The EQUAL-IST GEP Implementation at the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia

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Abstract   In the recent policies issued by the European Commission (EC), which were reflected in the FP7 and Horizon 2020 (H2020) framework programs, *Gender Equality Plans* (GEPs) have been promoted as the main tool to achieve structural change for transforming institutions and, in particular, their rules, regulations, organizational processes, and cultures. The Horizon 2020 EQUAL-IST (Gender Equality Plans for Information Sciences and Technology Research Institutions) project supports six Universities across Europe (Italy, Lithuania, Germany, Ukraine, Finland, Portugal) to design and implement actions towards gender equality, with a specific focus on the ICT/IST area, through two phases of implementation. The paper presents the analysis of the experience of the EQUAL-IST GEP implementation at the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia in Italy. Particular attention will be devoted to analyze the encountered resistances and critical issues, highlighting the adjustments adopted during the second implementation phase to overcome them and to ensure sustainability of the main actions.

Keywords   Gender Equality Plans. Information Sciences and Technology. Implementation. Sustainability. Structural change.

Summary   1 Introduction. – 2 UniMORE GEP Overview. – 3 HR and Management Practices. – 4 Teaching and Student Services. – 5 Institutional Communication. – 6 Research Design and Delivery. – 7 Highlights and recommendations. – 8 Conclusions.

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1   Introduction

Implementation of Gender Equality Plans (GEPs) in research institutions is monitored in the ERA periodic reports, which show that in spite of an increasing number of RFOs and RPOs adopting the aforementioned policies the majority of EU research organizations are still not committed to structural change for gender equality (European Commission 2017). As a consequence, additional guidelines and tools, such as the GEAR (Gender Equality in Academia and Research) Toolkit developed by the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), have been provided by the EC to assist research organizations in understanding steps and specific implementation processes to exploit (EIGE 2017).

The H2020 EQUAL-IST project ("Gender Equality Plans for Information Sciences and Technology Research Institutions"), approved in 2016 within the H2020 program "Science with and for Societies", applied these guidelines and tools to the research institutions in Information Sciences and Technology (IST) and Information and Communications Technology (ICT) disciplines. Specifically, the EQUAL-IST project focuses on supporting six ICT/IST Departments from Germany, Finland, Italy, Lithuania, Portugal, and Ukraine to become engaged into achieving internal structural change for gender equality through GEP implementation. Running for 36 months, the project took the challenge to develop and implement the lacking discipline-specific interventions related to gender equality in the ICT and IST fields (Benschop, Van den Brink 2011). The project addresses the following four main areas of intervention: Human Resources (HR) and Management Practices, Teaching and Student Services, Institutional Communication and Research Design and Delivery.

During the initial stage of the project, an internal gender audit was performed at each participating RPO, where a mixed methodology was applied using quantitative data analysis and qualitative techniques (e.g., focus groups, semi-structured interviews, and workshops). This process had led to the identification of the challenges related to gender equality at each RPO. These challenges, as well as ideas to address them, were then discussed on a crowdsourcing online platform (Gorbacheva 2017), which was developed within the project (`http://www.crowdequality.eu`) in order to trigger a participatory approach to design tailored GEPs.

The designed GEPs have been implemented at RPO in two rounds: the first iteration from October 2017 to May 2018 and the second iteration from July 2018 to April 2019. Between the two iterations, the GEPs were redesigned at each partner RPO, based on the results of the first implementation phase and on the assessment carried out by the EQUAL-IST external evaluator, to allow a realistic re-adjustment of the GEPs in consequence of organizational hurdles and unexpect-

ed events or dynamics, as well as to take advantage of unforeseen windows of opportunity for change. In particular, during the second iteration of GEP implementation, great effort was devoted to ensure sustainability of the main actions toward gender equality also beyond the end of the project. To this aim, we recall that each RPO elaborated a dedicated Sustainability Plan (Sangiuliano 2019) that was approved by the highest management levels: this proved to be very useful in the overall process of self-reflection on the impacts as well as in designing a strategy to make the first steps toward structural change more stable and to build pre-requisites to further and more transformative changes in upcoming years.

In this paper, the specific case of GEP implementation at the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia (UniMORE) is presented. The paper aims at analyzing the GEP implementation highlighting the resistances and obstacles encountered during the first iteration and evaluating the solutions proposed to overcome them during the second iteration trying to set the path to sustainable structural changes.

2 UniMORE GEP Overview

The Gender Equality Plan was the result of a long process of discussion and analysis internal at UniMORE. According to the methodology for participatory gender audit in ICT/IST research institutions (Canali 2018), the identified challenges were categorized into the four intervention areas considered in the EQUAL-IST project: HR and Management Practices, Teaching and Student Services, Institutional Communication and Research Design and Delivery. Then, the GEP was designed based on the results of the internal Gender Equality Audit, the crowdsourcing process carried out on the online CrowdEquality platform,[1] the analysis of the resulting data, discussions among the members of the UniMORE EQUAL-IST Working Group, and meetings with the main stakeholders that were involved in the GEPs implementation.

During the first and the second iteration of GEP implementation, 16 actions were implemented at UniMORE, covering all the intervention areas: 14 were initiated during the first iteration and two new actions were added during the GEP refinement phase to be implemented during the second iteration; moreover, 10 actions were included in the Sustainability Plan. The overall distribution of the GEP actions (and corresponding activities) implemented at UniMORE is reported in table 1.

The distribution among the four intervention areas reveals that the majority of the initiatives were carried out in the area of HR Man-

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agement Practices, mainly due to the fact that it is quite a comprehensive area including two different and quite broad domains: Human Resources (including staff recruitment/career progression and well-being/work life balance) and Governance (entailing functioning of internal structures/bodies involved in consultations and/or strategic policy design and approval; gender equality machineries; interinstitutional agreements and framework protocols). The number of initiatives was quite balanced in the areas of Teaching and Student Services and Institutional Communication, while the less populated area was Research Design and Delivery for the reasons that will be explained in Section 6.

Table 1   Overall view of GEP actions at UniMORE

	1st Iteration		2nd Iteration		Sustainability Plan
	N. Actions	**N. Activities**	**N. Actions**	**N. Activities**	**N. Actions**
HR and Management Practices	6	15	7	7	4
Teaching and Student Services	3	5	4	5	2
Institutional Communication	4	7	4	6	3
Research Design and Delivery	1	1	1	1	1
Total	14	28	16	19	10

In the remaining sections of this paper, specific actions and activities implemented for each intervention area will be described, focusing mainly on the sustainable actions. In the detailed description, it will be interesting to note the shift from the "*preparatory*" nature of most of the actions characterizing the first iteration of GEP implementation, to the "*structural change*" nature of the majority of the actions carried out during the second iteration. These terms refer to the definition given in the study by Sangiuliano et al. (Sangiuliano, Canali, Gorbacheva 2019) and distinguishing "*preparatory* actions", including activities focused on creating preconditions and aimed at raising awareness and building capacity, from 'structural change actions", focused on introducing structural changes and aimed at changing institutional procedures, structures and regulations.

3   HR and Management Practices

During the first iteration of GEP implementation, it emerged very clearly that one of the main challenges to support the structural change process toward gender equality was about the sustainability of the actions included in the EQUAL-IST GEP in the long term and after the end of the project. For this reason, during the second iteration a clear focus has been placed on institutionalization of changes, passing from the implementation of more 'preparatory' actions, such as the identification of existing gender expertise within the university, to the adoption of a more strategic framework consisting in negotiating with power structures and representative bodies.

At the end of the first iteration period, two sub-commissions had been already established within the Unified Committee for Guarantees (CUG), on 'Well-being at work' and 'Positive Actions for gender equality'. A new action included in the refined version of the EQUAL-IST GEP at UniMORE was about the exploitation of a window of opportunity regarding the renewal of a strategic document at the university level. Specifically, the new action concerned the inclusion of several initiatives held in the EQUAL-IST GEP (that was formally approved but merely project-based document) into the official triennial, legally binding GEP, namely Triennial Plan for Positive Actions, adopted under Italian Law for the next three years period (2019-21). This document has been consecutively elaborated by the Unified Committee for Guarantees (CUG), of which Claudia Canali is a member and chairperson of the sub-commission on Positive Actions for gender equality. The document includes several actions derived from EQUAL-IST GEP and considered to be the key priorities for UNIMORE, including actions to increase visibility of information about leaves and work flexibility regulation, a feasibility study about the setting up of a child care service in the university facilities, the collection of gender disaggregated data and publication of statistics, the adoption of guidelines for gender neutral communication at the institutional level, and training activities on gender neutral communication for UNIMORE staff members. The official proposal for the Triennial Plan 2019-21 has been approved by the Unified Committee for Guarantees (CUG) on 25 February 2019 and it is currently under approval by the trade unions' representatives, before being passed for ratification to the Administrative Board.

Let us now briefly analyze the actions concerning the area of HR management and practices that have been included in the Triennial Plan 2019-21. The feasibility study about the setting up of a child care service in the university facilities, initially included in the EQUAL-IST GEP, has been actually postponed with respect to the initial planning. The complexity of carrying out a complete feasibility study has been underestimated, also due to the fact that the overall management of

UniMORE was going to change during the GEP implementation period (all the heads of the departments changed in November 2018 and a new Rector was elected in May 2019). In fact, such a study would involve the evaluation of several possible alternative agreements with local stakeholders, a full financial sustainability plan and security assessments of the potential locations for the services in a university with departments dislocated over two cities and several urban areas.,. This change hindered the possibility to carry out a task requiring a long-term commitment with respect to the agreements with local stakeholders and to the definition of the financial sustainability plan. However, the action was redesigned from implying the creation of an internal service only to including different alternatives scenarios, such as new agreements with already existing childcare services and the possibility to involve internal resources of the Department of Education and Social Science (following the successful experience of other Italian Universities). Moreover, other measures were foreseen such as the installation of babies changing tables in each UniMORE Department.

The other action included in the Triennial Plan 2019-21 was about the collection of gender disaggregated data and publication of statistics. The initially planned data collection was limited to the DIEF department of Engineering, but during the GEPs implementation we envisioned the opportunity to extend data collection and analysis to the entire University and to guarantee sustainability to this action over the next years. Indeed, UniMORE was actively involved into a national CRUI (Conference of Italian University Rectors) working group on Gender Budgeting, that was defining official guidelines on how to implement Gender Budgeting within a research institution. The guidelines will be officially released and presented to the Italian Rectors in October 2019. Hence, we exploited this window of opportunity and the collected data will be published following the CRUI guidelines in order to a) exploit the knowledge of experts at the national level that defined clear and comparable indicators, leading to results easily comparable with other Italian RPOs; b) to leverage the official recommendation of the CRUI towards the adoption of a periodic gender budgeting in each Italian University to reinforce the engagement and the support of the high level management of our institution beyond the end of the project.

Finally, it is worth to underline that an identified challenge encountered during the project in this area of intervention was the lack of actions directly aimed at increasing the percentage of women accessing to senior and decision-making positions in career. This is basically due to the fact that the percentage of female professors in grade A at the Department of Engineering 'Enzo Ferrari' is much higher than in other engineering departments in Italy, while the situation in the ICT area is even more outstanding with 3 women out of

4 full professors. This situation essentially caused the fact that during the initial gender audit and the crowdsourcing-based GEP design at UniMORE, no actions directly targeting female career for high level positions were planned.

4 Teaching and Student Services

According to Eurostat 2018 data (Eurostat 2018), about 1,3 millions of people in Europe are enrolled in ICT courses (in different levels of education), but only 16.7% are women (13% in Italy), therefore (European Commission 2018) men graduate 5-7 times more than women in ICT on average in Europe. The statistics collected during the EQUAL-IST gender audit on the proportion of women students at Bachelor, Master and PhD ICT courses of the Department of Engineering 'Enzo Ferrari' (DIEF) at UniMORE confirm this gender gap, showing much lower percentages of women with respect to all the other university courses. While at the university level the share of women in UniMORE courses is around 55%, which is consistent with the national average (Bartoloni 2018),[2] the ratio at the department ICT drops down at around 14-15%.

A key action implemented within the EQUAL-IST project to address the gender gap in the ICT student population was about **replicating and extending the innovative best practice represented by the summer camp Ragazze Digitali (*Digital Girls*)**. 'Ragazze Digitali' was organised annually since 2014 by the Department of Engineering 'Enzo Ferrari' of UniMORE, in collaboration with the association European Women Management and Development (EWMD), with the main goal of encouraging female students to enroll in Computer Science/Informatics programs through a creative learning-by-doing approach based on team-based activities. During the summer camp, dedicated to girls of third and fourth grade of the high schools and free for them to participate, the girls learn how to code through creative laboratory activities. The summer camp was indeed designed based on the belief that interventions aimed at increasing young girls' interest and self-efficacy in technology-related activities have the potential to reduce the gender gap in participation (Master et al. 2016). Moreover, they are exposed to female role models (Shin 2016) represented by women expert in the ICT field who intervene as speakers on dedicated topics. The Summer Camp represents a highly innova-

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2 M. Bartoloni. "Università gratis o scontata per le studentesse che scelgono corsi scientifici". *Il Sole 24 Ore*, 8 gennaio 2018. URL `https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/notizie/2018-01-08/universita-gratis-o-scontata-le-studentesse-che-scelgono-corsi-scientifici-153505.shtml`.

tive best practice to promote female participation in ICT studies: its long duration (4 weeks) along with the fact that it dedicated to girls and free for the participants makes this initiative unique, not only in Italy but, at the best of our knowledge, in Europe and in the world.

During the EQUAL-IST project, thanks to the support of local entities and foundations, the initiative has been extended in Modena starting from 2018 with two camps running in parallel and working on different activities related to coding and ICT (videogames in Python and Arduino-based projects). Moreover, it has been replicated in the nearby city of Reggio Emilia with a camp based on Arduino projects. Finally, Ragazze Digitali has been extended also to the city of Cesena with a three weeks summer camp . In terms of achieved impact, the last two editions of Ragazze Digitali saw a significant increase of enrolments with respect to the previous editions, reaching the number of 117 participants in 2018 and 166 in 2019. The promotional events carried out in the local high schools to present the summer camps involved almost 1,500 participants (students and teachers). This successful initiative has achieved sustainability thanks to the commitment of a local Banking Foundation, which has allocated funds to support the initiative for the next three years, and to agreements made with the university of Bologna that allowed the replication of the Summer Camp in the city of Cesena.

More details on the Summer Camp, on its impact on the participating female students, on their changed attitudes and plans for future studies and careers can be found in a recently published paper (Canali 2019).

Another important sustainable action implemented in this intervention area, not initially included in the UniMORE GEP, regarded the activation of a new teaching course "Language and Gender". The course (36 hours) will be activate starting from the academic year 2019-2020 within the Bachelor Degree on "European Languages and Cultures" at the Department of Linguistic and Cultural Studies. Furthermore, it would be available as an optional course to any student of UniMORE. It is worth to note that this course is the first teaching course active at UniMORE on a gender-related dimension.

5   Institutional Communication

During the first iteration of the GEP implementation, most of the activities in this area focused on the organization of **workshops and seminars aimed at raising awareness about gender (in)equality** in research institutions and in the ICT field among UniMORE staff and students. The effect of these preparatory initiatives was important to prepare the ground for actions more oriented to structural change.

During the second iteration, we envisaged that the more sustainable strategy to improve the communication toward the students to **permanently include information about the gender gap and stereotypes directly in the official guides and presentation documents of the ICT courses at UniMORE**. Hence, data about the gap in the student population of ICT courses and considerations against the gender stereotypes characterizing the field of Computer Science as a male discipline were included in the official brochures of the Department courses, that are published online. Information about initiatives like the summer camp "Ragazze Digitali", encouraging female students to enroll in ICT courses was also included in the official slides used during the presentation events of the ICT courses for the local high school students, to give them maximum visibility.

Another important action implemented during the second iteration was about the **adoption of guidelines for gender sensitive language in the institutional communication**. The guidelines have been designed and written by Prof. Cecilia Robustelli,[3] who is a UniMORE professor in linguistics, and were approved by the Italian Ministry for Education and Research in March 2018 (Robustelli 2018). Being aware that the concrete adoption of these rules in the university documents and communication channels will take a long process to be correctly implemented, we included the guidelines adoption in the strategic Triennial Plan of the CUG in order to give sustainability to this action. Moreover, the effective and concrete adoption of the guidelines requires appropriate training of the university staff members responsible for communication. For this reason, the EQUAL-IST GEP included also a **yearly event**, organized by the CUG committee, **for training staff members on the non-discriminatory use of gender in the language of the institutional communication**. Important success factors for the effectiveness and the sustainability of this actions are: a) the possibility to exploit an internal resource from the Linguistic and Cultural Studies Department and her expertise for training the staff, thus reducing the financial resources needed to implement the action; b) the inclusion of this event within the mandatory training for the University staff members to make the training effective and trigger high participation.

6 Research Design and Delivery

Addressing gender equality in the area of Research Design and Delivery revealed more difficult and challenging for UniMORE, as well as for the other EQUAL-IST partners, with respect to other areas of in-

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3 http://personale.unimore.it/rubrica/dettaglio/crobustelli.

tervention. The main motivation is that, as in most of the hard STEM fields, the understanding of how gender can be a relevant dimension to take into account into Computer Sciences and IS research content remains rather limited. The allegedly inner neutrality of algorithms and coding is often mentioned to question the need for gender-sensitive CS/ICT and IS research. As UniMORE was directly involved with its ICT section of the DIEF Engineering Department, it reflected this limited awareness, and prioritized actions in other intervention areas.

The lack of actions in this intervention area emerged at the end of the first iteration of GEP implementation. To address this issue, a dedicated **webinar on Gender in IST/ICT research** was held at the consortium level titled *"Gender in ICT/IST research content: why and how to integrate a gender (and intersectional) approach in your research projects",* with keynote contributions on gender in Human Computer Interaction and UX design as well as on gender and artificial intelligence and machine learning, in order to increase awareness and achieve a shared understanding of what it actually means to integrate the gender dimension in those fields. Moreover, a dedicated section on Gender in ICT Research content in the EQUAL-IST online Toolkit (Sangiuliano 2018) was made available as a tool for providing partners with additional resources and knowledge on this ERA priority.

This allowed UniMORE to reach a better understanding, at the institutional level, of how to integrate gender content in research and supported the efforts undertaken towards mainstreaming the gender dimension in research during the second iteration of GEP implementation. During the first iteration, indeed, the only scheduled and implemented action was the organization of the workshop "Women and Research", organized on 29 March 2018 and dedicated to young female researchers, that was meant as an occasion of networking to share experiences and openly discuss about the gender impact on research careers and activities. On the other hand, the second iteration saw the establishment of an interdisciplinary working group, namely "Gender and Research", involving permanently almost 20 female researchers belonging to 7 different UniMORE departments. The working group is expected to deliver research projects where a gender dimension is taken into consideration in ICT and STEM research. This action as well as the management of the working group will be sustained after the end of the project by the interest from the Research Office to increase the number of submitted and approved projects to EU calls for proposals.

7 Highlights and Recommendations

As underlined in the previous sections, the biggest shift from the first to the second iteration of GEP implementation at UniMORE consisted of moving from a focus on raising awareness to embedding actions into the operational structures and institutionalizing change in a sustainable perspective.

To this regard, it has to be highlighted that the UniMORE experience in "hacking" the legally binding Triennial Plan for Positive Actions to be enacted by any Italian university could be decisive for other universities to follow that path. A path that requires to bring gender expertise inside the CUG, to identify key priorities at the level of the organization and potential windows of opportunities outside (as, in the UNIMORE case, the adoption of nation-wide guidelines for gender budgeting and gender-sensitive communication). The triennial plan of UniMORE has yet the potential to set a new, higher quality standard for those legally binding plans, known to be often left dead letters (EIGE 2016). This experience should be widely shared, and it has potential to deliver its impact beyond the project timeline. To this aim, control mechanisms have been carefully devised in the sustainability plan elaborated by the project team, which contains clear, achievable objectives for the post-project period.

The UniMORE sustainability plan also includes an action of which the realization has been postponed during the project, consisting in a feasibility study for establishing childcare facilities at UniMORE. To this regard, it is interesting to highlight the EQUAL-IST external evaluator's recommendation to facilitate the implementation of the feasibility study regarding such a complex service. The suggestion is to adopt a flexible framework, such as combining new facilities at some faculties with reserved places in existing facilities outside the university, depending on demand and funding. Moreover, it was suggested that a participatory process, for instance in form of co-design workshops, could certainly help to document the needs in terms of childcare facilities (organization, functioning, opening hours, services…) and to co-design appropriate, tailor-made solutions.

Moreover, the successful experience of the summer camps *Ragazze digitali* offers a clear potential for replication, not only in different national contexts, but also in different areas. It should nonetheless be mentioned that Emilia-Romagna also provides a specifically favorable context for such an initiative, with a strong presence of IT companies – often related to the automotive industry, an active third sector supported by regional foundations and used to cooperate with the academia. Not only this successful experience is likely to be maintained at least for the next three years thanks to local fundings, but it has inspired a project of Engineering Summer School "Women in Transport" promoted by the Motor vehicle University of Emilia-Ro-

magna[4] within the Women in Transport – EU platform for change (European Commission 2019).

Finally, the permanent working group 'Gender and Research' established in 2019, which should work as a research cluster allowing researchers from different areas and departments with interests and expertise on gender issues to cooperate, will reinforce the visibility of gender knowledge at UniMORE. A trend that will be also supported by the opening of the first course on gender sensitive language at the B.A level at UniMORE. Thanks to the achieved transdisciplinary collaboration, UniMORE has been judged as one of the two partners most far-reaching in gendering research content under the EQUAL-IST project (Forest 2019), offering potential for mutual learning among former partners and in the regional and national context in Italy, beyond the timeline of the project.

8   Conclusions

The GEP implementation carried out at the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia (UniMORE) during the Horizon 2020 EQUAL-IST (Gender Equality Plans for Information Sciences and Technology Research Institutions) project is presented in this paper. The actions were analyzed by area of intervention (Human Resources (HR) and Management Practices, Teaching and Student Services, Institutional Communication and Research Design and Delivery): among the several activities implemented for each area, the paper focuses on the structural change actions, meaning the actions aimed at changing institutional procedures, structures and regulations. The GEP implementation was analyzed with the aim to highlight the encountered resistances and to present the solutions proposed to overcome them, with particular attention to the shift toward sustainability occurred between the first and the second iteration of the implementation process. Finally, some highlights about the strategic approach adopted at UniMORE are reported to provide useful recommendations for RPOs willing to implement similar initiatives toward Gender Equality.

As future work, we plan to continue along the path initiated during the EQUAL-IST project. To this aim, we identified some key elements that will be fundamental toward the effective continuation of gender equality policies at UniMORE: a) in close collaboration with the CUG committee, to monitor the implementation of the Triennial Plan of Positive Actions; b) to strength collaboration with the external stakeholders, at the local (banking foundations, private associa-

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4 https://motorvehicleuniversity.com/.

tions and companies) and national level (Conference of Italian Rectors, networks of ICT researchers) to support on-going and future actions; c) participate in International and National projects on gender-related dimensions by leveraging the existence of the Gender and Research working group.

Acknowledgements

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