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## **Gender Equality Plans under Horizon Europe: from difficulties of interpretation to prospects**

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### **1. Introduction**

With the arrival of *Horizon Europe*, the 9th framework programme for research and innovation (2021-2027), in late February 2021<sup>2</sup> the European Union published the European Research Council (ERC) Work Programme containing detailed information for potential applicants and funding requests. In a matter of hours, there was a flurry of informal

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<sup>1</sup> The authors collaborated on an equal basis in identifying the research objectives, the methodology used, and the writing and revision of the paper.

<sup>2</sup> The references to the EU requests and documents cited in this article refer to May 14, 2021.

contacts in academic circles regarding an important new feature of the ERC Work Programme: a box on the application form asking applicants to state whether their chosen institution for research had a Gender Equality Plan – GEP<sup>3</sup>.

The question sits in an academic context where, at European level, official data from *She Figures 2018* (European Commission 2019), the publication providing indicators on gender equality in research and innovation at pan-European level, reveals that just 58% of Europe's higher educational institutions had a GEP in 2016. While several years have now passed and current figures are without doubt higher, it is clear that this type of initiative risks excluding a significant number of universities from potential funding and, even more importantly, limiting European countries which do not have national GEP legislation or programmes. To avoid being cut off from ERC funding and other financial support, the calls for which will be published in the coming months, the only alternative for universities is to swiftly create and implement a GEP. While meeting the Commission's formal requirements is relatively easy, it is much more difficult to implement the process of structural change which will guarantee a successful outcome for a GEP. In other words, there is a risk of it becoming a 'box ticking' exercise, a concern also raised by participants in GEPs that fall within official national programmes such as the UK and Ireland's *Athena SWAN Charter* framework, a system rewarding universities which are formally committed to fostering gender equality using GEPs as their main tool.

On the following pages we will share our experiences of participating in EU-funded projects aimed at implementing GEPs in Research Performing Organisations (RFO), a series of informal meetings held in 2018-2019 at Italian universities supporting gender equality at national and international level, and our knowledge of European literature and documentation on gender mainstreaming and GEP promotion<sup>4</sup>.

In the first section, we will focus on the context for the EU initiative, providing then more detailed information on projects currently available. We will next describe the situation in Italy, where tools and initiatives supporting equal opportunities in academia are not

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<sup>3</sup> We will use this abbreviation from this point onwards, since it is a widely used acronym in European academic circles.

<sup>4</sup> These activities were carried out mainly within the FIAGES project (No 793195), funded by the Horizon 2020 program, Marie Skłodowska-Curie action.

clearly recognised as yet. Finally, we will conclude with observations and ideas for further exploring the issue, which remains relevant until the current EU framework programme, Horizon Europe, reaches its conclusion.

## 2. Efforts to support equal opportunities by the European Union

Since 1984 the European Union has been funding research in the European Research Area (ERA) through multi-year grants programmes known as Framework Programmes for Research and Technological Development, normally abbreviated to Framework Programmes or with the acronyms FP1 to FP9. Since the eighth framework programme, the programmes have also been given a name used in official communications: *Horizon 2020* for the eighth programme (2014-2020) and *Horizon Europe* for the latest programme, which will run to 2027. The last two programmes are different in their specific objectives and actions for the scientific research being funded. While the emphasis in the previous programmes was on technological development, in Horizon 2020 and Horizon Europe the focus has shifted to innovation, as reflected in their full name: *Framework Programmes for Research and Innovation*.

A few years after the launch of the framework programmes, in 1998 the European Commission introduced gender mainstreaming, a strategy designed to integrate gender issues into all Community policies and activities and reduce inequalities between men and women<sup>5</sup>. At the same time, the European Council decided to include Community

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<sup>5</sup> We do not intend and nor is it possible here to chart the history of equality within the EU, mentioned as early as 1957 in the founding Treaty of the European Economic Community (EEC). However, it is important to mention the initiatives that laid the ground for what we have covered in the article, that is the measures stemming from Framework programmes for research and innovation related more closely to the academic and research sectors. We will give a brief outline of the equal opportunities Programmes referred to in the article, which are more general and fall prior to the initiatives which have directly impacted the Research and Development programmes from the fifth framework programme onwards.

The European Community has adopted a series of Action Programmes for Equal Opportunities. The First Community Action Programme in this sense (1982-85) centred on developing a global policy for women's employment. The Second (1986-90) introduced a more diversified policy focusing on disadvantaged and socially underprivileged women. This programme also introduced a series of studies prior to the third Action Programme for Equal Opportunities, covering the impact of new technologies on women's health. The Third Action Programme (1990-1995) sought to improve women's lives by increasing public awareness of gender equality issues, the image of women in the mass-media and women's participation in decision-making processes at all levels and in all areas of society. The Fourth Action Programme (1996-2000) concentrated on integrating gender into government policies.

policy on equal opportunities in FP5 (1998-2002). Shortly thereafter, in 2000, the Commission began promoting studies on the gender impact of each funding programme, laying the foundation for an assessment of gender integration in FP5<sup>6</sup>.

As regards funding for research and innovation, greater emphasis was placed on the gender dimension in FP6 compared to FP5, having become a priority issue at each stage of the project cycle. FP6 included three closely gender-related objectives for research: increasing the number of female researchers taking part in projects, ensuring women scientists are involved in the processes of assessment, consultation and implementation, and redesigning research to ensure it meets the requirements of both women and men. To achieve these objectives, the European Commission asked the scientific community to begin considering gender issues when preparing research proposals, particularly in applications for Integrated Projects and Networks of Excellence: the projects had to include a gender equality action plan. The Commission also raised the percentage of women on various committees, including assessment committees for project calls, aiming to increase the number of women in the database from 18% in FP5 to 40%. They sought: i) Women scientists with experience of any scientific discipline, in order to increase the number of women in all assessment groups for priority issues; ii) Women scientists with experience of any scientific discipline relating to gender issues; iii) Women scientists with gender as their main field of competence<sup>7</sup>. Specific reports were also commissioned along with a summary of the findings from various spheres (EC, 2009).

The FP6 funded Research Performing Organisations - RPOs - and Research Funding Organisations - RFOs – in order to remove discriminatory barriers for women in their scientific careers and in decision-making processes, helping research organisations implement gender equality plans and include the issue of gender in their research. FP7's Science in Society (SIS) programme FP7 and the Science with and for Society (SwafS) programme with calls for Gender Equality in Research and Innovation (GERI).4

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<sup>6</sup> European Commission (2001), Gender impact assessment of the Fifth Framework Programme specific programmes, Promotion of Innovation and Encouragement of participation of SMEs, Luxembourg, Office for Publications of the European Communities. <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/eb6e08f8-9269-48ff-9762-bdc13b6a156a>. This web page and all the other pages quoted in the article were last accessed on 15 May 2021.

<sup>7</sup> <https://cordis.europa.eu/article/id/19868-commission-seeks-women-fp6-evaluators>

- Support to research organisations to implement Gender Equality Plans in Horizon 2020<sup>8</sup> marked a turning point, providing funding for *Gender Action Plans* - GAP (FP7) - and *Gender Equality Plans* - GEP (*Horizon 2020*). This is not the place for a detailed examination of how EU terminology has evolved, particularly the shift from “Action Plan” to “Equality Plan”, or the changes this reflects in conceptual terms. For further information, see the literature on the differences between gender mainstreaming policies and positive action policies (Stratigaki 2005), and the ambivalence surrounding the European Commission’s adoption of gender mainstreaming (Meier 2018; Lombardo and Forest 2014; Lombardo and Meier 2006).

The European Commission’s decision, from FP7 onwards, to create dedicated programmes for GEPs was offset by its choice to drop the requirement for projects to include a gender equality action plan as in FP6. This may have contributed to the gap between what was funded through GEPs at structural level and the progress made by individual projects in terms of the organisations taking part in research consortia and the content of research itself. For example, Mergaert and Lombardo (2014) examined the Commission’s documents and reports in an attempt to establish why action plans were abandoned for individual projects, but did not find an adequate response.

However, projects funded by the SIS and GERI programmes did produce useful material on GAPs and on GEPs: the published reports and articles are now available to everyone thanks to the Open Access policy which applies to EU-funded projects. It gives access to valuable material covering various scientific disciplines, a useful way of introducing a “sex/gender” perspective (Tannenbaum, Greaves, and Graham 2016; Tannenbaum *et al.* 2019; Directorate-General for Research and Innovation 2020; 2013) in research or creating GEPs following the guidelines issued by the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE)<sup>9</sup>.

In short, the EU’s framework programmes have provided significant support for gender issues, funding gender equality initiatives within the research field for many years, from individual projects and consortia to wider actions involving the entire scientific

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<sup>8</sup> The SwafS programme included five areas: Ethics, Science Education, Open Science (Open Access), Public engagement in responsible research and innovation, Promoting Gender Equality in Research and Innovation.

<sup>9</sup> <https://eige.europa.eu>

community, RPOs and RFOs. A key feature of the initiatives is the importance not only of redressing the numbers of men and women taking part in research and development, but also of including different perspectives within scientific contexts. The latter has yet to find exhaustive responses: particularly in high-tech sectors, it requires research educators to apply gender perspectives to the educational pathways – ones which are mostly overlooked in the scientific world – and asks researchers to review and expand their knowledge and competences to include a gender perspective in each step of the research process.

The pathway that universities have undertaken thanks to the EU has produced numerous reports, strategies, policies and recommendations to date. They are available online, making them easy to consult by anyone not involved in the academic world.

Another important legacy left by the aforementioned programmes is a greater understanding at academic and scientific level of the increasing importance of gender issues. This also stems from networking actions and opportunities to share gender policies and funded projects, which are active across Europe and have led to requests that the EC places greater emphasis on gender within the *Horizon Europe* framework programme. Running from 2021 to 2027, FP9 (Horizon Europe) might finally lead to gender equality being widely and effectively promoted within European universities. The new requirement from 2022 is to adopt a GEP by the time they sign a grant agreement with the EC.

### **3. Compulsory Gender Equality Plans for EU funding**

Published in February 2021, the new Work Programme from the European Research Council (ERC) funds frontier research in all fields of knowledge, with no age limit as regards scientific maturity. Its Working group on gender issues<sup>10</sup> is particularly active in promoting new gender-focused initiatives and assessments for funded projects.

The ERC's model grant agreement for the previous *Horizon 2020* programme had already made equal opportunities for women and men a key priority for research projects. The model grant agreement signed by bodies receiving funding required them to aim for

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<sup>10</sup> <https://erc.europa.eu/thematic-working-groups/working-group-gender-issues>

gender equality for staff involved at all levels of each project, including supervisory and managerial roles. Those failing to meet this requirement risked having their funding curtailed, although we do not currently know whether and how many cases of budget cuts actually occurred<sup>11</sup>.

An important new feature emerged when new calls for proposals were published under *Horizon Europe*: the requirement for bodies hosting successful research candidates to adopt a GEP<sup>12</sup>. The application form for new proposals asks the person representing the institution to state whether or not it currently had a GEP, answering YES or NO. The answer does not impact the evaluation of proposals, but if funding will be subsequently rewarded, the institution has to create and adopt a GEP (subject to a list of minimum requirements) before signing the contract with the EU.

The idea was clearly influenced by similar action taken recently in Europe, such as the project involving the three most important research funding bodies in Ireland, Science Foundation Ireland, the Irish Research Council and the Health Research Board. To be eligible for funding, higher education institutions are required to take part in the *Athena SWAN* (AS)<sup>13</sup> programme. With its three different Awards (bronze, silver and gold), Athena SWAN recognises and acknowledges good practice in gender equality within higher education and research institutions: representation, progress and success for all. A GEP is a key part of the documents that Universities must submit to obtain an Award. A UK study on AS shows the link between securing funding and university leaders' efforts to obtain AS awards (Ovseiko *et al.* 2017).

As regards creating and implementing a GEP, the EU currently requires<sup>14</sup> a senior figure to sign a formal document which is published on the University's website, outlining i) the human resources involved and the gender competences allocated to implement the GEP; ii) collecting and monitoring sex/gender-disaggregated data for staff and the

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<sup>11</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/data/ref/h2020/mga/erc/h2020-mga-erc-multien.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> This is not the only change regarding proposals for research projects; for further details see: <https://sciencebusiness.net/framework-programmes/news/eu-considers-tougher-rules-promote-gender-equality-horizon-europe>

<sup>13</sup> Athena Swan was set up in the UK in 2005 and has been operating in Ireland since 2015. <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/equality-charters/athena-swan-charter>

<sup>14</sup> The information given on these pages was taken from the EU website, specifically: [https://ec.europa.eu/info/research-and-innovation/strategy/gender-equality-research-and-innovation\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/research-and-innovation/strategy/gender-equality-research-and-innovation_en)

student body; iii) indicator-based annual reports; iv) training for staff, including those in decision-making roles, to increase their awareness and understanding of gender equality practices and unconscious gender biases.

In practices the measures and objectives must cover a number of areas typically included in GEPs: a) the life/work and organisational balance; b) gender balance in leadership and decision-making processes; c) gender equality in recruitment and career development; d) gender integration in research and educational content; e) action to combat gender-based violence, including sexual harassment.

The EU does not oblige organisations to follow a common model, but refers universities seeking compliance to the information and guidelines available online. The most relevant is the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) website, which has a dedicated GEP section and provides numerous examples of European GEPs issued from FP7 onwards. As mentioned previously, FP7 and *Horizon 2020* funded many Coordination and support actions (CSAs) in which a partnership, usually with one or two expert partners acting as mentors and guides for “newbie” partners, embarked on creating a GEP in RPOs and RFOs. It is important to note that the CSAs are not research projects, but rather subsidiary measures funding dissemination, outreach and communication, networking, coordination and support. The results of these fully-funded actions are an invaluable resource when it comes to understanding the issue and realising lasting change.

While it does not provide a common template for GEPs, the EU has indicated five minimum requirements and the concrete measures and objectives that are in fact covered by most GEPs at European level. The lack of a common template is justified by the fact that GEPs are already a formal requirement in some European countries, Spain and Austria included, while in others such as Ireland, the aforementioned funding initiative has led all Universities to adopt a GEP even though they are not formally required.

In a memo dated April 2021, the EU stated that although 2021 application forms already include a question on GEPs, they will not be considered an eligibility criterion for calls until 2022. The fact remains, however, that time is running out for Universities which do not yet have a GEP, since the document requires profound institutional and structural change, the involvement of teaching, research and administrative staff (and the student body to a lesser extent) and significant investments in staff and funding.

#### 4. Equal opportunities initiatives in Italian universities

This is not the place for a detailed analysis of action by Italy's public bodies and state Universities on equal opportunities, gender equality and wellbeing in the workplace. We will provide only a brief overview, as with the EU's pathway to equality. There is an obvious coincidence between the EU's guidelines and programmes and actions taken in Italy, which have always fallen within the European legal framework and have adopted EU recommendations without delay.

To summarise the situation in Italy, Equal Opportunities Committees (Comitati per le pari Opportunità - CPOs) were first launched under Decree Law n. 198 of 11 April 2006, the Equal opportunities code. In 2008 the National Conference of Italian Universities' Equality Bodies<sup>15</sup> set up a Network of University Committees' Equal Opportunities representatives. The network fosters cooperation among universities by running conferences and training sessions. The Conference's website contains a full list of events, the most recent of which are: the National Conferences at the University of Genoa (2018) and Federico II University, Naples (2019) and a training course for serving CUG members, held most recently at the University of Macerata in 2018.

Article 21 of Italian Law 183/2010 required Public Administrations to establish a Committee for equal opportunities, workplace wellbeing and anti-discrimination (CUG), a central committee to guarantee equal opportunities and promote workers' wellbeing and protection against workplace discrimination. The CUG replaced previous CPOs set up to combat gender discrimination and sexual harassment, as well as the *Anti-mobbing committees* designed to ensure wellbeing in the workplace and prevent psychological harassment. The Directive of 4 March 2011 laid down guidelines for CUGs. Some Universities, including the Universities of Genoa<sup>16</sup> and Trieste, Milan's Cattolica University and a handful of others retain a CPO alongside the CUG.

Article 48, Subparagraph 1 of the aforementioned "Equal opportunities code" requires Public Administrations to operate three-year Positive Action Plans (PAPs). The aim is to

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<sup>15</sup> <http://www.cpouniversita.it>

<sup>16</sup> The University of Genoa's CPO is elected and represents all areas of the University; the CUG only includes Personnel, Technical, Administrative and Library staff (TABS) and is open to nominations.

remove obstacles to equal opportunities at work and between men and women, and to rebalance the numbers of women in management positions and activities, limited to cases where the gender gap is at least two thirds. Positive action involves special temporary measures which, notwithstanding the formal principle of equality, are designed to remove obstacles to full equal opportunities. They are extraordinary measures, since they apply to specific contexts, and are temporary, as they can only be kept in place while inequality persists.

*She Figures 2018* (European Commission 2019) reveals the percentage of higher education institutions which have adopted a GEP, following a survey by the EU project Monitoring the Evolution and Benefits of Responsible Research and Innovation (MoRRI)<sup>17</sup>. These are the most complete data currently available. The MoRRI data show that 56% of RPOs adopted a GEP in the EU-28 in 2016, ranging between over 90% in Sweden, Germany and the UK to 60% in Ireland and less than 20% in Slovakia, Bulgaria and the Czech Republic. The figure for Italy is 39% (European Commission 2019, 110). The difference stems at least in part from the fact that Universities are legally required to have a GEP in countries such as Austria and Spain. Given that PAPs have been compulsory for state universities since 2006, it is obvious that participants in the MoRRI survey did not consider them a GEP.

However, the page of the EIGE website covering gender equality in Italy states that “By Law, Public Administrations – including all Public research organisations including Universities – must have a gender equality plan (also called Positive Action Plan and referred to hereafter as PAP). Therefore, all 96 Italian universities have a PAP)”<sup>18</sup>. It is clear that the lack of common terminology can sometimes make it difficult to see affinities between national systems<sup>19</sup>.

Nonetheless, the *She Figures 2018* report is used throughout Europe by those involved in gender equality issues: in Italy at least, the data seem to represent a situation that is far

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<sup>17</sup> Monitoring the Evolution and Benefits of Responsible Research and Innovation - MoRRI, funded under the H2020 programme and running for three and a half years, introduced a monitoring system for responsible research and innovation via six dimensions: public engagement, science education, gender, ethics, open access to the results of scientific research and governance for R&I.

<sup>18</sup> <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-mainstreaming/toolkits/gear/legislative-policy-backgrounds/italy>.

removed from reality. As mentioned before, public bodies have been required to have a CUG since 2011, and failure to implement one leads to a ban on hiring new staff.

The three-year PAPs are available online on the Universities' (and Public bodies') websites, as are other countries' GEPs, so they are easy to analyse and compare. Galizzi and Siboni (2016) studied the PAPs of 28 Italian universities, revealing that most concentrate on collecting gender-disaggregated data, on maternity and children's services and providing information on gender discrimination to create a more favourable environment for women. The PAPs did not cover awareness of gender issues in science or promoting women as leaders. The authors behind the research also revealed that positive action is mostly aimed at academic and administrative staff, thereby ignoring the needs of trainee researchers and students<sup>20</sup>.

A comparison of the information and data that Horizon Europe will require from 2022 from GEPs, mandatory to be allocated EU funding, reveals certain differences. Not all PAPs cover the five areas required by the EU, and methods, timescales, responsibilities and auditing methods are not always detailed.

## **5. From Positive Action Plans to Gender Equality Plans**

APRE (the Italian Agency for the Promotion of European Research), which since the advent of the ERC Work Programme has provided online sessions for Universities interested in understanding the scope and consequences of the EU's request. In our opinion, the idea of creating special commissions for creating and implementing GEPs at Italian universities, the strategy recommended by APRE, risks creating parallel organs to CUGs and CPOs, extending the timescales involved and making the approval process more complex. Not to mention the time needed to set up commissions, from selecting staff, representing various areas of the academic sector, assigning powers and interacting with dif-

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<sup>20</sup> For details and updates on PAPs, see work by Rapetti, E., Poggio, B. (2018) "I piani di Azioni Positive delle Università italiane", in R. Kodilja, P. Tomio (editor) *Partecipazione ed empowerment delle donne*, ETS, Pisa; Tampieri A. (2020) *Prevenzione e rimozione delle discriminazioni: la Direttiva n. 2/2019 e il ruolo dei C.U.G. Diversity Management*. In *Diversity Management: nuove frontiere dell'inclusione e sfide per i C.U.G. universitari*, edited by Francesca Galgano, Maria Sarah Papillo - Naples: FedOAPress, 2020.

ferent academic contexts to provide extensive training and change the criteria for commissions and working groups at every level. Another problem linked to new, special commissions is the inevitable overlap with established responsibilities and a lack of recognition for PAPs and activities in existence for years.

It would therefore seem more logical to strengthen the roles of existing, recognised CUGs (and, where existing, CPOs) representing the various sectors of academia, as they are already aware of how their Universities operate. CUGs normally work with trusted Consultants, offices for students with disabilities and other organs covering the areas the CUP must include in its planning. CUGs and/or CPOs might begin by analysing existing structures and initiatives that could turn their activities into wider PAPs, thereby establishing whether one or more areas required for the GEPs by Horizon Europe have been overlooked or are unbalanced. CUGs also produce an annual report on planned PAP activities, hence they are already monitored and could easily be widened to include new elements.

It might be useful to create a working group within the CUG (and the CPO, if there is one) with additional competences, which could concentrate for a limited time on producing the documents the Commission requires and turning PAPs and Gender Budget data<sup>21</sup>, where present, into full GEPs. After this stage, managing the GEPs, monitoring and assessing action and planning subsequent GEPs would be the remit of the CUG and CPO. Their staff could be increased permanently to handle the additional workload, and members' roles would be optimised and widened.

If the Commission confirms that GEPs will become a requirement for projects in 2022, there will be very little time left. Universities are complex organisations, and their hierarchies and bureaucracy make for lengthy decision-making times. Not surprisingly, GEP projects funded under *GERI-4* in *Horizon 2020* lasted up to four years, an appropriate

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<sup>21</sup> The gender budget is not currently cited in EU documents referring to the GEPs required by universities from 2022 onwards. There is a whole section on Gender Budgets on the European Institute for Gender Equality's website (<https://eige.europa.eu/gender-mainstreaming/toolkits/gender-budgeting/what-is-gender-budgeting>), and some recent EU-funded projects have focused on gender budgets or have included them within their scope. Examples are the project funded under FP7, TRIGGER - TRansforming Institutions by Gendering contents and Gaining Equality in Research, with the University of Pisa as a Partner, and an ongoing project funded under Horizon 2020 run by the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia: LeTSGEPs \_Leading Towards Sustainable Gender Equality Plans in research institutions, <https://letsgeps.eu>)

timescale in the absence of other formal gender equality initiatives – a situation common to some Countries. It is important to note that the absence of a GEP or specific regional or national initiatives does not necessarily mean that the Universities concerned have fewer women teachers or researchers, particularly in STEM disciplines in Eastern Europe. On the other hand, GEPs produced under EU projects are rarely consultable on the websites of the Universities involved. This would seem to confirm the fear that, once projects have ended, GEPs do not become a permanent part of University life, explaining why the EU insists on initiatives being sustainable. Maintaining the visibility of a GEP, which must be published on the University's website, is much easier for Universities which have already taken part in projects funded by FP7 and *Horizon 2020*, but adapting and integrating the content of PAPs – which are also public documents – might not take much longer if the process is organised adequately.

It is important to note that Italian PAPs do not follow a single model, as is the case for GEPs produced in the UK and Ireland. While the format of PAPs may vary, the content is always similar; given the nature of CUGs, they are not limited to gender issues and are wider documents than those required by the EU. It might therefore be useful to adopt one of the GEP models validated by *Horizon 2020* projects, particularly regarding the summary of the GEP's objectives: they must be specific, auditable, recognised, realistic and time-limited. This section of the GEP, with tables or diagrams for easy monitoring and assessment of the objectives, might be used as the final section of the PAP, enabling them to retain the usual structure for each University, at least to begin with.

Bringing about these changes obviously involves costs. For EU-funded projects, the staff costs and expenses involved in creating and implementing a GEP are quantifiable at least in part, excluding expenditure on coordinating and managing the project and interacting with partners. The cost of producing a PAP can also be calculated: the main expenditure is for staff at present, but we are unaware of public data on this matter. Creating ad-hoc structures and working groups seems incompatible with the timescales issued by the Commission. On the other hand, existing CUGs and CPOs cannot be expected to produce a GEP, even where a PAP exists, without taking on extra staff or acquiring funding for the training activities involved. A general idea of the costs of training and other activities can be gained by looking at actions undertaken in recent *Horizon 2020* projects.

The international network created by EU projects with GEPs is another valuable resource. Particularly when it comes to training, we believe the network of connections and partnerships created over the years by RPOs and RFOs benefitting from EU support might be of use. As in EU projects, where expert partners offer participants their experience when producing a new GEP, setting up national and international networks in the coming months might accelerate the production process for GEPs.

Another benefit for Italian Universities joining the networks would be a move towards a standard GEP model which reflects the academic world in Italy. The practice of hiring staff through public examinations, for example, makes it difficult to implement certain strategies used in other countries, although changes could always be made.

A specific problem might be unconscious bias training (Easterly and Ricard 2020), recommended by the EU as a strategy for gender equality, which might be part of a GEP.

Training courses on unconscious bias have been used for some time in Italy, but they are often aimed at the business sector: universities have unique characteristics, requiring educators to adapt unconscious bias training to the specific context.

One risk that requires monitoring, since it is highly likely to occur, is that the extra work involved in turning PAPs into GEPs will fall mainly on women's shoulders. Research shows that the workload involved in producing GEPs under *Athena Swan* falls mainly to women, suggesting that, as the underrepresented gender, women have a personal interest in being part of a programme for change; at the same time, the programme itself does not guarantee that the work involved in setting up and implementing GEPs will be distributed equally (Caffrey et al. 2016). Other research on *Athena Swan* clearly shows a risk of gender segregation, with the job of creating a GEP being carried out mainly by women (Munir et al. 2014). Reading the proceedings of conferences and training events run by the *Conferenza Nazionale degli Organismi di Parità* of the Italian universities, and taking part in the same, clearly shows that the participants are mainly women. This leads one to think that there is a real risk of gender equality being considered a women's issue in Italy, even though there is a formal gender balance in working groups. Italian experiences of PAPs reveal that the extra workload involved does not positively impact the careers of women participants (Bencivenga 2019). Neither *Athena Swan* nor CUGs seem to guarantee that the work of drafting and maintaining GEPs and PAPs will

be distributed equally between the genders, or at least will have a positive effect on career pathways, as with those who take on additional institutional roles in an academic context. Let us look at the positive aspects. The fact that Italy's CUPs and CPOs already cover equal opportunities, combatting gender discrimination and sexual harassment, protecting workplace wellbeing and the fight against psychological harassment make it more difficult to "extract" the issue of gender equality in one sense. But it also places Italian universities in a favourable position regarding the innovations of *Horizon Europe*, which clearly sets diversity and intersectionality alongside the issue of gender. *Horizon Europe* also includes special funding for research on gender and intersectionality, taking on board criticism that *Horizon 2020* took a polarised view of gender which did not reflect current views on the problems faced (Schmitz *et al.* 2014; Ratzler *et al.* 2018). More recent analysis of *Horizon 2020*'s gender mainstreaming policy suggests that it fails to implement gender mainstreaming, further depoliticising gender equality in the neoliberal context of the Commission (Vida 2021): the new ideas introduced under *Horizon Europe* may help achieve a breakthrough. Many Italian universities seem to have already embarked on widening their gender equality perspective as regards diversity and inclusion. Some have introduced double student ID cards for transgender students, who are therefore able to use their new identity at the university without having to make changes to the civil register (CUG 2013).

Another positive aspect in Italy is that CUGs – and consequently PAPs - are obligatory for all public bodies, not only universities as with AS in the UK and Ireland. This helps create networks and partnerships with benefits at territorial and sectorial level<sup>22</sup>, creating discussion panels for CUGs from different bodies. Examples are the National CUG Forum for Public Administrations and city-wide CUG networks for public administrations (as in Turin and Genoa). They work to share good practice and information and adopt common actions, particularly regarding PAPs and training, thereby harmonising their knowledge and competences and impacting positively on the actions they take.

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<sup>22</sup> An example is the sectorial network made up of CUG chairpersons from the bodies (Ispra/Arpa/Appa) making up Italy's National Environmental Protection System (Snpa).

## 6. Conclusions

Gender equality plans (GEPs), applied both in the public and private sectors, set out the legal framework and operating conditions needed to integrate and organise gender-related issues. To create a GEP, organisations must first pinpoint the strategic actions which will enable them to achieve gender equality<sup>23</sup>. A GEP combines a gender mainstreaming perspective with the positive actions needed to remove any obstacles to its achievement.

The gender mainstreaming objective was first announced in 1995 at the IV world conference on women in Beijing, and immediately adopted by the EU. Supporting gender mainstreaming was designed to integrate the gender perspective into government policies by permanently coordinating government ministries' actions, and examining how far equality legislation had been implemented. Another relevant principle discussed at the conference was the importance of promoting gender-disaggregated data. It is important to note that almost three decades after the conference, an analysis of the EU's pathway towards gender equality reveals a persistent gap in many areas. Little emphasis is placed on actions such as disaggregated data and including gender perspectives in teaching pathways, to cite just two of the aspects required by GEPs and already included in gender mainstreaming objectives. While the EU initiative seems to introduce an important change, little progress has been made to date, although things would be different if Universities had striven to take concrete action in the past based on the EU's indications. However, we believe it is important to underline how compulsory GEPs might help gender issues become a fundamental structural aspect of university policies, preventing the systematic undervaluation we have seen in the past.

We hope that the Conference of Italian University Chancellors (CRUI), which has a committee on "Gender Issues", will now focus on taking positive steps to achieve gender equality in senior roles at Italian universities<sup>24</sup>. It would be useful to draw up a common GEP model for Italian universities, as in the case of the Gender Budget.

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<sup>23</sup> Gender Equality Plans in the private and public sectors in the European Union.

[http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2017/583139/IPOL\\_STU\(2017\)583139\\_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2017/583139/IPOL_STU(2017)583139_EN.pdf)

<sup>24</sup> I As of May 2021, Italy has 79 male chancellors and five female chancellors. The five female chancellors are: Giovanna Iannantuoni (Milano Bicocca), Sabina Nuti (Scuola superiore di Sant'Anna, Pisa), Antonella

*Horizon Europe* is the widest international research and innovation programme in the world, open both to organisations and individuals and offering funding for scientific research projects. The length of the programme coincides with the EU's long-term budget, and it receives total funding of 95.5 billion Euros. Making GEPs compulsory will have a clear impact world-wide in the coming months and years, given the numerous programmes accessible to bodies and individuals outside of the EU.

If the EU's decision to introduce obligatory GEPs under *Horizon Europe* from 2022 is confirmed, it may prove fundamental to harmonising the promotion of gender equality in higher education and research across Europe. GEP projects funded under *Horizon 2020*'s last call will remain in place for a few more years; we hope they will be fundamental in supporting Universities which have not yet taken part in GEP projects to achieve this goal.

A final observation: when it comes to gender equality and equal opportunities, it is important to set aside the competitiveness typical of research environments. The system as a whole progresses more quickly when structural change is harmonised and ideas and targets are shared. The university sector can only flourish and progress if we encourage diversity and mobility.

Creating clusters of Universities/countries in line with EU requirements while leaving wide gaps in the geography of equality would thwart the EU's ambitions for its latest seven-year programme, which aims to integrate and harmonise policies and actions across all contexts and establish a "European education area" through the introduction of European universities.

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Polimeni (Università Sapienza, Rome), Tiziana Lippiello (Ca' Foscari, Venice), Maria Grazia Monaci (Università della Valle d'Aosta). There were seven female chancellors until last year. [www.cruis.it](http://www.cruis.it)

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