academic careers and create obstacles in retaining them. The "leaky pipeline" phenomenon, where women face obstacles and delays in advancing their careers, was frequently discussed (Clark Blickenstaff, 2005). The highly competitive nature of academia further hindered the attraction of women to the field, while some women also encountered difficulties in feeling included and envisioning a viable university career.

A key issue was the underrepresentation of women in leadership and high-ranking roles, as one interviewee highlighted: "The higher paid the professorships are, the more the women's quota goes down" (head of GE committee, University C). As the pay and prestige associated with higher-level positions increase, the proportion of women in these roles decreases. This trend reinforces existing gender imbalances, narrowing the pool of female candidates for leadership roles and perpetuating a cycle of inequality.

The lack of female professors also impacts students, preventing them from having role models. In fields where women dominate the student body, the lack of female faculty creates a stark and discouraging contrast. As one participant noted: "We have a large gap between the number of girls that are students in that field and the number of women that we find in academic roles" (member of GE committee, University H).

These three challenges, the leaky pipeline, the underrepresentation of women, and the lack of female role models can be related to the national context discussed above. Implementing and enforcing national policies regarding gender-balanced shortlists in recruitment and gender quotas is one way to address such issues. However, as the desk research showed, many of the countries have such legislation in place, and yet these challenges were prevalent across most of the universities. Hence, although legislation regarding recruitment and gender quotas may be advantageous to GE work, this cannot stand alone in addressing the representation of women in universities. Systemic challenges within universities could explain this.

Systemic obstacles further slow women's career progression, requiring them to take longer paths to professorships compared to men. "Women need on average more years to reach professor ranks," shared one interviewee (member of GE committee, University B). The competitive and exclusionary nature of academia, compounded by "old boys' networks" (head of GE committee, University C), discourages many women from pursuing academic careers. One respondent described the environment as "a very bad atmosphere full of competition, aggressive discourse, so it's not favourable at all for any gender equality agenda" (member of GE committee, University B). This highlights how the cultural context of academia with its exclusionary nature—often steeped in harsh competition—can limit women's progression.

Conservative traditions and hierarchical structures within universities exacerbate these issues, reinforcing power dynamics that disadvantage women. As one interviewee stated: "Universities are hierarchical structures where young researchers depend on the professor or leader of the group. This dynamic favours gender imbalance" (member of GE committee, University H). As highlighted in the citation, dependency on

senior academics—who are often men—creates an environment where power dynamics favour established networks and limit opportunities for young women. These hierarchies tend to privilege those already in positions of authority, making it difficult for early-career female researchers to access funding and career advancement opportunities.

Traditional qualification assessment methods are flawed and pose additional challenges by undervaluing tasks often performed by women, such as teaching, mentoring, and committee work, while prioritising metrics like publications and grants, often associated with male academics. One interviewee observed: "Women end up doing more tasks that don't add much to their CV, while men focus on 'important things'" (member of GE committee, University H).

Finally, the unequal distribution of work and recognition often leads to women being overburdened and undervalued. This dynamic was summarised briefly: "The few women we have are overworked" (head of GE committee, University A). In contexts where structural barriers intersect with deeply ingrained academic cultures, these challenges are particularly pronounced, reinforcing gender inequalities in promotions and leadership appointments.

4.4.2. Structural and Organisational Challenges

The interviews revealed several structural and organisational challenges that hinder the progress of GE in universities. At the forefront is the insufficient effort dedicated to promoting GE. Ambiguity in GEPs often leaves them poorly understood and inadequately implemented. One interviewee highlighted this, noting: "Some of the activities are, on the one hand, very concrete, but in other ways, they are very generally described….If you don't have the will, it's a little bit easier to say that you've looked at it" (member of GE committee, University A). This lack of clarity leads to disengagement and limited impact. The existence of national legislation concerning GEP requirements may help to alleviate this challenge. However, most of the countries considered in this study had such legislation in place, and yet they still experienced a lack of effort at the university level. This could potentially be explained by the attitudes towards GE work and GEPs more generally at the universities.

One such attitude identified through the interviews was the perception of GE work as mere compliance with formal requirements. GEPs and related initiatives are sometimes seen as "mainly formalistic without proper implementation" (member of GE committee, University B), reducing their significance and undermining their effectiveness. This tokenistic approach often leaves little room for meaningful change.

Leadership support, while not overtly resistant, often lacks the tangible commitment necessary to drive progress. Many interviewees expressed frustration with the insufficient prioritisation and funding for GE work, with one stating: "There is no overt resistance…but there is also not enough support" (member of GE committee, University B). This sentiment was echoed by others who noted that financial and human resources targeting gender inequality are consistently limited, reflecting a broader under-prioritisation of the issue. One respondent pointed out: "Funding is always limited, and gender equality is always a nice way to save some money" (member of GE committee, University I). This lack of investment undermines the ability to implement effective and sustainable GE interventions.

The reliance on top-down approaches to implement GEPs was also criticised. While these models provide clear direction, they often fail to account for the diversity of needs across different departments. As one interviewee explained: "A university is a very diverse organisation….Our reality is just so different, so it may work really well somewhere, but then somewhere else it doesn't work at all" (member of faculty GE committee, University A). This observation underscores the importance of flexibility and adaptation in GEP implementation to ensure that policies are responsive to varying departmental structures and cultures.

Moreover, universities are not fully utilising the resources and potential of their diverse staff. According to one interviewee: "[The university is] not using its potential because there is a wonderful human potential…that is not being used sufficiently" (former head of GE committee, University B). This underutilisation stems from a failure to integrate diverse perspectives, capitalising on existing expertise, and recognising the value of inclusivity.

Additionally, the focus on achieving gender balance in leadership and professorships, while important, may overshadow broader dimensions of GE. One interviewee cautioned against this narrow understanding of the GE perspective: "[Gender equality] is something we do in order to have gender balance among the professors…you lose out on [knowledge about the working conditions of researchers and academics]" (head of GE committee, University F). Such a limited view risks neglecting critical issues like career progression, work–life balance, and assessment biases.

Finally, the slow pace of change remains a significant barrier. Universities, described metaphorically as "an oil tanker [that] takes forever to get anywhere" (head of GE committee, University E), struggle with deeply entrenched organisational and structural barriers, slowly adapting due to their size, complexity, and deeply ingrained hierarchical structures. This metaphor reflects how bureaucracy and rigid governance processes impede swift transformations. While departments or smaller units may adapt more quickly, overall institutional progress remains painstakingly slow. One participant stated: "Nothing is really changing….It will take 80 more years, 100 more years [before] we have equality, because it's so slow" (member of GE committee, University I). The comparison between faster-moving departments or smaller units and the slow-moving overall institutional change, reflecting a sense of frustration and disillusionment, underscores how local efforts may produce incremental progress, but systemic transformation remains challenging.

4.4.3. Work–Life Balance

Another challenge to GE that emerged from the interviews is the issue of work–life balance and the impact of family and care responsibilities. Work–life balance issues reflect deeply ingrained societal norms and structural inequities, disproportionately disadvantaging women. Specifically, societal expectations regarding family life and caregiving responsibilities were highlighted. The cumulative effect of these pressures leads many women to choose between family and career.

Societal norms often dictate that women bear the primary responsibility for caregiving and household tasks, regardless of their professional roles. This imbalance was especially visible during the Covid-19 pandemic, where women in academia struggled to manage remote work alongside caring for children. As one interviewee put it: "The majority of family care responsibilities are on women, even if they are professors and scientific researchers" (member of GE committee, University B). The caregiving burden extends beyond young children

to include elderly or unwell parents, further complicating women's ability to balance personal and professional responsibilities. The conflict between family responsibilities and career demands is particularly acute for young women in academia. The timing of key career milestones, such as obtaining tenure or research funding, often coincides with the age at which many women consider starting a family. This misalignment forces difficult choices, with one interviewee summarising: "The beginning of an academic career coincides with the time when women have children" (member of GE committee, University H). As a result, many women either scale back their ambitions or leave academia entirely.

Economic considerations exacerbate these challenges. With men frequently earning higher salaries, families are often compelled to assign caregiving roles to women, as it is seen as the more financially viable option. This reinforces a cycle of professional setbacks for women, contributing to their slower career progression and sustained income disparities. Inequities in parental leave policies further widen the gap. Women taking extended leave for caregiving often experience career stagnation, while limited leave options for men perpetuate the norm that caregiving is a woman's domain. A respondent highlighted the dual issue: "Women take time out for parenting and therefore do not progress as fast or as far, while men avoid parental leave due to stigma and a lack of male role models" (member of GE committee, University E). This systemic imbalance discourages shared caregiving and reinforces traditional gender roles. It is worth noting here, that these challenges relating to work–life balance and care giving responsibilities, in general, were stated by interviewees from all universities included in this study. Hence, regardless of the progressiveness of national legislation or GEPs, the societal norms surrounding these issues prevail.

4.4.4. Societal Attitudes and Cultural Norms

The interviews identified societal factors, cultural traditions, and a lack of national focus on GE as some of the most significant barriers to progress in academia. These challenges, prevalent across the nine alliance member countries, are rooted in entrenched societal perceptions and cultural norms. Key issues include deeply ingrained gender stereotypes, a prevailing belief in male superiority, and societal expectations for women to conform to male-defined norms to succeed. Societal perceptions about gender roles remain predominantly patriarchal, perpetuating male superiority and sidelining women. This systemic inequality is challenging to dismantle, as it is embedded in the fabric of societal and institutional norms. One interviewee remarked: "Our key issue is our deep-rooted prejudices about this patriarchal relationship between men and women" (former head of GE committee, University B). The absence of robust governmental policies and financial support further undermines efforts to advance GE in universities, and hence, the significance of the national and legislative context in which universities find themselves cannot be emphasised enough. This is true for all universities considered here, but Universities B, F, G, and I especially stressed this during interviews. For instance, interviewees highlighted that token policies without substantive implementation fail to inspire motivation or drive real change. An interviewee explained: "When reforms are not successful and you receive no support from the national level, you lose motivation to engage. Gender policies are there but not financed or implemented" (member of GE committee, University B). The lack of national-level commitment signals a broader societal disinterest, discouraging universities from pursuing impactful GE initiatives.

Moreover, stereotypical beliefs in academia about intellectual and professional capabilities continue to disadvantage women in academic settings. Men are often perceived as more competent, perpetuating biases

that limit women's opportunities for advancement. As one respondent shared: "Men were thought to be more cunning than women. Meaning they were more intelligent, measured in brains" (member of faculty GE committee, University A). Another noted that women's presence in academia and other societal positions is often conditional upon adhering to rules historically defined by men: "Women have done it on terms and rules of the game previously defined by men" (member of faculty GE committee, University A). Such stereotypes constrain women's ability to redefine roles and excel on their own terms, thus reinforcing the status quo.

4.4.5. Internal Resistance

Internal resistance to GE initiatives within universities is complex and multifaceted. It includes the belief that GE has already been achieved, the misperception that women's career choices are to blame for gender imbalances, and concerns that initiatives for women unfairly disadvantage men.

One of the most prevalent sources of resistance is the attitude that GE has already been achieved. Some staff members argue that the visible presence of women in various roles, such as professors and students, is proof that equality is no longer an issue. They question the necessity of continued efforts, with one interviewee remarking: "There are definitely some who don't think we have a diversity problem. Because they don't want to [be forced to] hire the 'least qualified' candidate just because it is a woman" (head of GE committee, University A). This perspective reflects a common view within the university that since women are already integrated into academic roles, further interventions are unnecessary.

Additionally, some academics argue that the gender imbalance is due to women's career choices rather than institutional barriers. According to one interviewee: "People believe that it's not that we don't let women do scientific careers, it's them. They don't want it. They would rather do something else" (member of GE committee, University H). This argument places the responsibility for gender inequality on individual preferences rather than structural biases.

Resistance also arises from a perception that current efforts to support women are excessive, leading to a sense of unfairness among some male colleagues. These staff members argue that GE initiatives may be tipping the scales too far in favour of women, with one interviewee noting: "Do we really need this anymore?…Isn't it men who are the minority?" (member of GE committee, University I). The belief that GE has already been achieved leads some staff to question the need for further action, viewing hiring policies as forced measures rather than necessary interventions. Another example highlighted discontent with specific programs designed to support women, such as scholarships for women in STEM, with some colleagues expressing frustration over the exclusive focus on women: "How is it possible that you are funding scholarships reserved only [for women]?" (member of GE committee, University H). This type of resistance is fuelled by a feeling of exclusion and an argument that men, too, deserve such opportunities.

There is also a belief among some that universities, as prestigious institutions, are immune to discrimination and gender inequality. This mindset suggests that the high status of academia makes issues like harassment or discrimination inconceivable within universities. One interviewee shared: "[Many think that] harassment and gender discrimination can't exist within a university. [The] university is a high-status part of the environment [made up of only good people]" (member of GE committee, University H). Thus, the prestige of universities

further fuels resistance, as some staff believe that academic institutions are inherently meritocratic. This view contributes to a dismissive attitude toward GE-targeted actions, as some think that such issues simply do not exist in academia.

Finally, a tension between GE and broader diversity efforts was noticed. Some interviewees expressed concern that expanding the focus to include diversity could dilute efforts and funding for GE, framing it as a zero-sum game: "This move towards diversity…could potentially become a barrier to gender equality" (head of GE committee, University C). Or as another respondent pointed out: "If we are to put money towards diversity measures, then the women will lose out" (member of GE committee, University F). The expansion of diversity initiatives alongside GE efforts raised concerns that resources may be diverted from gender-specific measures, prompting some to perceive it as a competition for funding rather than an integrated, intersectional approach.

Table 1. Summary of key barriers to GE within universities.

Barriers	Subcategories
University culture	Deep-rooted patriarchal views in academia
	Male-dominated norms and expectations
	Conservative traditional and hierarchical structures reinforcing power dynamics
	Competitive culture and resistance to change
	Women expected to conform to male-dominated academic norms Unequal
	distribution of work and recognition—women overlooked and undervalued
	Assessment systems pose challenges by undervaluing academic roles traditionally taken on by women
Structural and organisational challenges	Gender bias in recruitment, promotion, and tenure processes
	Tokenistic approach leaving little room for meaningful change
	Lack of leadership commitment at different levels
	Lack of institutional commitment and structures to support GE
	Lack of human and financial resources
	Fragmented organisation of GE work
	Lack of well-coordinated, top-down and bottom-up strategy
	Not utilising the existing resources and potential
	Discriminatory organisational practices and policies
	Underrepresentation of women in leadership and high-ranking roles
	Lack of role models
Work–life balance	Disproportionate caregiving responsibilities for women—challenges for young women academics
	Gender pay gap and its impact on career advancement
	Parental leave policies that disproportionately benefit women and career stagnation
	Societal pressure on women to choose between career and family

Table 1. (Cont.) Summary of key barriers to GE within universities.

Barriers	Subcategories
Societal attitudes and cultural norms	Deep-rooted gender stereotypes
	Patriarchal norms and beliefs in male superiority and gender roles
	Societal expectations of women's primary responsibility for family and caregiving
	Lack of national and governmental support for GE work discouraging GE efforts at universities
Internal resistance	Institutionalised resistance
	Lack of leadership commitment
	Gender imbalance attributed to women's career choices—blaming the women
	Perception that GE had already been achieved
	Perception that initiatives for women disadvantage men
	Discontent with GE programs exclusive to women
	Universities viewed as immune to inequality
	Concern that diversity efforts dilute focus on GE

5. Discussion

The findings underscore the strong influence of national and institutional contexts on GEP design, implementation, and outcomes. Differences in national policies, governmental support, and institutional priorities across the alliance lead to diverse GEP structures and effectiveness. Academic culture, structural barriers, internal resistance, and societal attitudes further limit GEP impact, reinforcing that effective GEPs cannot follow a one-size-fits-all model (Benschop & Verloo, 2011).

A key finding is the variation in GEP design and implementation due to differences in national policies, governmental support, and institutional priorities (Ní Laoire et al., 2020). Complexity approaches emphasise that GEPs are evolving processes shaped by local contexts (Chen, 2012; Palmén & Kalpazidou Schmidt, 2019). Strong policies in some countries (e.g., Germany, Norway) boost GEP success, while deep-rooted socio-cultural norms in others (e.g., Serbia) hinder progress, despite similar formal policies. These findings stress the need for GEPs' adaptability.

An important dimension of these conditions is the *university culture*, which encompasses ingrained norms, values, and practices that influence academia (Wellcome, 2020). From a complexity theory standpoint, university culture operates as a dynamic system where historical gender biases persist, affecting individual and institutional behaviour. Hierarchical structures and entrenched norms often sustain gender disparities, particularly in how excellence and meritocracy are socially constructed, frequently privileging masculine attributes (Benschop & Brouns, 2003). These cultural norms, reinforced by informal practices such as gendered networking and implicit biases in recognition, contribute to the "leaky pipeline" effect, where women exit academic careers at higher rates than men (Morley, 2015). Our findings reveal that academic cultures that favour traditional assessment criteria may undervalue the contributions of women and other marginalised groups, creating an environment that prevents their advancement. The emphasis on metrics in

assessments of "excellence" and based on "meritocracy" often conceals systemic inequalities, as these ideals are frequently defined through traditional androcentric lenses (Broström et al., 2024; O'Connor & Barnard, 2021). A gender-sensitive lens with initiatives focused on reshaping these metrics to include diverse perspectives can drive incremental cultural changes. However, such efforts require ongoing reflexivity to avoid reinforcing existing male-dominated academic norms and practices (Järvinen & Mik-Meyer, 2024). A reflexive approach also highlights how informal structures, including norms, values, and unwritten rules, impact GE by reinforcing cultural barriers that GEPs have to address to be effective (Bustelo, 2017). This underscores the importance of adopting a cultural and structural perspective in GEPs design that addresses not only formal policies but also the informal organisational norms that shape opportunities for career progression (Acker, 2006). University culture operates as a dynamic, interdependent system with a plethora of variables resistant to rapid change. Multiple actions, and long-term and reflexive strategies are necessary to disrupt deep-rooted inequalities (Kalpazidou Schmidt & Ovseiko, 2020). For example, deconstructing the language of "meritocracy" and embedding diversity into definitions of academic achievement or negotiating "meritocracy" can challenge patriarchal structures and foster inclusivity (Broström et al., 2024).

Structural and organisational barriers reflect deeply entrenched power dynamics within university hierarchies. Theories on gendered organisations (Acker, 1990) highlight how formal and informal practices perpetuate gender disparities, such as unequal recruitment processes and unclear promotion criteria (Nielsen, 2016). From a complexity theory perspective, these barriers are not isolated but rather interconnected with broader societal norms, often reflected in the operations and attitudes within the universities. Addressing them requires systemic, multilevel interventions to transform deeply embedded structural conditions. The organisational structure of each university plays a critical role in shaping the effectiveness of GEPs. In some institutions, GE efforts are centralised within a dedicated department (Universities A, E, F, and G), ensuring a coordinated and cohesive approach. This structure allows for more efficient resource allocation, clearer lines of responsibility, and the ability to monitor progress systematically. Centralised models can facilitate stronger institutional impact by maintaining consistency across departments and ensuring alignment with strategic goals. In contrast, other universities (Universities C, D, H, and I) distribute GEP implementation across various departments or units. While this decentralised approach can foster local ownership and tailored interventions, it also risks fragmented efforts, inconsistent implementation, and a lack of institutional cohesion. Top-down approaches can provide clear institutional direction but often struggle to accommodate the diverse needs of different departments in complex, multilayered institutions (Lombardo & Mergaert, 2013). In any case, decentralisation underscores the need for a well-structured approach to GEP implementation that is backed and followed up by ongoing leadership and institutional commitment (Tildesley & Bustelo, 2024).

The organisation of GE work locally proved important for the outcome and impact of GEPs. Some universities decentralised GEP responsibilities across multiple entities (Universities C, D, H, and I), leading to fragmented efforts, while others opted for a centralised approach (Universities A, E, F, and G). Universities adopting decentralised models often face challenges in maintaining consistent implementation and evaluating progress across different units. On the other hand, universities with centralised GE structures benefit from more streamlined decision-making and comprehensive monitoring systems. However, neither model guarantees success without active leadership engagement and institutional awareness at all levels. Governance frameworks that embed gender awareness into organisational culture are essential for initiating and sustaining change. Without these, GEPs risk becoming mere formalities with limited transformative

potential. This underlines the importance of a well-coordinated, top-down, and bottom-up strategy to ensure cohesive and effective implementation, supported by the active involvement of the leadership, other key actors, and robust internal and external networks (Caprile et al., 2022). A comprehensive, well-coordinated approach supported by engaged leadership and gender-aware governance is critical to overcoming structural barriers (Bacchi & Eveline, 2010). In most of the alliance universities, GE is an institutionalised value. However, while GE is embedded in formal rules and regulations, this does not mean that it also is institutionalised in the processes and practices of everyday life. Active institutional support is essential for providing GEP agents with legitimacy and authority, safeguarding progress, and ensuring the sustainability of change efforts (Tildesley & Bustelo, 2024).

As mentioned above, the focus must be on the local dynamics and GEPs designed and tailored to local contexts to disrupt local self-organisation processes upholding gendered norms. In contexts with high levels of uncertainty and complexity as universities, structural change processes rarely assume a linear trajectory. Instead, as discussed above, they tend to follow a non-linear path, marked by abrupt advancements or regressions, unanticipated challenges, unintended outcomes, and deviations from the initial GEP. As a result, the implementation phase of a GEP necessitates an adaptable, proactive approach, highlighting flexibility to respond swiftly to emerging dynamics (Kalpazidou Schmidt, 2023). For instance, reflexive practices, such as inclusive decision-making, utilising or developing existing potential, and transparent assessment processes can mitigate challenges and disrupt traditional patterns by ensuring that GEP actions are embedded in institutional practices rather than treated as external add-ons. Establishing structures dedicated to GE work, enabling institutions to draw on the expertise and experiences of a wide range of stakeholders (Bustelo et al., 2016) are other practical steps to address structural inequalities.

Resource allocation, human and financial, emerges as a critical structural factor in determining the attainment and sustainability of GEPs' goals. In many institutions (Universities B, F, G, I), limited funding and staffing for GE initiatives prevented GEPs from going beyond minimal, symbolic actions that satisfy policy requirements but fail to address structural inequalities. The findings highlight the compounded impact of these resource limitations, suggesting that consistent and adequate funding is necessary for GEPs to effectively tackle entrenched inequalities and foster sustainable change. In line with complexity theory, without sufficient resources, GEPs struggle to evolve and adapt to enduring challenges, limiting their transformative potential (Kalpazidou Schmidt & Cacace, 2017). Lack of resources is also a sign of underprioritising GE, while repeated calls for more resources without results may be interpreted as a "resistance strategy and an excuse for inaction and not taking responsibility" (Peterson et al., 2021, p. 40). Financial and human resource limitations restrict the scope and depth of GEP impact and reflect institutionalised resistance and lack of leadership commitment.

Work–life balance challenges highlight the intersection of societal expectations and organisational rigidity. Adopting a gender-sensitive lens reveals how caregiving responsibilities disproportionately expected to be performed by women exacerbate structural and cultural challenges. Complexity theory frames these issues as feedback loops where disparities, for instance, as to pay and promotion perpetuate unequal caregiving roles, further limiting women's advancement opportunities. Reflexive strategies, such as equitable parental leave policies, institutional childcare provision, and support systems for caregivers, can help to disrupt these loops and create more inclusive work environments. Such measures challenge broader patriarchal norms by promoting gender-just caregiving responsibilities recognition (Järvinen & Mik-Meyer, 2024).

Broader societal attitudes and cultural norms profoundly influence GE efforts within universities. The wider societal context and stereotypes about gender roles create resistance to change both within and beyond academia. Patriarchal norms and gender stereotypes create implicit expectations that disadvantage women, even in academic settings (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004). Societal attitudes act as external constraints on universities, necessitating multi-level interventions to address them. Gender-sensitive approaches that engage with both internal university practices and external societal narratives are essential—change in societal attitudes often requires simultaneous top-down and bottom-up approaches (Caprile et al., 2022).

Internal resistance to GEP actions reflects different forms of opposition. Resistance often stems from the perception that GE has already been achieved (in some countries) or attributions of disparities to individual choices rather than structural inequities (Snickare & Wahl, 2024). Manifestations of resistance may also reflect concerns about the perceived fairness of targeted GEP initiatives and scepticism regarding the necessity of GE measures and competing institutional priorities. Although establishing legitimacy for GEP actions is crucial for driving change, in some cases the legitimacy of the GEPs has been openly contested (Peterson et al., 2021). Despite a formal mandate, GEP actions often encounter resistance, ranging from overt denials of their necessity to subtle undermining through cemented informal norms and practices (Agócs, 1997). The latter is described as "non-performative diversity," where equality efforts are acknowledged but not notably pursued (Ahmed, 2012). GEPs implemented to appoint women to decision-making positions, such as professorships, often encounter resistance, which is frequently framed through meritocratic arguments. This perspective is commonly used to deny institutional accountability in addressing biases and inequities embedded in decision-making processes and practices regarding recruitment and promotion that produce gendered outcomes (Nielsen, 2016). This stresses the inherent complexity of overcoming resistance and points out the need for flexible, context-sensitive approaches to legitimise and sustain GE measures. According to complexity theory, resistance can act as a diagnostic and monitoring tool, revealing underlying tensions and identifying opportunities to adapt strategies. A reflexive dialogue that addresses concerns about fairness in implementing actions targeted to women, while demonstrating the interconnected benefits of GE, can help build collective buy-in (Palmén & Kalpazidou Schmidt, 2019).

In conclusion, the study underscores how national policies, institutional frameworks, and cultural factors influence the design, implementation, and impact of GEPs. It highlights that effective strategies must be tailored to specific contexts rather than relying on universal models. Our findings align with previous research in highlighting that effective GEPs cannot follow a one-size-fits-all model; instead, they must be customised to the specific national and institutional contexts where they are rooted. Customisation is critical for addressing unique challenges, leveraging local strengths, and fostering meaningful, sustainable changes that go beyond fulfilling basic policy requirements. To navigate the complexities of GE, we advocate for the integration of theory and practice through a reflexive, gender-sensitive lens. Finally, in the following section, addressing our second research question, we look at the results in light of the critical role of university alliances in advancing GE initiatives.

5.1. Implications of the Findings: Promoting GEPs Through Alliance Synergies

We identified distinct implications, which are related to the fact that the studied universities are members of an alliance. Alliances offer a unique platform to advance GE in academia by harnessing the power of inter-university synergies. Based on our findings, we highlight ways to enhance collaboration, align efforts, and strengthen GE initiatives, which may also benefit other alliances.

A strong, unified, and explicitly stated commitment to GE across all member institutions is critical. While all universities have GEPs, our findings reveal that the degree of dedication varies. Some institutions face greater barriers due to national-level constraints, such as legislation (e.g., University B) or socio-cultural obstacles, while others encounter institutional and academic culture challenges (Universities E and F). University leaders are crucial in embedding GE into institutional values and alliance principles, setting a powerful example. Public reporting on GEP progress can further reinforce commitment and sustain long-term engagement.

The findings indicate that the design of GEPs is based on varying interpretations of the GE concept within the studied alliance. For example, some universities (Universities B and D) focus primarily on increasing the number of women, while others (Universities C, E, and F) prioritise structural and cultural change, adopt intersectional perspectives, or integrate the gender dimension into research. A shared understanding of GE among alliance members is therefore crucial for ensuring consistency. By agreeing on core principles, universities can work towards a common vision for GE that aligns efforts and strengthens partnerships, making implementation more impactful. However, a flexible common framework can guide diverse institutions to address GE in their own context while upholding shared standards.

Close collaboration is a cornerstone of the potential impact of the alliance members on GE. Joint initiatives, human and other resource sharing, and common bodies for experiences exchange, allow for a broad and inclusive approach to existing and emerging challenges. Regular communication platforms, such as workshops and online hubs, can facilitate the exchange of best practices, allowing member institutions to draw upon each other's practices and strengths. Such a cooperative structure enables the alliance to address GE issues collectively, increasing the reach and effectiveness of GEPs across the alliance.

Systematic monitoring, evaluation, and reporting are vital for ensuring sustainable outcomes, yet the study reveals that not all alliance members (e.g., Universities B and D) currently have the necessary follow-up mechanisms or competences. Universities with expertise in GE and evaluation could support members with less competence, for instance in assessments, training, or mentoring exercises. Establishing joint mechanisms for accountability and a shared framework for monitoring progress on GEPs would enable each university to assess its efforts systematically and identify areas for improvement. Regular assessments and shared evaluations across the alliance could also foster evidence-based decision-making, ultimately strengthening the efforts of the entire alliance.

Open exchange of knowledge and shared experiences are fundamental to alliances' success in advancing GE. The findings reveal significant variation in universities' experience with GEP design, implementation, and evaluation. Some institutions face challenges due to limited GE expertise and capacity (e.g., University D). More experienced universities (e.g., Universities E and I) can support capacity building by offering mentorship and guidance. Regular workshops, shared human resources, and dedicated online platforms for GE knowledge exchange can further promote learning and the dissemination of effective practices. This collaborative approach would not only strengthen individual universities but may also enhance the alliance's overall GE expertise and capacity.

Overall, the alliance holds significant potential to advance GE by leveraging synergies across its member institutions. A unified commitment to GE, strengthened collaboration, and sustained engagement are crucial in driving meaningful progress. Additionally, systematic monitoring, evaluation, and transparent reporting

mechanisms can improve accountability and long-term impact, ensuring that GE remains a core priority across the alliance.

6. Conclusion

This article explored the challenges faced by nine European universities in designing and implementing GEPs within a university alliance. Findings revealed that national policies, institutional priorities, and cultural and structural barriers significantly shaped GEP implementation and effectiveness. Key challenges included fragmentation, resource constraints, deep-rooted gender stereotypes, and resistance to change, requiring strong leadership and a strategic balance between top-down directives and bottom-up engagement to ensure institutional buy-in. The article highlights the value of integrating complexity theory, gender-sensitive strategies, and reflexive practices in navigating the dynamic nature of GEP implementation in academia.

University alliances offer a promising platform for knowledge exchange, cross-institutional learning, and resource sharing. Through collaboration, universities can develop adaptive, context-sensitive strategies, leveraging shared experiences to navigate resistance and structural barriers. Further research is needed to assess the long-term impact of these alliances on driving sustainable, institution-wide transformations across diverse contexts.

This study offers novel insights into GEP implementation, by detailing the barriers and challenges, emphasising the importance of contextual sensitivity, and highlighting the potential of university alliances in advancing GE in academia.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

Due to the nature of the research, data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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