

GENDER EQUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

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I. INTRODUCTION

In the last twenty years, several programmes have been undertaken to promote gender equality in academia and in research & innovation institutions. Gender equality is one of the main challenges facing society today, and higher education is an area with strong gender imbalances in all areas and at all latitudes (Robertson, 2018).

In the European Union and despite persistent disparities in several European countries (European Commission, 2021b), data show that, on average, at Bachelor's and Master's levels, women outnumber men as students (54%) and graduates (59%), and there is almost a gender balance at PhD level (48%). However, disparities between fields of study persist and women still account for less than a quarter of PhD graduates in the Information and Communications Technology field (22%). The gender equality objectives can only be achieved through a structural approach to change across the European academic and research & innovation system, implying the joint commitment of organisations. In the Horizon Europe programme, the introduction of the Gender Equality Plan eligibility criterion aims to support these efforts, reflecting the legal basis of Horizon Europe that reinforces gender equality as a transversal priority (European Commission, 2021a).

Portugal ranks 15th in the EU Gender Equality Index. Within this Index, the power domain measures gender equality in decision-making positions in the political, economic and social spheres. Portugal has a score of 53.6 out of 100 points (Institute for Gender Equality, 2021). Recent data from She Figures 2021 (European Commission, 2021b) reveal that in Portugal there have been very small improvements in the representation of women at the highest academic level, i.e. at grade A (from 25% to 27%) between 2013 and 2018. Furthermore, to the unequal presence of men and women at the highest levels of the academic career, the data reveal that women are in a clear minority in senior management positions in higher education institutions, not exceeding 28.9% and 21.7% of the total number of individuals in that position, respectively, in Portugal and the EU-28. Moreover, data collected by Direção Geral de Estatísticas da Educação e Ciência (2020) show that the disparities are very expressive at the top of the career, where women do not represent more than 24% of full professors, in university education, and 30% of principal coordinating professors, in polytechnic education. These figures show that there is still a way to go in terms of gender equality.

One way to improve the working conditions of women and men academics and researchers and promote GE in careers is through institutional reform. Portugal has requirements for Gender Equality Plan for higher education institutions (Estratégia Nacional para a Igualdade e a Não Discriminação, 2018). While not mandated by law, Gender Equality Plans are promoted through the country's national legal framework which includes support for Gender Equality Plan implementation and trainings on

discrimination in higher education institutions (European Research Area and Innovation Committee, 2021).

This paper aims, through case studies, to understand HEI's commitment to gender equality at the level of policies, actions and involvement of the academic community.

II. OBJECTIVES

To identify the strategies adopted by higher education institutions for gender equality issues, the policies followed by higher education institutions and the contributions to the fulfilment of Sustainable Development Goal 5 - Gender Equality.

III. METHOD

1. INTERVENTION SELECTION

The method adopted for this research was the case study centered on four higher education institutions in Portugal, with practices implemented in gender equality, located in territories with different characteristics and variable dimension, this being the central criterion for the most adequate selection method.

2. SELECTION AND APPLICATION OF EVALUATION TECHNIQUES AND RESULTS

The selection of evaluation techniques for the four case studies was centered on the application of two questionnaires, which resulted in 221 validated answers across the four case studies. The results point to differences and similarities in the processes and practices of gender equality implemented in the four case studies.

3. IMPLEMENTATION OF THE INTERVENTION

This is not exactly an intervention, but rather an evaluation, seeking to assess the strategies adopted in the four case studies for gender equality issues, the policies followed in the same institutions in this area, as well as the contributions to the fulfilment of Sustainable Development Goal 5 - Gender Equality.

IV. RESULTS

1. CASE STUDY – POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE OF TOMAR

Under this theme, which is part of the institutional strategy, the Polytechnic Institute of Tomar has a Code of Good Practices and Ethical Conduct, as well as a Plan for Gender Equality, Inclusion and Diversity that was presented to the whole academic community in a public session. These documents were also disseminated through the institutional newsletter and the institution's social media. These documents are part of the Reconciliation Management System (Norma Portuguesa 4552), certified in May 2022, which is part of the Internal Quality Assurance System and is available on the institutional website and Intranet. Regarding equality and diversity, Polytechnic Institute of Tomar has a specific working group that carries out activities, as well as a dedicated webpage.

Recently, the sharing of good practices in gender equality has originated an international event - Blended International Program - An Inclusive University in a Diverse World - under the Erasmus+ Programme.

Gender equality monitoring is carried out annually and involves the creation of panels, management capacity building and supervision of academic work, among others, with the aim of achieving equity in work teams and in management positions.

2. CASE STUDY – POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE OF PORTALEGRE

Although this issue is not explicit in the institution's strategic objectives, gender equality has been a concern of Polytechnic Institute of Portalegre for several years, and the first manifestation of this concern appears in the Code of Ethics, approved in 2014. More recently, Polytechnic Institute of Portalegre has a plan for gender equality approved, disclosed and under implementation. The institution has a certified professional, family and personal life reconciliation management system, where it assumes the commitment to develop information mechanisms on parenthood and other rights and duties related to reconciliation, as well as equal opportunities between men and women. It also tries to gradually implement the gender equality component in the curricular plans of the study cycles.

The Polytechnic Institute of Portalegre monitors the Gender Equality Plan actions, through indicators.

The Gender Equality Plan foresees the intention to define internal guidelines in order to guarantee equity in gender representation in the work teams created, in the composition of juries for academic exams, as well as in the nomination of the institution's management teams.

The Polytechnic Institute of Portalegre Gender Equality Plan is available in the institution's website.

3. CASE STUDY – INSTITUTO SUPERIOR TÉCNICO - UNIVERSITY OF LISBON

Instituto Superior Técnico has gender equality integrated in the institutional strategy and has a plan. Approved in 2021, Instituto Superior Técnico first "Gender Equality Plan" was disseminated through the School's information notes and website. The strategy followed by Instituto Superior Técnico foresees six focus areas, among which the activities aiming at conciliation between professional, family and personal life. This area aims to contribute to Instituto Superior Técnico people achieving a balance that ensures equal opportunities, namely by: implementing measures that encourage the balanced participation of men and women in family life; making available flexible forms of work (schedules, jobs, etc.) and professional development opportunities. Two ongoing good practices are highlighted: the holding of a workshop on "Good Practices in conciliating professional, family and personal life" and the implementation of an innovative measure to exempt teachers from teaching service after parental leave. The plan foresees indicators and goals and the main activities for the promotion of gender equality are explained.

Recommendations on "Gender Balance" have been discussed and disseminated to encourage Instituto Superior Técnico Departments to promote diversity in work teams with special attention to gender balance.

4. CASE STUDY – POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE OF VIANA DO CASTELO

Gender equality is integrated in the scope of the Strategic Plan and aligned with the Code of Ethical Conduct, and the Concilia project was developed, with the aim of investing in conditions that promote equality, inclusion, well-being and conciliation of professional life with family and personal life in its community, supported by the implementation of the Conciliation Management System. One of the results of this project was the Polytechnic Institute of Viana do Castelo Equality Plan, which had as main thematic areas of intervention: Work-life balance and organizational culture; Gender balance in leadership and decision making; Gender equality in recruitment and career progression; Integration of gender in research and teaching contents and in teaching; Elimination of violence and; Student community.

One of the most important initiatives to support these policies at gender equality was the implementation of a structured training plan, involving students, teachers and staff, on gender equality, reconciliation management, career and time management and other personal development actions.

V. DISCUSSION

It is retained that:

- Part of the studied entities integrate gender equality issues in their strategy.
- All higher education institutions adopted the strategy of implementing a reconciliation management system.
- They show good practices and concern with monitoring activities.
- Most teachers and non-teaching staff know that higher education institutions have this concern, but most of them have not been called to participate and are not aware of practices to promote gender equality.
- However, most of them evaluate positively the action of their institution on this issue.

It is concluded that there is a lot of information and tools that can help higher education institutions to promote gender equality, from practical advice for institutional change, to creating a plan and evaluating its impact. European Institute for Gender Equality has also developed a number of additional tools for this purpose, including a guide to institutional transformation European Institute for Gender Equality, 2016). The European University Association has published reports on diversity, equity and inclusion in European higher education institutions and strategies and approaches used by universities to promote them, which include examples from across Europe (Claeys-Kulik et al., 2019).

Of course, among the institutions studied there are different interpretations of the definitions of diversity and inclusion, but the initiatives tend to follow similar paths. Ambiguity about what constitutes gender equality affects how progress is measured, because different definitions and associations lead to different interpretations of the results. There is, therefore, a need for better definitions of gender equality, which will be the focus of future work. A policy assessment is also needed to investigate best practices and determine the causes of the apparent limited variation in initiatives.

VI. REFERENCES

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