

Inclusiveness and Gender Equality: The Case of an Academic Institution

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Abstract

This paper presents how a structured Gender Equality Plan (GEP) can significantly enhance inclusiveness and fairness within an academic institution. Using the example of the University of Primorska (UP), it highlights key measures undertaken to integrate gender-balanced approaches across hiring, promotion, and decision-making processes. A dedicated project, AGRIGEP, provides additional support through resources, training, mentoring, and collaborative research opportunities that strengthen awareness and accountability. By fostering transparent selection procedures and nurturing inclusive leadership, UP demonstrates that proactive engagement at all levels—top and middle management, academic staff, and student bodies—can help remove systemic barriers. The shared learning model, supported by ongoing evaluation and monitoring, allows a continuous adjustment of objectives and strategies. Consequently, UP has seen improved representation of underrepresented groups, enhanced participation in governance structures, and an overall shift toward a more equitable institutional culture. This experience underscores how a clearly defined GEP, combined with consistent community engagement, can serve as a blueprint for other universities aiming to make tangible progress toward gender equality and an inclusive academic institution.

INTRODUCTION

The need for balanced and inclusive practices in the higher education space has been continuously growing over the last decade (Lister et al., 2002). Universities are increasingly adopting strategies to ensure equal opportunities regardless of gender or other personal circumstances. The University of Primorska (UP) has therefore embarked on developing and implementing a Gender Equality Plan (GEP), which includes measures for transparent recruitment, fair promotion mechanisms, and greater representation of underrepresented groups in governing bodies and working committees. At the same time, with the goal of continuous improvement, a latest version of the strategy, called GEP 2.0, is already in preparation, building on previous experiences and enhanced recommendations.

A significant support to NES proved to be the Horizon AGRIGEP project—Advancing Gender Equality in European Agriculture and Food Systems—which offers a platform for collaboration, research, and education focused on integrating the gender perspective into academic and administrative operations. Horizon AGRIGEP (2025a, 2025b) is a pioneering initiative under the Horizon Europe program aimed at integrating gender equality principles across agricultural research, innovation, and policymaking in the EU. The project addresses systemic gender imbalances in the agricultural and agri-food sectors, recognizing the pivotal role of women and marginalized groups in sustainable food systems and rural development. Launched in 2024, AGRIGEP brings together a multidisciplinary consortium of universities, research institutions, non-governmental organisations, policymakers, and stakeholders from across Europe (Mazancová, Bojnec, & Kobolak, 2024a, 2024b). The project's core objective is to develop and implement inclusive GEPs tailored specifically for agricultural and food system organizations, ensuring that gender mainstreaming becomes a structural and sustainable component of institutional practice.

AGRIGEP focuses on five key areas: first, capacity building and training delivering gender-sensitive training modules for researchers, farmers, and policymakers to promote awareness and skill development in gender equity. Second, institutional change supporting organizations in co-creating and implementing GEPs, with mechanisms for monitoring progress and embedding gender equality in governance structures. Third, data collection and analysis establishing robust gender-disaggregated data frameworks to assess gender gaps in access to land, finance, education, and leadership roles. Fourth, policy engagement working closely with EU and national authorities to align agricultural and rural policies with gender equality objectives, including the Common Agricultural Policy.

Finally, knowledge sharing and innovation fostering stakeholders and communities of practice and knowledge hubs to exchange best practices, with a focus on innovation in agri-tech, climate-smart agriculture, and sustainable farming. AGRIGEP places a strong emphasis on intersectionality, ensuring that policies and interventions consider the diverse realities of women in rural areas, including vulnerable groups and youth. By the end of the project in 2026, AGRIGEP aims to establish a replicable model for gender equality transformation in agricultural systems, contributing to the EU's broader goals of social inclusion, sustainability, and innovation in rural economies.

This study aims to show how UP, by combining three key approaches—reviewing relevant documents, organizing focus groups, and conducting training—managed to gain a comprehensive overview of the challenges and successes in implementing the GEP. The main objective of this study was to assess the effectiveness of the measures from the GEP at UP and to investigate the extent to which they contributed to creating an inclusive, fair, and engaged academic community.

METHODS

This study employed a multi-method approach, beginning with a systematic review of existing strategic documents, regulations, and reports on the implementation of the GEP at the UP. The evaluation focused on transparent recruitment, equitable promotions, and including underrepresented groups in decision-making. Among the reviewed materials were documents produced as part of the international AGRIGEP project, as these offered insights into best practices drawn from other European research and educational institutions (Bojnec & Blatnik, 2024). When examining these texts, we also considered the European guidelines for implementing GEPs, particularly those emphasizing the regular monitoring of statistical data and the establishment of uniform evaluation criteria.

In the second phase, we identified three groups to provide insights into various levels of university operations: senior management, middle management and professional staff, and students. For each group, we organized focus groups at various university locations between October 2024 and May 2025. The discussions were recorded and noted. The collected data were subsequently analysed using thematic analysis, with an emphasis on identifying recurring patterns and shared challenges connected to implementing the GEP. Through stakeholder mapping and self-evaluation, we also explored any differences attributable to specific organizational units and their specialized activities.

In parallel with conducting focus groups, we held training sessions and workshops for both senior administrative personnel and professional staff, as well as for students. The content of the training centred on recognizing and mitigating unconscious biases and on strengthening the skills needed to integrate gender equality principles into everyday work and decision-making processes. The workshops employed a methodology devised by the AGRIGEP network, particularly in regions where successful practices had been identified at other European universities (Mazancová, Bojnec, & Kobolak, 2024a). By distributing surveys among international students, we also introduced a cross-cultural dimension into the analysis to determine how receptive the university environment is to the diverse cultural contexts and needs of its international student body.

In the final phase, we synthesized findings from the various methods. Combining survey data, document reviews, and focus group insights enhanced the reliability of the findings through triangulation. Efforts focused on identifying differences between faculties, especially regarding administrative resources, financial resources, and readiness to implement gender equality changes. This approach provided a comprehensive view of the effectiveness of the current GEP and of the specific challenges that inform the formulation and implementation of the GEP 2.0 strategy.

RESULTS

The analysis of the reviewed documents, including key strategic acts, regulations, and reports on the implementation of the GEP, revealed that the UP is gradually moving toward more transparent and inclusive policies, particularly in the areas of hiring and promotion for academic and professional staff. Several documents provided guidelines for forming various committees and establishing mentoring programs, indicating efforts to address systemic barriers. At the same time, some gaps emerged, such as the lack of uniform methods for evaluating the effectiveness of measures across different faculties and the inconsistent implementation of best practices, which is often dependent on the initiatives of individual departments or project leaders, such as those involved in the AGRIGEP project.

Focus group discussions were held for three groups: university leadership, middle management with professional services, and students. These discussions aimed to gather detailed information about the implementation of the GEP at three widening Central European universities focusing on agriculture and life sciences (Paksi et al., 2025).

The leadership of the UP demonstrated a clear awareness that transitioning from formal plans to genuine organizational cultural transformation must be grounded in a systematic, long-term strategy that goes beyond mere administrative measures. During the discussions, they particularly emphasized the importance of regularly monitoring concrete indicators, such as the percentage of women in decision-making bodies, the gender ratio in promotions, and employee responses to initiatives for more flexible work arrangements. The leadership noted improvements in committee composition and decision-making, but some inconsistencies remain. These inconsistencies will need to be addressed in the next phase, especially within the framework of the forthcoming GEP 2.0 document.

Middle management and professional services noted that the results of official policies in everyday practice are primarily reflected through departmental work organization, the formation of promotion criteria, and the implementation of mentoring programs for new employees. They pointed out that the training and education carried out in collaboration with the AGRIGEP project contributed to greater awareness of unconscious biases and a more structured introduction of mechanisms to ensure equality. At the same time, disparities among faculties were observed. Some units recognized significant benefits from additional educational activities, while others noted the need for greater administrative and financial support to implement measures uniformly. In this group, it was often

emphasized that a university centre or service responsible for gender equality should assume a stronger coordinating role in transferring best practices and collecting data for evaluating effectiveness.

In discussions with students, satisfaction was expressed that the university is increasingly talking about the importance of gender equality, both in the academic context and in society at large. Students reported improved access to information regarding GEP-related activities and praised workshops aimed at educating individuals on how each person can contribute to a more inclusive study environment. Nevertheless, some students pointed out the uneven implementation of measures, as differences among individual faculties or study programs could be quite substantial, indicating the need for a more systematic and coordinated approach. At the same time, several students expressed a desire for even more active involvement in measures that address inequalities, believing that their perspective can contribute to more realistic and long-term effective solutions.

Training sessions and educational workshops intended for all three groups also proved to be an important complementary source of information about current developments and changes occurring in practice. UPC Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya – Barcelona Tech prepared comprehensive training materials on gender in teaching, gender in research, and gender-based violence in the academic environment. An analysis of workshop reports showed that participants, regardless of their function or status, recognized a higher level of awareness of unconscious biases and a heightened sensitivity to fundamental principles of gender equality.

The AGRIGEP project provided significant support by offering appropriate teaching materials and methods for identifying and reducing discriminatory practices. One of the biggest challenges appears to be establishing lasting mechanisms that would continue to encourage sustainability once these trainings have ended, including regular exchanges of experiences and updates of knowledge, especially as new generations of employees or students arrive. One of the opportunities is UP's (2025a) involvement in the Transform4Europe alliance, emphasizing its commitment to innovation and inclusivity. The overall picture that emerged from the document analysis, stakeholder mapping, focus groups, surveys with international students, and training reports indicates that the UP is on the right track to meeting the key goals outlined in its GEP.

Nonetheless, certain structural and organizational issues remain, primarily related to a lack of consistency among faculties, limited administrative resources to support gender equality, and varying degrees of readiness for change. The findings suggest that the preparation and implementation of the revised GEP 2.0 strategy could provide an opportunity to unify standards, strengthen performance monitoring, and continue training all stakeholders, thereby solidifying the foundations for a more balanced and inclusive academic community in the long term.

DISCUSSION

The research results, which combined document analysis, stakeholder mapping, conducting focus groups, administering surveys with international students, and organizing training sessions, indicate that by implementing the GEP, the UP is gradually achieving the core goals of creating a more inclusive academic environment. However, a closer reading of the findings reveals the multifaceted nature of the process and numerous challenges that require attention when upgrading the existing framework within the planned GEP 2.0 document.

Several aspects appear crucial to the long-term success of these initiatives. The first aspect concerns structural and organizational conditions that largely influence the effectiveness of measures such as transparent hiring procedures, the introduction of mentoring systems, and ensuring equal opportunities for promotions. Although the university leadership in the focus groups showed awareness of the importance of gender equality, the results also highlighted the need for a more systematic and uniformly coordinated implementation to prevent practices that remain confined to individual faculties or departments. In this light, strengthening central coordination appears essential, perhaps by establishing or expanding the competencies of an office or committee for gender equality, which would oversee all stakeholders and ensure consistent strategy implementation. Such an approach would, on one hand, support the diversity of local solutions and, on the other, provide minimal standards for the entire institution, aligning with literature recommendations that a unified strategy supported at all levels of governance is crucial for systemic change in higher education institutions (Rosa & Clavero, 2021).

The second aspect concerns the importance of continuous training and education, as participants—particularly from middle management and professional services—acknowledged that the workshops conducted in collaboration with the AGRIGEP project contributed to greater awareness of unconscious biases and to understanding how these biases affect decision-making processes. Despite the initial successes, it is necessary to emphasize how to ensure the long-term sustainability of such trainings, especially in terms of funding, staffing capacity, and regularly updating the content. Developing competencies and changing institutional culture are processes that require ongoing attention and renewal, as previous studies on introducing innovations in academic environments have also pointed out (Moreira & Sales Oliveira, 2022).

The third aspect highlighted by the results concerns the role of students. In the focus group discussions, students proved receptive and inclined to discuss gender equality, yet they also critically noted the inconsistent implementation of measures across different faculties and programs. These observations indicate that GEP measures may at

times be more visible and effective in environments with strong institutional or local initiatives or where highly motivated individuals are involved, while in other areas they remain less prominent. Students therefore expressed a wish for greater involvement and the opportunity to co-create strategies, as they believe their perspectives can help shape solutions more closely aligned with their everyday academic experiences. Involving the younger generation in designing and assessing measures has long been recognized in academic policy development literature as an important factor for enhancing both legitimacy and the sustainable impact of interventions (Correa et al., 2025).

In light of these insights, it appears sensible to take into account, in the design and implementation of the planned new version of the GEP 2.0, the findings that point to the need for more uniform application of measures, strengthened infrastructure (for example, a properly funded office for gender equality), regular training, and ongoing data collection. This would place the university in a better position to monitor relevant indicators, exchange best practices, and respond more rapidly to potential gaps. The research also suggests that partnerships with projects such as AGRIGEP could remain a key source of expert support, both in terms of methodological tools for detecting and measuring unconscious biases and in terms of a community of practice that facilitates the exchange of experiences among various higher education institutions.

Although the example of the UP is specific due to its unique cultural and structural features, the findings presented have broader relevance for any higher education institution seeking to establish or enhance gender equality mechanisms as a factor in creating an inclusive university. Involving all levels of governance, combining various methods of data collection (documentary analysis, focus groups, surveys, workshops), and deliberately investing in ongoing training and awareness-raising for employees and students are widely recognized pillars of an effective process for introducing organizational change. In the future, it would be sensible to extend the measurement of GEP impacts to other areas of the university's activities, for instance the design and content of study programs, while involving further stakeholder groups such as alumni and external partners. Such an approach could provide an even deeper understanding of how gender equality principles manifest in different segments of academic life and which strategies have proven most successful in the long term.

CONCLUSION

In recent decades, universities worldwide have increasingly recognized inclusiveness and gender equality as central to institutional integrity, academic excellence, and social responsibility. The UP, as one of Slovenia's youngest and most dynamic universities, offers an important case study in how these values are interpreted, institutionalized, and challenged within the context of higher education in Central and Eastern Europe.

The UP has aligned itself with European and global frameworks promoting equality, including the European Charter for Researchers and the European Commission's requirements for GEPs in research institutions. UP's Strategic Plan emphasizes the creation of an inclusive academic environment, especially through mechanisms ensuring equal opportunities for underrepresented groups, including women, ethnic minorities, and people with disabilities.

In 2021, UP adopted a GEP, which builds on five core pillars: work-life balance, gender balance in leadership and decision-making, gender equality in recruitment and career progression, integration of the gender dimension into research and curricula, and actions against gender-based violence and harassment. These pillars reflect the EU's Horizon Europe policy expectations and place the university in step with broader European efforts to transform academic cultures.

Statistically are provided detailed data on student enrolment, staff composition, and gender distribution at UP. Women represent a significant portion of the student body and academic staff at UP, which mirrors broader national trends in Slovenia (UP, 2025b). At the undergraduate level, women students often outnumber their men counterparts, particularly in the social sciences (management and tourism), humanities, education, and health sciences. However, disparities become more pronounced in the natural sciences, mathematics, and computer sciences, where women remain underrepresented.

A similar pattern appears in academic career progression. While gender parity is more or less maintained at the entry-level positions (assistants and lecturers), women remain underrepresented in senior academic and leadership positions. This illustrates the structural barriers that can limit women's advancement in academia. The UP has responded by implementing mentorship programs for early-career researchers, leadership training for women, and transparent procedures for hiring and promotion.

One of the innovative elements of UP's approach has been the integration of gender perspectives into curricula and research methodologies. Faculties such as the Faculty of Humanities and the Faculty of Management have introduced gender studies modules and promote research projects that interrogate social structures from an inclusive, intersectional lens. This not only enriches academic inquiry but also fosters critical thinking and social awareness among students.

Interdisciplinary research at the university also reflects a growing sensitivity to gender issues. Projects funded under European frameworks increasingly require the integration of gender as a variable in research design, methodology, and analysis. The Faculty of Health Sciences, for instance, includes gender-based health disparities in public health studies. Such initiatives not only meet funding criteria but contribute meaningfully to knowledge production that serves diverse populations.

Despite policy advances and visible initiatives, challenges persist. Cultural attitudes—both within the institution and the wider society—can slow the implementation of inclusive policies. Therefore, inclusiveness should go beyond gender to address broader intersectional issues. Students and staff with disabilities, and vulnerable groups individuals may face additional barriers. While UP promotes a policy of non-discrimination, active support systems—such as counselling services, accessibility infrastructure, and inclusive language guidelines—require continued expansion and funding. The UP has responded with language support programs, international offices, and mentorship schemes, though feedback suggests that more can be done to foster a truly welcoming climate for international students and staff.

Importantly, inclusiveness and gender equality are now framed not just as ethical imperatives but as indicators of institutional excellence. Accrediting bodies and international rankings increasingly factor these into evaluations. For UP, maintaining competitiveness within the European Higher Education Area means sustaining efforts toward a more equitable, transparent, and inclusive academic culture. Among strategic directions can be strengthening gender-disaggregated data collection on regular basis and detailed data analysis that can help identify gaps and monitor progress. In addition, this can encouraging inclusive leadership development programs that actively include women and minority candidates, expand intersectional policies with develop comprehensive inclusion frameworks that address the needs of diverse identities beyond gender, promoting inclusive teaching to train educators in inclusive pedagogies and support diverse learning needs, and foster stakeholders engagement promoting dialogue between the university, the local, national, and international stakeholders to address social inequalities more broadly.

To sum up, the UP exemplifies a proactive and structured approach to inclusiveness and gender equality. The UP demonstrates a strong institutional commitment to inclusiveness and gender equality through strategic planning, targeted initiatives, and international collaboration. Though challenges remain, the UP has laid a strong foundation through its policies, research priorities, and international collaborations. By continuing to address existing challenges and fostering a culture of equity, UP positions itself as a leading example of inclusive excellence in higher education.

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