

# Gender Composition of Boards of Directors and Sensitivity to Gender Issues in Italian University Strategic Plans

Romilda Mazzotta, Maria Teresa Nardo, Patrizia Pastore, Giovanna Vingelli

Università della Calabria, Italia

[romilda.mazzotta@unical.it](mailto:romilda.mazzotta@unical.it), [maria.nardo@unical.it](mailto:maria.nardo@unical.it), [patrizia.pastore@unical.it](mailto:patrizia.pastore@unical.it), [vingelli@unical.it](mailto:vingelli@unical.it)

**Abstract** In the recent Italian regulatory framework, planning is the main point in the effective accomplishment of the mission of universities. Among the planning tools envisaged by the legislator, on one hand strategic plans outline the mission, the strategic guidelines and the objectives of the University, and on the other hand the integrated plan, which includes shorter-term objectives and strategies. Previous research suggests that women in boards of directors bring new perspectives to the board themselves. The objective of the essay is to verify if the gender composition of these bodies influences the quality of the planning process that produce effects on performance and achievement of results. The impact of board structure on gender sensitivity of the Italian state universities is thus explored, and it is verified considering both the process and the content of documents (Strategic Plans). In particular, we use the content analysis methodology in order to build a compliance indicator on the planning process and content. The empirical findings suggest that boards with higher gender diversity are positively related to the gender sensitivity of the strategic plans: the participation of women in the board of directors brings new perspectives to the board and addresses the gender sensitivity of the institution.

**Keywords** Gender. University. Italy. Planning. Control bodies. Boards of directors.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 Gender Composition of Boards. State of the Art. – 3 Gender Composition of University Boards. – 4 Strategic Planning in Universities: Process, Tools, Actors. – 5 Research Objectives. – 6 Research Methods. – 7 Results. – 8 Conclusions.



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## 1 Introduction

Previous research shows that, although explicit gender discrimination has been outlawed for many years, management in organizations is not gender neutral, as it involves traditional gendered practices and subtle discrimination still exists (Broadbridge, Hearn 2008; Wilmsen 2002). Despite the feminization of certain disciplines (women's concentration in social sciences, pedagogy, medicine), science continues to be a male-dominated activity. Although women are the majority among graduates, and their share grows among university staff (even in the highest rank) (European Commission 2012), career development is very much dependent upon the field of research, so that both horizontal and vertical segregation are present. At the same time, women are underrepresented in all key decision-making roles and men still dominate in corporate decision-making bodies, while women's marginal participation persists (Desivilya Syna, Palgi 2014), showing often subtle and implicit gendered processes at the top management levels (Nielsen 2010; Sheridan, Haslam McKenzie, Still 2010). Heilman (2001) argues that gender bias in evaluations is one of the causes of the scarcity of women at the upper levels of organizations. In its report on gender segregation in education, training and labour market, the European Institute of Gender Equality (EIGE 2017) states: "Gender segregation narrows life choices, education and employment options, leads to unequal pay, further reinforces gender stereotypes, and limits access to certain jobs while also perpetuating unequal gender power relations in the public and private spheres", and it is one of the factors contributing to the shortage of STEM professionals, as well as to the inefficiency and rigidity of the labour market.<sup>1</sup> Academia is traditionally based on a highly institutionalised and bureaucratic hierarchical system, founded on sets of values that define and maintain a specific configuration of gender roles and relations, while the persistence of gendered structures and processes is largely attributed to the institutional culture that legitimises and ascribes neutrality to these processes.

Changes to gender equality in academia worldwide reflect wider societal changes, and they are also directly affected by legislation, regulatory frameworks, action plans, university strategies, and committed individuals. Research approaches and policy debates on gender equality in research have substantially evolved over the past

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<sup>1</sup> <https://eige.eu-ropa.eu/rdc/thesaurus>.

decades. In the 1980s, policy concerns in European and other Western countries were mainly placed on women's recruitment while research focused on gendered socialization and educational and professional choices. In the 1990s, research addressed issues of retention and career advancement over entry and qualification issues - shifting to an organizational approach towards an institutional transformation - and the focus was increasingly placed on research organizations, their implicit norms and standards, embedded structures of inequality in institutional practices, and power relations (Glover 2010). Changes in the higher education landscape can be observed across Europe since the 1990s and gender equality measures have been brought into university governance systems. The main claims for inclusivity have been: the Anglo-American "diversity management" model (mainly used in the corporate sector) and the "gender/diversity mainstreaming" approach - institutionalized in the state sector especially by the United Nations and the European Union. The relevance of these models varies across different types of higher education systems and contexts; however, "women's/gender equality" has become a powerful asset extending norms about rights and formal equality. Mainstreaming gender into universities has meant the development and the formalization of new indicators of gender equality for translating systematic gender gap into policy-making initiatives. The European Union has engaged in several initiatives that encourage universities to adopt positive actions, including measures targeting women to overcome their position of inequality (Rees 2007). In addition, several guidelines have been issued to support the dissemination of positive actions by European universities (European Commission 2012).<sup>2</sup>

Across the European Union, women remain significantly underrepresented in the labour market and in management, and their potential is not fully recognized and valued (EPP Group 2019, 5). At the same time, women are underrepresented in all key decision-making roles and men still dominate in university decision-making bodies, while women's marginal participation persists (Desivilya Syna, Paggi 2014), showing often subtle and implicit gendered processes at the top management sphere (Nielsen 2010; Sheridan, Haslam McKenzie, Still 2010). Burkinshaw and White (2017) argue that the gendered power relations at play in universities stubbornly maintain entrenched inequalities whereby, regardless of measures implemented for and by women, the problem remains.

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<sup>2</sup> In recent years, initiatives such as Athena SWAN (designed to support the advancement of women in science, technology, engineering and mathematics) and the Leadership Foundation's female-only Aurora and Leadership Matters programmes have been introduced to increase the number of women in the leadership pipeline and to better prepare them for senior roles.

According to *Nature* (2018), female leadership at 200 of the top-ranked universities worldwide fell in 2018 to 17%. «Just 34 of the universities named in the 2018 Times Higher Education World University have female presidents, compared with 36 in 2017. Among the listing's highest-ranked institutions across 27 nations, there are the University of Oxford, UK; Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts; Imperial College London; the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia; and the University of California, Berkeley. The rankings consider research, teaching and international outlook among other factors. In Sweden, 4 of the 6 institutions that made the list are led by women. The United States have 11 female-led universities in the rankings, the report's highest number». However, fundamental changes are underway in University's organization, requiring more leaders and a different type of leadership at all levels (Hanum et al. 2015, 65).

The presence of women in corporate boards and their impact on board effectiveness is one of the most contentious issues in corporate governance. This stems from the relatively low, though increasing, number of female executives in boards of directors around the world. Many women still face barriers, as invisible as unbreakable, which prevent their vertical mobility and preclude their access to roles of responsibility within companies: they face a "glass ceiling" (Morrison et al. 1987) where they can see, but not reach, high-level company positions (Campbell, Bohdanowicz 2015, 121) in every sector, in society, in politics. The glass ceiling refers not only to barriers internal and external to the organization (such as procedures, structures, power relationships), but also to prejudices, stereotyped behaviours and subtle discrimination (the "second glass ceiling"; Pastore 2018, 196) they face after joining top level positions or corporate boards seats (Li, Wearing 2004). When this lack of representativeness of women in the boards manifests itself, their role in many cases is reduced to tokenism, as a symbolic presence (Kanter 1987; Bourez 2005; Konrad, Kramer 2006; Konrad, Kramer, Erkut 2008), unable to express a real decision-making power (Dang, Nguyen, Vo 2014; De Anca, Gabaldon 2014; Pastore, Tommaso 2016).

According to the She Figures 2018 (European Commission 2019),<sup>3</sup> while women now outnumber men at student and graduate levels and there is broad gender balance at PhD level, their distribution in the different scientific fields of study is uneven, which shows the persistence of gender stereotypes. The presence of stereotypes is especial-

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**3** Published every three years, the She Figures is the main source of panEuropean, comparable statistics on gender balance in science. The data also sheds light on differences in the experiences of women and men working in research – such as relative pay, working conditions and success in obtaining research funds. The report is produced in cooperation with the Member States, associated countries, and Eurostat.

ly strong in the field of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM), where women remain underrepresented at all levels starting as students (32% at Bachelor, Master or equivalent level) up to top academic positions (15%). Furthermore, women still make up the minority of top academic positions.

The academic career of women in the EU is characterized by strong vertical segregation: their share at grade A is only 21% and the glass ceiling index is still high - 1.78. These issues are identified in the design of the She Figures reports, which have been published every three years since 2003. The most recent version (2019) presents data related to the pool of graduate talent, participation in S&T occupations, labour market participation as researchers, working conditions of researchers, career advancement, participation in decision-making, and R&I outputs. Despite their advanced degrees and work force presence in most professional sectors, including higher education, women are often absent from leadership roles. In higher education, women are generally overrepresented in entry-level faculty positions and underrepresented in senior-level and managerial positions (e.g., associate professor, full professor, dean, president). The EU is approaching gender balance among doctoral students: in 2016, women made up 47.9% of doctoral graduates at the EU level, while in two thirds of EU Member States the proportion of women among doctoral graduates ranged between 45% and 55% and the number of women doctoral graduates increased at a faster rate than that for men, even though the proportion of women among doctoral graduates still varies among the different fields of education (European Commission 2019). Gender inequalities persist in career advancement and in the participation in academic decision-making. In the EU-28, the proportion of women among heads of institutions in the higher education sector increased from 20% in 2014 to 22% in 2017<sup>4</sup> (24.4% in Italy) and the proportion among the heads of universities increased slightly over the same period from 14.1% to 14.3%<sup>5</sup> (only 8.2% in Italy). Women made up 27% of the members of boards of research organizations,<sup>6</sup> and 20% of the board leaders; this proportion ranged from 12% to

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**4** The highest proportions were found in Sweden (41.7%), Latvia (37%), Lithuania (32.6%), Slovenia (32.4%), Norway (31.3%), Croatia (30.8%), Estonia (30.4%) and Iceland and Switzerland (30%). The lowest proportions were observed in Spain (8%), Turkey (8.5%), Cyprus (10.4%) and Greece (11.1%).

**5** The proportion of women ranged from 0% in Estonia, Cyprus, Iceland, Luxembourg and Malta to 37.5% in Norway. The proportion was higher than 30% in Switzerland (33.3%), Latvia (31.3%) and Sweden (31.3%).

**6** The respective proportion at the national level ranged from 12% in Croatia to 54% in Norway. In nine out of the 32 countries in the She Figures 2018 (European Commission 2019) (NO, LU, SE, RO, BG, IS, FI, IE and SI) women constituted at least 40% of board members.

54% at the national level (20% in Italy), while in nine countries it was 40% or higher (8% in Italy)<sup>7</sup> (European Commission 2019).

Explanations for the under-representation of women in senior positions have focused on structural and/or cultural explanations, reflected in a variety of metaphors such as the leaky pipeline, glass ceilings, glass cliffs, labyrinths and so on. Research focuses both on the nature of recruitment/retention processes and on the transparency of procedures and career structures (Knights and Richards, 2003), but also on the profile of academic gatekeepers (e.g. journal editorships; research funding organizations) which are largely male. Cultural explanations have focused on organizational cultures (Morley 2013) and double standards regardless the level of competence. An increasing number of research institutions has been adopting a variety of measures to address the gender gap (Gvozdanović, Maes 2018), such as leadership training, implicit bias training, Gender Equality Plans and the Human Resources Strategy for Researchers (Cameron et al. 2015). However, these measures have not led to significant changes so far (European Commission 2019).

## 2 Gender Composition of Boards. State of the Art

As far as we know this is the first work that analyses the relationships between board composition and sensitivity to gender issues within the university strategic plans. Therefore, we can only refer to literature on gender diversity and gender role in (private and public) sectors different from universities.

The board of directors is the most important decision-making body in a (private or public) corporation. Its correct composition is considered one of the profiles of effectiveness of corporate governance systems (Zahra, Pearce 1989; Walsh, Seward 1990; Johnson, Daily, Ellstrand 1996; O'Neal, Thomas 1996; Westphal 1999; Kang, Din, Charoenwong 2010, 889), and its effects on the strategic decision-making process, on the company control system and on the economic and financial performance of the companies, have always fueled an intense academic and professional debate. Theoretical perspectives of the literature on governance assign heterogeneous roles to the board of directors (Decastri 2009): strategy formulation (stewardship theory: Donaldson, Davis 1991; Muth, Donaldson 1998); monitoring and control (agency theory: Jensen, Meckling 1976; Fama 1980); connection between the company and the external environment and

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<sup>7</sup> The proportion of women among board leaders ranged from 0% (CZ, FR, HR, CY, MT, PT, RO and SK) up to 73% in Bulgaria and 80% in Spain. Seven countries in total (SE, IS, NL, LV, IE, BG and ES) had more than 40% of women among board leaders.

the resources on which it depends (resource dependence theory: Pfeffer, Salancik 1978; Zahra, Pearce 1989); management support (managerial hegemony theory: Lorsch, MacIver 1989); coordination and mediation (stakeholder theory: Donaldson, Preston 1995).

Business economy literature and, specifically, studies on corporate governance have always underlined how diversity (in terms of: age, gender, geographic origin, socio-cultural and educational backgrounds) and the heterogeneity of skills and competences, professional profiles and knowledge, perspectives and visions, and personalities and gender:

- increase the independence of collegial corporate bodies;
- ensure the best possible representation and protection of all shareholders (Van der Walt, Ingley 2003; Rose 2007; Hoogendoorn, Oosterbeek, Van Praag 2013);
- make the decision-making process more effective and improve both executive control and problem-solving processes;
- create the conditions for a higher competitiveness of a company on the markets, a lower capital cost, and a greater corporate value.

Since the board of directors has the responsibility for economic governance and business results, the ability to effectively perform control over the work of management and at the same time to support strategic decision-making is strictly determined by its composition (Hermalin, Weisbach 2003; Minichilli, Zattoni, Zona 2009; Agrawal 2012), with particular reference to personal characteristics and expertise of the members (Perry, Peyer 2005).

After decades of legislation towards equality, data continue to show that management is a male's field (Singh, Vinnicombe, Terjesen 2006) despite several studies have shown that gender composition is not indifferent in the board's decision (Singh, Terjesen, Vinnicombe 2008; Terjesen, Sealy, Singh 2009). Previous research has focused on female representation in corporate boards, which is both more common and more heterogeneous across firms (Daily, Certo, Dalton 1999; Hillman, Cannella, Harris 2002; Terjesen, Sealy, Singh 2009; Singh, Terjesen, Vinnicombe 2008) and, generally, their findings show that women on board are underrepresented. A large amount of work in this area has examined the causes of the underrepresentation of women on boards compared with their representation in management roles (Hillman, Shropshire, Cannella 2007). Other research instead considers how it might impact board decision-making processes (Chen, Crossland, Huang 2016). Companies which are open to everyone's contribution in top positions and corporate governance (which are different by gender, preferences, age, culture) work better and they can be positively received by the market (Baltrunaite et al. 2014; Besley et al. 2013). Moreover, according to Campbell and Bohdanowicz (2015, 121), appointing women to

boards allows companies to improve their performance as they exploit the full intellectual and social capital that women offer.

The issue of gender diversity<sup>8</sup> on boards or in top management teams has therefore become increasingly important, specifically in the literature on corporate governance (O'Rourke 2003; Kirsch 2018; Davidson, Burke 2011). Appointing women directors tends to make the composition of boards more diverse, which is thought to affect the nature of board processes and outcomes, and by extension, firm outcomes (Terjesen, Sealy, Singh 2009). Research focuses on the presence of women as contributing to better functioning through role performance (Wan, Ong 2005), execution of tasks and, ultimately, corporate performance (Carter, Simkins, Simpson 2003; Francoeur, Labelle, Sinclair-Desgagne 2008; Adams, Ferreira 2009). In Keatinge's words (2013, 2), a greater gender diversity in the board «can lead to a more diverse workforce, better corporate governance practices and improved stakeholder relations, which, in turn, will result in better financial performance». Higher female participation leads to more transparent management activities: firms with higher proportions of female directors display better earning quality and encourage more public disclosure. In this context, gender diversity is an indicator of board effectiveness, as the behaviour of female directors might differ from that of male directors (Adams, Ferreira 2009). Having more female directors adds quality to board discussion and decision-making, and a diverse board is more likely to provide a wider range of opinions, beliefs, networks and backgrounds (Liao, Luo, Tang 2015; Post, Rahman, Rubow 2011); to contribute other perspectives to debates, raising new concerns and providing new sensitivities that find expression in the discussions of boards (Burke 1997); to generate greater creativity in decision-making (Erhardt, Werbel, Shrader 2003). In addition, women on boards might bring an additional independent view that enhances the decision quality (Colaco, Myers, Nitkin 2011). Gender diversity and participation of women in boards can be also seen as important indicators of the social responsibility of an organization, and it can be a sign of the stakeholder orientation of the company (Oakley 2000), while the inclusion of female board directors has also proved financially beneficial, resulting in increased shareholder returns, and higher returns on equity (Hillman et al. 1998). Ultimately, gender equality in the boardroom is a basic tenet of equality, which seeks to offer the same opportunities for women as men (Conroy 2000).

More specifically, the literature on gender diversity and corporate governance has suggested that companies with a higher proportion of women on their boards are characterized by:

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**8** The extent to which a group or organization is heterogeneous with respect to the gender of its members.



1. best corporate governance practices (and their transparency) and better organizational performance (Adams, Ferreira 2009; Nielsen, Huse 2010; Kakabadse et al. 2015);
2. a highest number of the board and control committee meetings (Gallego-Álvarez, García-Sánchez, Rodríguez-Domínguez 2010; Fitzsimmons 2012) and a generally higher attendance at board meetings than men (regarded as a proxy of the quality of firm governance, which in turn reduces the absenteeism rate of male members leading to the best possible strategic decisions);
3. better firm performance (Francoeur, Labelle, Sinclair-Desgagne 2008; Ben-Amar et al. 2013; Chapple, Humphrey 2014; Ali, Ng, Kulik 2014; Dezső, Ross 2012), and economic value creation for the company (Francoeur, Labelle, Sinclair-Desgagne 2008; Miller, Triana 2009; Terjesen, Sealy, Singh 2009; Terjesen, Aguilera, Lorenz 2015; Davies 2011);
4. a better company reputation (Bernardi, Bosco, Vassill 2006; Bernardi, Bosco, Columb 2009; Brammer, Millington, Pavelin 2009);
5. a greater consideration for the employees' welfare, a stronger stakeholder (Van der Walt, Ingley 2003; Rose 2007; Hoogenboom, Oosterbeek, Van Praag 2013) and CSR orientation (Hafsi, Turgut 2013; Zhang, Zhu, Ding 2013; Larrieta-Rubín de Celis et al. 2015; Ben-Amar, Chang, McIlkenny 2015; Bear, Rahman, Post 2010; Boulouta 2013; Harjoto, Laksmana, Lee 2015).

However, some scholars have pointed out the possible negative effects of diversity (Rose 2007; Baranchuk, Dybvig 2009; Ferreira 2010). According to these scholars, a higher percentage of women on boards generate longer board meetings to share different points of view and resolve disputes and this has a negative impact on the operative performance of the board and on the monitoring results (Pastore, Tommaso, Ricciardi 2017, 67, 80-1). The heterogeneity of interests represented within the board may increase the conflict, the difficulty of communication and the possible emergence of factions within the group which can lessen the board cohesion and negatively affect companies' performance (Dobbin, Jung 2011, 816).

In recent years, the potential benefits of gender diversity have also drawn the attention of European market players and Regulators (promoting gender equality is one of the fundamental values espoused by the European Union and a core activity for it) who have recommended to require to listed companies a heterogeneous gender composition both in top management and boards and to encourage the participation of women in decision-making processes, which is considered essential for the competitiveness and sustainability of the European Union.

In this respect, the EU 2010-2015 Strategy for Equality between Women and Men, the European Pact for Gender Equality 2011-2020 and the Strategic Engagement for Gender Equality for the period 2016-2019 have set out a target (at least) of 40% female representation on boards and senior and middle management of all private and public boards, including universities, by the end of 2020 in European countries. This European Strategy has been decisive in bringing gender policies into the political agenda of several Member States and in encouraging them to impose the balanced presence of women and men in the overall membership of their corporate and management bodies upon listed companies and the state-owned ones—either through law (as it happened, for example, in Norway in 2003, France in 2010, Belgium, Italy in 2011 – see box below, and more recently in Germany in 2015) or through self-regulatory and corporate governance codes (as in the case of United Kingdom, Luxemburg, Poland, Sweden, Finland) –, in order to accelerate the process towards economic gender equality, to promote women’s empowerment, to achieve a greater heterogeneity in these boards and an improved decision-making quality.

In Italy, State Law No.120/2011 requires that public companies (from 12 August 2012 onwards)<sup>9</sup> as well as those majority-owned by a government entity (for which the rule was enforced from 12 of February 2013)<sup>10</sup> must renew/appoint their boards by reserving a quota to women (the under-represented gender) on corporate management and supervisory boards (boards of statutory auditors in the Italian companies), to be applied to the first renewal of these

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**9** It is the Act 12 July 2011, No. 120 (Known as “Golfo-Mosca” Law, after the names of the two authors), on Amendments to the Unified Text on finance-related intermediation under Legislative Decree 24 February 1998, No. 58, concerning equal access to the administrative and oversight bodies of quoted companies” (in Italian, “Legge 12 luglio 2011, n. 120, Modifiche al testo unico delle disposizioni in materia di intermediazione finanziaria, di cui al decreto legislativo 24 febbraio 1998, n. 58, concernenti la parità di accesso agli organi di amministrazione e di controllo delle società quotate in mercati regolamentati”). It was approved on July 12, 2011 and entered into force on August 12, 2012 (one year after, i.e., there was a phase-in period between approval and implementation).

**10** The Law no.120/2011 also applies to State-owned companies (i.e. public companies under the control of the government) after the entry into force of Italian Presidential Decree on equal access to the Board of State-owned companies, the DPR no. 251 of 30/11/2012 implementing Law 120/2011), on 12 February 2013. The provisions of law establish a legal dual-track: for publicly-listed companies, the discipline stem from the Act under reference, and in detail by a subsequent Regulation of CONSOB (Italian Stock Exchange Authority); for State-owned companies, the discipline is governed by a subsequent Regulation, the above-mentioned D.P.R., dated November 30, 2012. As for the latter, the oversight is attributed to the President of Council of Ministers or to delegated Minister for Equal Opportunities. See: Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Inter-Ministerial Committee for Human Rights (2016), “Italy’s Reply to UNWGDW”, September 15, 2016:2.

bodies (at least one-fifth of board seats) and for three consecutive mandates (from the second and third renewal of the corporate bodies, women must be at least one-third). Hence, Italian gender quotas on corporate management boards (applying to board nominations following August 2012) are temporary and gradual<sup>11</sup> and the Law is aimed at promoting the involvement of women in corporate activities as well as achieving positive actions for a period of time sufficient to generate processes of cultural change. In the first five years of implementation of the legislative quotas, Italy has achieved results higher than expected: the number of women in top positions has increased and the increases recorded have been so significant (Italy has already achieved the 33.5% target) as to allow Italy to exceed the EU-28 average (of 25.3% of women in corporate boardrooms at the end of 2017) and to position itself among the best European practices, since it has recorded the greatest progress in gender-balanced boardrooms (Source: European Institute for Gender Equality, 2018). It would have been impossible to achieve this result without a legislative measure such as quotas. It would be useful to examine whether the significant progress noted in the last five years are only a numerical result or if they represent a substantial change with regard to the composition of the decision-making bodies, the selection of members of the boards, and the role of appointed women (chairs, CEOs).

However, despite these various European initiatives, which have given rise to an acceleration towards equal opportunities, female corporate board directors remain a minority in most of the boardrooms of private and public companies the world (Branson 2012; Heidrick, Struggles 2013), «with women more likely to fill the role of independent, non-executive directors rather than executive positions» (Campbell, Bohdanowicz 2015, 122).

The picture is sadly, not different in universities. The gender imbalance in boards and executive management is replicated in the education sector, where women are underrepresented in leadership roles both in schools (Chard 2013) and universities (Morley 2013). «This relative dearth of women in senior positions reflects a failure to maxi-

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**11** It is valid for three mandates, from August 2012 until 2022 (i.e. 9 years for each company: boards of companies listed on the Italian stock exchange are elected every three years). The corporate bodies renewed for the first time after the Law in 2014 will remain in office up to a maximum of 2023. With reference to the second issue, the measure is implemented gradually and remains in place only for three consecutive board elections. The required target of representation of either gender is set at least one-fifth (amounting to 20%) of the members of the Boards for the first election following one year of the coming into force of Law no.120/2011 (that is after August 2012), to be increased to one-third of the members of the boards (amounting to 30%) for the following two board elections, from 2015 up to 2022, when the Golfo-Mosca law will cease.

mize female talent» (Shepherd 2017, 82). In conclusion, one level of analysis that has received comparatively little scholarly attention is the gender composition of public institutions, which our essay aims at addressing focusing on the Italian universities.

### 3 Gender Composition of University Boards

European Universities have undergone regular reform process since the beginning of the 1990 (Pinheiro, Trondal 2014; Karlsen, Pritchard 2013), according to the principles of New Public Management (NPM) (Bolden et al. 2012). This process is still in progress particularly as regards matters pertaining to institutional governance (Engwall 2014). The literature on NPM and gender equality shows an ambivalent picture. According to Kreissl et al. (2015), the new organizational principles did not address the persistent phenomenon of gender inequality in academia, despite well-established gender equality agendas: while numbers indicate an increase in women's participation, numbers are still far off parity in higher positions along the steps of the academic career.

At the same time, few studies scrutinise: a) the impact of diversity management on organizational performance (Pitts 2006, 2007); b) the efficiency of different types of gender equality policies and measures in obtaining more balanced gender compositions in the academy (Castano et al. 2010) as well as c) the commitment and support from upper-management levels to the adoption and implementation of equality/diversity policies and programs.

According to Desivilya and Costea (2015), addressing gender inequality in academia requires leadership and action at all organizational levels, supported by adequate governmental policy mechanisms and incentives. Instead, academia is traditionally based on a highly institutionalised and bureaucratic hierarchical systems, founded on sets of values that define and maintain a specific configuration of gender roles and relations, while the persistence of gendered structures and processes is largely attributed to an institutional culture that legitimizes and ascribes neutrality to these processes. However, a «significant gender imbalance remains at executive management level within higher education despite a number of initiatives to increase the number of women in the leadership pipeline and ensure they are better prepared for these roles» (Shepherd 2017, 82). Yet, more women in leadership roles could improve working conditions for all women in organizations, could provide positive role models for female academics, and could encourage better gender balance and diversity at all levels (Sandberg 2013).

About the board appointment processes, Universities can make use of free of charge networks such as Women on Boards and KP-

MG Connect on Board, and organizations supporting specific professions and industries to advertise their appointments to a wider audience. This is the case, for example, of some Italian good practices such as: the “Ready for Board Women”, an initiative, created by PWA-Professional Women’s Association of Milan and Observatory on Diversity Management at SDA Bocconi; the “1000 Curricula Eccellenti” (One Thousand Excellent Curricula), promoted by the Bellisario Foundation; and the project ProRetePA (promoted by the Italian Department for Equal opportunities in collaboration with Friulian University) aimed to promote equal opportunities for women of talent in order to put them in touch with companies who are looking for talented women to enter in the organs of administration and control (Pastore 2018, 193).

Currently, leadership approaches include more plural and inclusive forms of leadership (Denis, Langley, Sergi 2012), and, especially, complex organizations, such as Universities, call for complex leadership (Marion, Uhl-Bien 2001). According to Ritt (2004), women, in general, may be better able to lead complex organizations and universities or to take part in their governance. However, women need both mentors and sponsors to help them navigate their careers, and to point them in directions they haven’t thought about (Glover 2010). Specifically, women who sit on boards and have decision-making power could represent a role model for other highly-qualified and talented women who aspire to progress to the top of the corporate hierarchy (as key executives) or beyond a certain level of their professional careers (as first line managers). «Having role models that demonstrate a range of different ways of being in and successfully navigating a leadership role would help make the role more attainable and attractive and could serve to weaken assumptions and stereotypes» (Hannum et al. 2015, 73). These women can generate a positive effect on the motivation and commitment of other women (and all their collaborators in general) to all levels of the organization, offering them opportunities for growth and encouraging them to express their full potential and, on the other hand, to trigger a “towing” effect, inspiring and encouraging the inclusion of other women in the processes renewal of the corporate bodies. The increase in reference models and the improvement of women’s expectations for career (as indirect effects of women’s leadership) could keep in the job market many women who leave it because of distrust, widening the pool of talents from which to choose the best candidate to be admitted on the board of directors.<sup>12</sup>

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**12** In this regards, the quota system within governance bodies is also acting as a multiplier of initiatives, positive actions and good practices aimed at supporting the competent presence of women at every level in the labor market. These initiatives favor not only

As stated by the literature (Adams et al. 2007; Adams, Gupta, Haughton 2010; Soares, Carter, Combopiano 2010; Adams 2016) it will be expected that the increased presence of women boards makes wider functional talent and skills available, and improves the effectiveness (Hillman, Cannella, Harris 2002; Kim, Stark 2016; Kirsch 2018). The consequent greater heterogeneity in the composition of the boards:

- should increase their independence (Ferreira 2010; Lückerath-Rovers 2013);
- should favor the plurality of strategic approaches to the business (Huse, Solberg 2006; Sheridan, Ross-Smith, Lord 2014) as well as broader perspectives in the analysis of problems and in the taking of decisions (Hillman, Shropshire, Cannella 2007; Bart, McQueen 2013);
- could enhance the efficacy and monitoring capabilities of boards (Kesner 1988; Van der Walt, Ingley 2003; Triana, Miller, Trezebiatowski 2014);
- could strengthen the representation of all shareholders (Ntim 2015) and, above all, by combining the action of different styles of leadership, could influence positively the corporate reputation and its image (Pfeffer 1981; Bear, Rahman, Post 2010; Dang, Nguyen, Vo 2014), improving, consequently, the longer-term sustainable potential growth potential for the company (Balasubramanian 2013, 21).

The further challenge is to demonstrate how and how much the gender mix can positively influence company performance and market results (Dobbin, Jung 2011).<sup>13</sup> In this respects, a new challenge opens up in terms of the efficiency of this positive action, since it is not enough to increase the numerical presence of women on company boards, but it is necessary that the involvement of women be involved in executive roles, and analyze the consequent analysis of the quality of such leadership positions/of the appointed women.

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female employment but also the regeneration, transformation and innovation of work in Italy and they are helping to create an inclusive organizational culture. In this stream, several good practices, based on the implementation of training strategies, could promote women's leadership and so to allow the inclusion of excellent women on boards of directors or meritocratically cooptating the female component in all decision-making processes up to the top. Enhanced and more visible career prospects (especially for higher grades) could also contribute to facilitate the creation of a "woman-friendly" work environment within the company, which encourages employees' commitment and dedication.

**13** A large body of theoretical and empirical literature carried out internationally in this field internationally (also outside the context of the gender quotas) has not been conclusive, delivering mixed and controversial results, whatever indicators chosen (both market-based measure, such as Tobins Q, and accounting-based measure, such as ROA, ROE and so on) to support (Campbell, Minguez-Vera 2008; Schwartz-Ziv 2017) or contradict (Van der Walt, Ingley 2003; Van der Walt et al. 2006; Rose 2007; Francoeur, Labelle, Sinclair-Desgagne 2008; Dobbin, Jung 2011; Gagliarducci, Paserman 2014) the impact of increasing proportion of women directors involved in the board on company's financial performance and outcomes.

#### 4 Strategic Planning in Universities: Process, Tools, Actors

Like in other European countries, since the 1990s, the Italian university system has undergone a season of reforms led by the New Public Management approach. With regard to the gender issue, the reforms have focused on the steering mechanisms used for achieving gender equality. Drawing from that, Müller et al. (2011, 303) have observed that similar to other European countries, currently in Italy, «several policy instruments such as legal/rights measures, positive actions (such as quotas), co-exist alongside more recent ‘mainstreaming’ mechanisms and new steering instruments such as target/incentive-bound resource allocation». In particular, Italian Law number 125/1991 introduced positive actions. Furthermore, Decrees number 198/2006 and number 5/2010 (referring to the European Directive 2006/54) provide that every public organization (thus state universities) has to prepare a Positive Action Plan (PAP). PAPs are documents in which organizations disclose the positive actions planned for the following three years to promote gender equality, together with monetary and human resources devoted to achieve such positive actions. However, the regulation only gives very general indications, saying that PAPs have to include positive actions aimed at removing barriers that prevent the realisation of equal opportunities, promoting women’s employment, achieving substantive equality between men and women, as well as improving the overall well-being at work. Nevertheless, no specific guidelines have been given with regard to the contents of PAPs. Consequently, each public organization has freedom of choice about the positive actions they may plan.

According to the principle of a greater autonomy of the university system (Italian State Law n.168/1989; Law n. 421/1992) and the application of the “new public management” approach (Hood 1995; European University Association 2007), all the Italian Public Universities assume a specific responsibility in developing planning and control processes (Italian State Law n.59/1997; Law Decree n. 43 dated march 31 2005) and drawing up a three-year strategic plan (DM n.506/2007 and DM n. 362/2007), as well as they have to develop functions to perform evaluation in all their activities (Cugini, Michelson, Pilonato 2011; Bronzetti, Mazzotta, Nardo 2012; Cassone, Sacconi 2013; Nardo, Mazzotta 2018).

The University’s Strategic Plan is the programming document outlining the University’s mission (Luxton 2005; Hinton 2012); it promotes governance transparency by formalizing a set of strategic objectives, the relevant implementing actions to achieve them and the indicators for monitoring and evaluation evaluating the process (Agasisti, Arnaboldi, Azzone 2008).

In line with current literature on strategic planning, and with analogous processes carried out by other institutions international-

ly, Italian Universities draw up a strategic map that conforms with the general guidelines for public university planning laid down by MIUR, the Italian Ministry of Education and with current regulation (Law 43/2005, Law no. 15/2009, Legislative Decree no. 150/2009, Law 240/2010).

Regarding the content, strategic planning in public universities helps top management to align its resources in the most efficient manner necessary for the attainment of strategic milestones and to stay competitive (Ofori, Atiogbe 2012, 67). The Plan concerns a three-year period (DM n.216/2006) with half-yearly reviews planned to monitor the work in progress. It is approved by June 30, and it «may be adapted annually by 30 July of each year on the basis of evaluation and monitoring carried out by the referent Ministry and the National Committee for University System Evaluation (NCSVU)» (Bronzetti, Mazzotta, Nardo 2011, 143). At the end of each year, on the basis of the achievement of the objectives, the Plan can be modified or integrated to take into account new requirements or circumstances. Every year, in the forecast budget, the economic sustainability of strategic actions will be carefully evaluated and objectives realigned with available resources. The fully implemented operation of self-assessment and accreditation models in university branches, courses and departments makes it possible to increase the effectiveness of permanent improvement cycles in research and teaching quality. The Strategic Plan begins with the analysis of the University's missions, in particular its primary institutional activities such as teaching, research as well as technology and innovation transfer. A further transversal dimension is quality.<sup>14</sup> The Quality Policy is a constituent part of the University policies; it is organic to strategic plans and to those of the University organizational performance related to the University's annual and long-term economic and financial planning. Then, there is an analysis of the University's comparative ranking (nationally and internationally), related to the results achieved in the recent past. A SWOT analysis leading to the definition of the strategic objectives and relevant actions aimed at addressing the areas where improvement is sought/desired. After conducting the gap analysis, needs identified are prioritized. The strategic priorities guide the focus in the direction of the institutions' vision, and priority areas for which targets and strategies are developed. Strategic priorities help determine how resources

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**14** However, the ongoing reductions in the Ordinary Fund and other sources of national funding make it difficult to guarantee adequate levels of services and support for teaching, research and third mission activities, even in a medium-term time scale. On top of this, the introduction of the principle of standard cost in the allocation of Ordinary Fund contributions, irrespective of teaching or research quality evaluation, along with modifications to the same fund's Reward Quota criteria, could lead to a significant drop in ordinary funding.



may be best allocated for the benefit of the institution and its stakeholders (Hinton 2012). Finally, there are specific, measurable and verifiable indications for each objective. DM n. 506/2007 introduced a suite of performance indicators to evaluate ex post Italian Universities Plans and to assign financial resources according to these indicators, covering five areas (Academic courses, Development of scientific research, Services to students, Internationalization programs, Teaching and non-teaching staff policies). In this regards, the strategic planning process also helps leaders to focus resources available on the major strategies designed to help stakeholders better and attain the institutions of higher education's purpose (Paris 2003).

Regarding the actors, the Strategic Plan is the outcome of an iterative and participatory/collaborative process that broadly involves all the of University members (supported by experts and by resources specifically allocated to it by the Administration), including the departmental structures, as well as all the other components that contribute to results of the University and which will be involved in the implementation of the plan. The engagement steps include meetings with the entire academic community and specific reviews with the Rector, Senate, General Manager, the Board of Administrators and the other governing bodies until the final approval by the Academic authorities. The University Strategic Plan is also approved following of a continuous and extensive consultation with administrative staff, students, players active in local territory in the fields of industry, business and culture and other stakeholders (Paris 2003). By participating in the process, stakeholders provide valuable feedbacks pertinent to strengths, needs, opportunities, and threats to the institution. Among the external subjects involved in the planning and evaluation process since the definition of the general guidelines, there are also: the Conference of Italian University Rectors (CRUI); the National University Council (CUN); the National Council of University Students (CNSU); the National Committee for the Assessment of the University System (CNVSU). The three-year programming relies provides, in a nutshell, on the following procedure: a) definition by the Ministry of Education, having heard CRUI, CUN and CNSU of "general guidelines" for the university system; b) adoption by the universities, by 30 June of each year, of three-year programs, consistent with the aforementioned general guidelines; c) evaluation and periodic monitoring of implementation results, also for the purpose of resources allocation, on the basis of "parameters and criteria" identified by the Ministry, after consulting the CRUI, and the evaluation agencies; d) presentation by the Minister for Research and the University of periodic reports to the Parliament on the assessments of the previous point. The implementation of the strategic plan, it is facilitated by the definition and the application of resource allocation criteria consistent with it and developed ac-

ording to a logic of evaluation of Research, Teaching and Administration activities. From a management point of view, this involves coordination between the strategic plan and the forecast budget; to achieve this goal, an integrated university information system and an effective reporting structure (criteria, databases, decision support) are required.

## 5 Research Objectives

The section has been organized through sub-sections illustrating the research objectives and sample, the data analysis and data collection.

### Objectives

Our hypothesis is that a board in which women directors are present promotes strategic plans more sensitive to gender issues. Following EIGE taxonomy, we define gender sensitivity as the «aim of understanding and taking account of the societal and cultural factors involved in gender-based exclusion and discrimination in the most diverse spheres of public and private life». Therefore, the purpose of this research is to analyse the gender composition of the board of the Italian public universities and to verify whether a relationship between the composition of directors' bodies and the sensitivity to gender issue in strategic document exists. Consequently, we posit the following research question:

R1: Do gender diverse boards promote strategic plans more sensitive to gender issues?

### Sample

In Italy research, teaching and third mission activities are delivered by state and non-state universities approved by the national Ministry of Education. Universities are endowed with legal status and have scientific, teaching, organizational, and financial autonomy. State universities are public entities funded by the national government for about 90 per cent of their total needs; on the contrary, non-state universities are funded by the national government for about 10 per cent of their total needs (Siboni, Nardo, Sangiorgi 2013). The public universities are almost equally distributed in Northern, Central and Southern Italy.

We have chosen to analyse all Italian state universities. The list of state universities was found on the website University.<sup>15</sup> The reference population is made up of 68 Universities positioned in 20 Regions. From this population, 7 universities have been excluded, because their main activity is related to research doctorates. The final sample is therefore made up of 61 universities. The list of universities, their size and geographical location is shown in attached table 1. In keeping with the generally accepted subdivisions (Censis, Centro Studi Investimenti Sociali) we have divided the universities into small ones (less than 10,000 students); medium (between 10,000 and 20,000 students); big (between 20,000 and 40,000 students) and mega (over 40,000 students).

**Table 1** Sample

Region	Denomination	Enrolled	Size
Abruzzo	University of Teramo	6,052	Small
	University of L'Aquila	16,919	Medium
	University of Gabriele D'Annunzio of Chieti and Pescara	24,947	Big
Basilicata	University of Basilicata	6,475	Small
Calabria	University of Mediterranea di Reggio Calabria	5,824	Small
	University of Catanzaro - Magna Grecia	10,008	Medium
	University of Calabria	25,487	Big
Campania	University of Sannio	5,128	Small
	University of Naples "L'Orientale"	10,805	Medium
	University of Naples Parthenope	12,799	Medium
	Second University of Napoli	25,285	Big
	University of Salerno	35,152	Big
Emilia-Romagna	University of Napoli Federico II	74,037	Mega
	University of Ferrara	15,488	Medium
	University of Modena and Reggio Emilia	22,065	Big
	University of Parma	23,851	Big
Friuli-Venezia Giulia	University of Bologna	78,657	Mega
	University of Trieste	14,750	Medium
	University of Udine	14,982	Medium
Lazio	University of Roma "Foro Italico"	2,200	Small
	University of Cassino e del Lazio Meridionale	7,561	Small
	University of Tuscia	7,865	Small
	University of Roma Tor Vergata	29,222	Big
	University of Roma Tre	32,214	Big
Liguria	University Sapienza	100,020	Mega
	University of Genova	31,496	Big

<sup>15</sup> <http://ustat.miur.it/dati/didattica/italia/atenei-statali>.

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<b>Region</b>	<b>Denomination</b>	<b>Enrolled</b>	<b>Size</b>
Lombardy	University of Insubria	9,391	Small
	University of Brescia	13,862	Medium
	University of Bergamo	16,715	Medium
	University of Pavia	21,194	Big
	University of Milano - Bicocca	32,683	Big
	Politecnico of Milano	42,665	Mega
Marche	University of Milano	59,596	Mega
	University of Camerino	6,895	Small
	University of Macerata	10,061	Medium
	University "Carlo Bo" of Urbino	13,418	Medium
Molise	University Politecnica of Marche - Ancona	15,336	Medium
Piedmont	University of Molise	6,935	Small
	University of Piemonte orientale	11,623	Medium
	Politecnico of Torino	30,839	Big
Puglia	University of Torino	67,958	Mega
	University of Foggia	9,444	Small
	Politecnico of Bari	9,621	Small
	University of Salento	16,585	Medium
Sardinia	University of Bari	44,278	Mega
	University of Sassari	12,893	Medium
	University of Cagliari	25,379	Big
Sicily	University of Messina	22,762	Big
	University of Palermo	39,726	Big
	University of Catania	43,346	Mega
Tuscany	University for Foreigners of Siena	1,864	Small
	University of Siena	15,277	Medium
	University of Pisa	44,846	Mega
	University of Firenze	49,917	Mega
Trentino-Alto Adige	University of Trento	16,180	Medium
Umbria	University for Foreigners Perugia	875	Small
	University of Perugia	23,037	Big
Veneto	IUAV	4,060	Small
	Ca' Foscari University of Venice	19,603	Medium
	University of Verona	22,997	Big
	University of Padova	57,272	Mega

Source: our processing

## 6 Research Methods

### Methods of Analysis

To analyse if board gender composition directly impacts on the gender sensitivity of the approved strategic plans, we started measuring gender approach on the basis of content analysis, a systematic coding and categorizing approach used for exploring large amounts of textual information to determine (among other) trends and patterns of words used and their frequency (Neuendorf 2017).<sup>16</sup> Count and amounts are numerical process, and a quantitative content analysis has as its goal a numerical summary of a chosen items' set. We identified 3 key aspects (characteristics, tool, policy) and 15 items (woman professor, gender, woman/women workers, researcher(s), sex - sexual, Positive Action Plan, Guarantee Committee, conciliation, equality, differences enhancement, diversity, exclusion, equal opportunity policies, gender policy, equity) summarized in table 2.

**Table 2** Item used in content analysis

<b>Characteristics</b>	<b>Policy</b>
woman professor	8. conciliation
gender	9. equality
woman/women workers	10. differences enhancement
researcher(s)	11. diversity
sex - sexual	12. exclusion
Tool	13. equal opportunity policies
Positive Action Plan	14. gender policy
Guarantee Committee	15. equity

Content analysis is a technique for gathering data. It involves codifying qualitative and quantitative information into pre-defined categories in order to derive patterns. For content analysis to be effective, certain technical requirements should be met: the categories of classification must be clearly and operationally defined; data capture must be systematic; content analysis must demonstrate characteristics for reliability and validity (Guthrie, Abeysekera 2006).

**16** The purpose of content analysis is to describe the characteristics of the document's content by examining who says what, to whom, and with what effect (Bloor, Wood 2006). The goal of content analysis is to produce counts of key categories and measurement of the amounts of variables (Fink 2009). Content analysis is a method of codifying the content or text of a piece of writing into categories based on chosen criteria (Weber 1988). However one of the limitations of content analysis has been its focus on quantity rather than quality of disclosure

Content analysis has been defined as: “a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns” (Hsieh, Shannon 2005, 1278). The analysis is conducted by keywords and by sentences (Hsieh, Shannon 2005). For each occurrence (word or underlying means), we attributed a score of one: therefore, we can have a sub-score for each dimension. Once the analysis was completed, we added the score obtained for each University, named gender sensitivity approach (GSA), considering all the equally important items. Then for each Universities it is calculate the gender sensitivity approach index (GSAI), obtained normalizing the GSA taking as reference the highest recorded value. GSAI has a variability between zero and one, where 1 is the value recalling the best gender approach in defining university strategies and zero as the worst approach. Gender composition is analyzed in term of presence of female directors on the board, measured considering the numbers of female directors, and in terms of incidence of female directors on the board, measured as share of women out of the total members.

We collected information on universities’ web-sites.

Content analysis and collection of data on board composition were conducted by reviewing the strategic plans, from which a list of features (subsequently compared and synthesized) was derived.

The theoretical paradigm underlying our research is the interpretive model too. In the light of interpretivism, sociological phenomena cannot simply be observed but must also be interpreted by the researcher. This means that there is not one absolute reality, but rather, different possibilities adopted to interpret the facts (Ryan, Scapens, Theobald 2002).

The approach is directed content analysis, in which initial coding starts with a theory and relevant research findings. The purpose of this approach is to validate or extend a conceptual framework or theory. Qualitative content analysis does not produce counts and statistical significance (Hsieh, Shannon 2005). Qualitative research is interpretive, and interpretation represents theoretical understanding of the phenomenon under study. It uncovers patterns, themes, and categories important to a social reality (Berg 2001; Patton 2002).

## **7 Results**

### **Descriptive Statistics**

Regarding the board composition, we analysed our sample considering the board at the 31 December 2017, i.e. the board that approves the 2018 strategic plan. The average size of the boards of Italian Universities is 10 directors. The average number of male directors is 7,

while the average number of female directors is 3 [tab. 3]. The number of women varies from a minimum of 1 (in 18% of cases) to a maximum of 7 (3% of cases).

**Table 3** Board Composition of Italian Universities

	M	F	Tot	IF	EF	SF	% F	FR	GSAI
IUAU Venezia	5	1	6	0	1	0	17%	0	0.044776
Piemonte-Orientale	8	2	10	1	1	0	20%	0	0.014925
Politecnico di Bari	8	1	9	0	1	0	11%	0	0.19403
Politecnico di Milano	10	1	11	1	0	0	9%	0	0.044776
Politecnico di Torino	8	3	11	1	2	0	27%	0	0.238806
Università de L'Aquila	7	3	10	2	1	0	30%	1	0.253731
Università del Molise	9	2	11	1	1	0	18%	0	0.044776
Università del Salento	9	1	10	1	0	0	10%	0	0.014925
Università del Sannio	7	2	9	2	0	0	22%	0	0.044776
Università dell'Insubria	7	2	9	2	0	0	22%	0	0
Università della Basilicata	8	3	11	2	0	1	27%	1	0.104478
Università della Calabria	10	2	12	1	1	0	17%	0	0.164179
Università della Campania – Vanvitelli	8	3	11	1	2	0	27%	0	0
Università della Tuscia	5	2	7	1	1	0	29%	0	0.164179
Università di Bari – Aldo Moro	6	2	8	2	0	0	25%	0	0.447761
Università di Bergamo	7	4	11	2	1	1	36%	0	0.238806
Università di Bologna	8	3	11	1	2	0	27%	0	0.119403
Università di Brescia	6	3	9	2	1	0	33%	0	0.164179
Università di Cagliari	5	5	10	4	0	1	50%	1	0.358209
Università di Camerino	4	3	7	1	1	1	43%	0	0.029851
Università di Cassino	9	1	10	1	0	0	10%	0	0.014925
Università di Catania	8	3	11	2	1	0	27%	0	0.313433
Università di Catanzaro – Magna Graecia	8	2	10	2	0	0	20%	0	0.134328
Università di Chieti-Pescara	9	3	12	2	0	1	25%	0	0.119403
Università di Ferrara	6	4	10	2	1	1	40%	0	0.373134
Università di Firenze	8	3	11	1	1	1	27%	0	0
Università di Foggia	7	5	12	4	1	0	42%	0	0.134328
Università di Genova	10	1	11	1	0	0	9%	0	0.074627
Università di Macerata	6	3	9	3	0	0	33%	0	0.074627
Università di Messina	8	1	9	1	0	0	11%	0	0.014925
Università di Modena e Reggio E.	7	4	11	3	0	1	36%	0	0.029851
Università di Napoli – Federico II	8	3	11	0	3	0	27%	0	0
Università di Napoli – Orientale	3	7	10	5	2	0	70%	1	0.119403
Università di Napoli Parthenope	7	3	10	3	0	0	30%	0	0.014925
Università di Padova	8	3	11	2	2	0	27%	0	0.253731
Università di Palermo	9	1	10	1	0	0	10%	0	0
Università di Parma	9	2	11	2	0	0	18%	0	0.029851

	<b>M</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>Tot</b>	<b>IF</b>	<b>EF</b>	<b>SF</b>	<b>% F</b>	<b>FR</b>	<b>GSAI</b>
Università di Pavia	7	3	10	0	1	2	30%	0	0.029851
Università di Perugia	9	1	10	1	0	0	10%	0	0.014925
Università di Pisa	8	2	10	1	1	0	20%	0	0.044776
Università di Reggio Calabria – Mediterranea	8	2	10	2	0	0	20%	0	1
Università di Roma – Foro Italico	7	2	9	1	0	1	22%	0	0.134328
Università di Roma – Sapienza	8	2	10	2	0	0	20%	0	0.059701
Università di Roma – Tor Vergata	7	4	11	2	0	2	36%	0	0.19403
Università di Roma 3	9	1	10	0	1	0	10%	0	0.014925
Università di Salerno	8	2	10	2	0	0	20%	0	0.044776
Università di Sassari	7	4	11	2	2	0	36%	0	0.089552
Università di Siena	7	2	9	2	0	0	22%	0	0.089552
Università di Teramo	7	3	10	3	0	0	30%	0	0.014925
Università di Torino	7	4	11	2	1	1	36%	0	0.104478
Università di Trento	5	4	9	2	2	0	44%	0	0.343284
Università di Trieste	6	4	10	1	2	1	40%	0	0.014925
Università di Udine	7	3	10	0	1	2	30%	0	0.014925
Università di Urbino	8	3	11	2	1	0	27%	0	0.014925
Università di Venezia Ca' Foscari	6	5	11	2	2	1	45%	0	0.104478
Università di Verona	8	3	11	3	0	0	27%	0	0.044776
Università Milano Bicocca	7	5	12	3	2	0	42%	1	0
Università Milano Statale	7	4	11	2	2	0	36%	0	0.029851
Università per Stranieri di Siena	1	7	8	3	2	2	88%	0	0.044776
Università per Stranieri Perugia	10	1	11	1	0	0	9%	0	0.19403
Università Politecnica delle Marche	7	4	11	2	0	2	36%	0	0.014925
<b>Total (media)</b>	<b>7,31</b>	<b>2,82</b>	<b>10,13</b>				<b>28%</b>	<b>5</b>	

Legend: M=male; F= Female; Tot= male + female director; IF= Internal female director; %F= female director/Tot; EF= external female director; SF= student female director; FR = Female Rector; GAI= gender approach index

Source: our elaboration

Data show that the boards are dominated by men, except for the board of the University of Cagliari. In five Universities the Rector is a woman, one in the North of Italy (University of Milan-Bicocca), two in the Center (University of L'Aquila and University of Naples - Eastern) and one in the South (University of Basilicata). 60% of the women present in the board of the surveyed universities are women who work within the university (professors and staff) and about 13% are students.

Table 3 shows the GSAI for the surveyed universities, reported in the last column. The descriptive analysis shows that there is a lack of attention to gender issue, confirmed by a relatively low GSAI (on average in the 87% to cases with a GSAI of less than 0.25). This result could depend on the lack of presence of women in the boards



(on average approximately three in a board of 10 members). In order to understand whether there is a relationship between sensitivity to gender issues and the composition of the board, a quantitative analysis was also conducted.

Pairwise analysis was performed and the results are reported in table 4. The analysis shows that there is a positive correlation between GSAI and DExternal (p-value 0.093). The analysis shows that a larger size of the board means that more men are likely to be present (p-value 0.000).

**Table 4** Pairwise correlation

	<b>GSAI</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>USize</b>	<b>Female%</b>	<b>BSize</b>	<b>DExternal</b>
GSAI	1						
Male	-0.096	1					
Female	0.067	-0.691***	1				
USize	-0.073	0.312**	0.008	1			
Female%	0.076	-0.849***	0.956***	-0.012	1		
BSize	-0.053	0.569***	0.212	0.414***	-0.063	1	
DExternal	0.217*	-0.356***	0.456***	0.046	0.440***	0.032	1

Legend: GSAI = gender sensitivity approach index; Male = number of male directors; Female = number of female directors, USize = dummy university dimension; Female% = number of female director/board size; BSize = number of member of board of directors; DExternal = dummy for external female directors  
\* Significance level 5% \*\* significance level 10%

## 8 Conclusions

This essay aims both at contributing to the debate on gender equality in institutional decision-making processes – with particular reference to those taking place within universities – and at raising gender awareness within academic institutions. The objective has been, on one hand, to verify the female presence in the strategic planning and decision-making processes of the Italian State Universities, and on the other hand, to verify if this presence influences the gender sensitivity of university strategic documents: that is, the strategic plan and the integrated plan, in terms of both process and content.

The analysis was carried out by analyzing the 2018 Italian University strategic plan through a content analysis. Based on this analysis, a Gender Sensitivity Approach Index (GSAI) was determined for each university, and it has been related to the composition of the board of directors. The empirical findings suggest that: 1. there is a low heterogeneity into the boards (men prevail in several academic boards and there is a low attention to gender issues and policies); 2. gender sensitivity decreases with the larger size of the university. According

to general results, the geographic location of Universities has no influence on sensitivity to gender issue: universities which present the best values are: Università di Bari – Aldo Moro; Università di Cagliari; Università di Catanzaro – Magna Graecia; Università di Catania; Università di Ferrara; Università di Reggio Calabria – Mediterranean; Università di Trento.

Moreover, higher gender diversity of the boards is positively related to the gender sensitivity of the strategic plans, i.e. participation of women on the board of directors brings new perspectives to the board and addresses the gender sensitivity of the institution. In these cases, heterogeneity results in a broader perspective which allows team members to be involved in in-depth conversations, to process different alternatives and to make the best decisions in order to reconcile the different opinions and optimise the performance.

Results suggest that when the board has a certain level of heterogeneity, strategic plans are more oriented towards gender issues. The explicit reference to equal opportunities in the statutes of their has a positive impact in gender oriented strategic plans. However, this presence might be the result of a mere compliance with the statute.

The study has some limitations. First, the analysis only includes the 2018 Strategic plans; second, it does not include non-state universities. This opens the door to a further possible development of this study, i.e. a longitudinal analysis of strategic plans spanning several years and/or inclusion of non-state universities, in order to understand if any differences in approach arise. A third limitation is that we have considered the mere presence of women within the board, and not their real effective role on the decision-making process, such as we not consider the positioning of female directors in the university hierarchy. These limitations opens the door to a further possible development of this study, i.e. examining how and if the gender-related opportunities or the difference between women director's values from those of male directors' influence decision-making.

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