

GUIDELINES FOR THE CIRCLE U. GENDER EQUALITY PLAN

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EXPLANATORY NOTE
<p>A team consisting of Circle U. researchers and Chairs, including the "Women in Science" group, both women and men, led by Prof. Ivanka Popovic from the University of Belgrade, focused on drafting the Guidelines for the Circle U. Gender Equality Plan.</p> <p>Based on a Report provided by Aarhus University at the end of the first two years of the project, the team developed these Guidelines, which were officially adopted by the Circle U. Management Board. The Guidelines address the challenges and obstacles identified in the Report and provide a roadmap with concrete recommendations to promote equality in scientific careers, ensure gender balance in decision-making processes and bodies, and integrate the gender dimension into Circle U's research and innovation platforms and activities, all in accordance with the Horizon Europe Guidance on Gender Equality Plans.</p> <p>Gender issues are part of the Circle U. EDI strategy and the Report and Guidelines will serve as a basis to create an alliance GEP in the new Circle U. 2030 project. The "Women in Science" group will also continue their work. The entire process will be overseen by the MEL officer.</p>

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Guidelines for the Circle U. Gender Equality Plan aim to provide a basis for the integration of gender equality into all aspects of engagement of Circle U. members. The document proposes an intersectional approach in which gender would remain the main contemplated type of inequality but interaction with other sources of inequality and grounds of discrimination would also be taken into account.

An effective gender equality plan needs to be based on a model of change that will identify the challenges that the alliance addresses, their causes and desired outcomes, including targets. The Guidelines propose several actions to achieve the set goals, as well as indicators to monitor progress. The Gender Equality Plan should engage the whole alliance, from senior leaders to staff, students and stakeholders and it should define a continuous process that encourages self-reflection and a regular review of processes and practices. The extent of the engagement defined in the Gender Equality Plan should be based on a realistic assessment of the current state of gender equality work at the member universities and the expected outcomes targeted to the needs of the individual universities and the overall mission of the Circle U. alliance.

The Guidelines rely and build on the report*¹ *Integrating Gender Balance in Circle U. Activities: Contextualizing the Gender Dimension in the Alliance*, which provides an extensive presentation of the gender equality plans and gender-related actions of Circle U. member universities. The Report also provides preliminary reflections and recommendations for the design and content of the future alliance Gender Equality Plan that will be realised as part of the Erasmus+ project Circle U. 2030.

The Guidelines are based on the *Horizon Europe Guidance on Gender Equality Plans* which serves as a platform for gender mainstreaming and provides a road map for the creation of Gender Equality Plans for universities and research institutions. Accordingly, the Gender Equality Plan will fulfil the mandatory requirements. It must be a public document with dedicated resources for planned actions, among others sex/gender disaggregated data collection and monitoring, as well as awareness-raising and training actions on gender equality. Five recommended thematic areas will also be considered in the plan: work-life balance and organisational culture, gender balance in leadership and decision-making, gender equality in recruitment and career progression, integration of the gender dimension into research and teaching content and measures against gender-based violence, including sexual harassment. Considering the challenges facing academic communities, it was recommended that the alliance gender equality plan should upgrade the five recommended thematic (content-related) areas to mandatory ones.

The relationship between gender equality and diversity was considered in the Guidelines, in the context of the interconnectedness of gender equality and broader diversity considerations. The additive approach to intersectionality was supported as it provides the flexibility needed to address the very different local circumstances at every alliance member university.

*Anna Vigsø Pedersen, Evanthia K. Schmidt, Louise Isgaard Saugstrup (Aarhus University), *Integrating Gender Balance in Circle U. Activities: Contextualizing the Gender Dimension in the Alliance*, 2023, <https://www.circle-u.eu/resources/equality-diversity-inclusion/integrating-gender-balance-in-circle-u-activities.pdf>

As the creation and implementation of a gender equality plan requires detailed knowledge and understanding of the academic community, a holistic approach was proposed to be the best way of creating a plan that would lead to tangible organisational and cultural changes.

Regarding methodology, the Gender Equality in Academia and Research (GEAR) tool, developed by the European Institute for Gender Equality, was suggested as the basic means of developing the plan. The GEAR tool offers guidance and information on how to implement a gender equality plan in an organisation to promote structural and cultural change towards gender equality.

SWOT analysis was performed in order to identify key issues related to creating the alliance gender equality plan. The following strengths were identified: There is a shared understanding of GE and existing expertise at member universities, there is support of top management and recommendations for the document are based on existing research. The identified weaknesses were: There is uncertainty of acceptance of the document by alliance members and a possible lack of commitment of the academic community and managers at different levels. There is an insufficient engagement of men in GE work. The observed opportunities were: There are the synergies and further development of alliance capacities together with supportive EU and/or national legislation such as the Horizon Europe GEP Eligibility Criterion. There is cooperation with other entities such as the cross-alliances forum and peer learning within the alliance – sharing of experiences and best practices and there are existing Circle U. resources such as the Women in Science Group and the Female Founders Network. The identified threats were: There are challenges in changing deeply rooted structural and cultural factors and sustainability issues - insufficient funding and human resources There could be a lack of follow-up and evaluation, as well as the potential influence of contextual actors, there is always the issue of internal resistance/gender fatigue and there is the changing political situation in Europe. The diversity that exists among alliance members was assessed as both an opportunity and a threat.

In practical terms, in lieu of the duration and outcomes of the Erasmus project Circle U. 2030, it was suggested that an alliance gender equality plan covering a three-year period, 2026-2028, would be optimal.

2. INTRODUCTION

Circle U. is a research-intensive and interdisciplinary alliance working to provide outstanding education, research and innovation to contribute to more sustainable, democratic and healthier societies. This mission indicates the commitment of the alliance to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). The 17 SDGs are integrated - they recognize that action in one area will affect outcomes in others, and that development must balance social, economic and environmental sustainability (1). Thus, SDG 5 Gender Equality (GE) is also embedded in the mission of the Circle U. alliance.

The Guidelines will contribute to the advancement of the gender dimension in the Circle U. alliance as part of the project Empowering Research and Innovation Actions in Circle U. (ERIA) and present the next step toward the future Circle U. Gender Equality Plan (GEP), a planned outcome of the ERASMUS+ project Circle U. 2030.

2.1 THE ERIA PROJECT

The ERIA project is a joint activity within the Circle U. alliance, a European university alliance consisting of nine universities: Aarhus University (AU), the University of Belgrade (UB), Humboldt University of Berlin (HU), King's College London (KCL), Université catholique de Louvain (UCLouvain), the University of Oslo (UiO), Université Paris Cité (UPCité), the University of Pisa (UniPi) and the University of Vienna (UniVie). The ERIA project is carried out by members from each of these universities and is co-funded by the European Commission under the Horizon 2020 Science with and for Society (SWAFS) programme and the Circle U. member universities*². The project is coordinated by the Université Paris Cité and has a duration of three years. The overarching objective of the project is to pilot initiatives that enhance the interaction between academia and society, with a focus on common scientific agendas. This objective is pursued through three main strategies.

- i) The project utilises Circle U. knowledge hubs as platforms to host and test activities that strengthen the connection between education, research, innovation, and service to society. These activities involve policy makers as well as citizens.
- ii) The project aims to empower the human capital within Circle U. by providing support and resources to staff and students, enabling them to make a positive impact on society.
- iii) The project seeks to establish collaborations with other European universities to contribute to the development of the new European Area for Research and Innovation.

These three lines of action are further specified through seven objectives, of which objective 6 entails promoting the three European Union (EU) objectives for GE in research in Circle U. The seven objectives of the project are supported through five Work Packages (WP) of which WP4 – Strengthening human capital and WP5 – Structuring Research and Innovation collaboration at the European Level among pilot Alliances

*² It is worth noting that the University of Vienna and University of Pisa joined the Circle U. alliance at a later stage and were not formal beneficiaries of the ERIA project, therefore, participation in ERIA has been based on their own financial contribution.

pertain to gender issues. The work packages are comprised of 14 activities. Specifically, Activity 13 is *Integrating gender-balance in the Circle U. R&I activities* (“research on research” approach), while Activity 14 is *Actively participating in the Forum FOREU2 with other alliances* including the exchange of best practices regarding gender equality.

The Guidelines presented here aim to provide a basis for the integration of GE into all aspects of engagement of Circle U. members, foremost in research and innovation activities.

2.2. HOW IS THE FOREU2 FORUM ENGAGED IN GENDER ISSUES?

The purpose of long-term strategic alliances between European universities is to promote the identity and values of Europe, as well as excellence and transformation. As part of this process, FOREU1 and FOREU2 university alliances have exchanged best practices and valuable insights regarding transformational modules. The topics of discussion were various, such as the development of common R&I agendas and action plans, the successful sharing of resources and infrastructures, the exploration of joint structures and the enhancement of human capital within the alliances.

The first *FOREU2 Report on Practices and Measures Taken/to Be Taken to Ensure the Mainstreaming of the Gender Dimension in R&I Long-Term Strategies (2)* presented 24 case studies of actions in participating alliances. Collecting case studies from various alliances provided examples of good practices that might serve as a reference for individual universities and alliances in order to foster the mainstreaming of the gender dimension in current and future R&I activities and projects. In this way FOREU2 and its member alliances are acting as role models in the academic community. The GE work at the University of Pisa was selected to represent the Circle U. alliance in this report.

The main commonality among the different examples presented is the existence of a GEP. This implies that the GEP is one of the primary components of any established strategy aiming at fostering change in terms of GE in research. Based on those GEPs, most universities/alliances have developed committees, offices or programmes to tackle gender-related issues. A majority of the presented case studies are examples of actions taken at the level of universities, with a minority presenting actions at alliance level. Consequently, the good practices put forward here could be usefully mainstreamed at alliance level to foster deeper impact and systemic change all over Europe. Discussions within the FOREU2 Forum indicate that many alliances plan to create alliance GEPs.

2.3. WHY SHOULD THE CIRCLE U. ALLIANCE HAVE A GEP?

As discussed above, the FOREU1 and FOREU2 university alliances have focused on the enhancement of human capital within the alliances. One aspect of this focus is the creation and promotion of an environment of equal opportunities, a priority articulated by all university alliances. An alliance GEP is a document that may support the development of such an environment.

Many European university alliances have emphasised the importance of addressing the challenges of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) with some contemplating the development of an alliance GEP. The European University Alliance ULYSSEUS has developed an Equality Plan (3) The Ulysseus Equality Plan

forms the basis for the development of all inclusion programmes and ensures inclusive and equal treatment throughout the alliance, starting from an intersectional approach. An intersectional approach is one in which gender remains the main contemplated type of inequality but its interaction with other sources of inequality and grounds of discrimination is taken into account (4). The Guidelines further presented in this document will adhere to this approach.

Finally, in anticipation of future alliance activities that might be funded by the European Commission (EC), the alliance as a legal entity will be expected to fulfil the Horizon Europe GEP Eligibility Criterion (5).

2.4. THE DOCUMENT

An effective GEP needs to be based on a model of change that will identify the challenges that the alliance addresses, their causes and desired outcomes, including targets. It will be structured to provide a set of activities that are required to achieve the set goals, as well as indicators to monitor progress. The GEP should engage the whole alliance, from senior leaders to staff, students and stakeholders and it should define a continuous process that encourages self-reflection and a regular review of processes and practices.

The Guidelines rely and build on the report *Integrating Gender Balance in Circle U. Activities: Contextualizing the Gender Dimension in the Alliance* (6), further referred to as the Report, which provides an extensive presentation of the GEPs and gender-related actions of Circle U. member universities. The Report also provides preliminary reflections and recommendations for the design and content of the future alliance GEP that will be realised as part of the Erasmus+ project Circle U. 2030.

The methodology used to create the Report employed two main approaches:

- i) a desk study that involved examining GEPs, national legislation and other relevant information on equality at the universities within the Circle U. alliance, and
- ii) conducting interviews with employees engaged in GE work at each of the member universities.

It is worth noting that all interviewees were women. This may be attributed to the significant representation of women among university employees involved in GE activities. In a few cases, the male employees who were invited to participate in the interviews did not respond to the invitation. These findings provided valuable information on the national context of every member university and personal insights of member university staff on the state of gender-related issues.

The Guidelines are based on the *Horizon Europe Guidance on Gender Equality Plans* (5), which serves as a platform for gender mainstreaming and provides a road map for the creation of GEPs for universities and research institutions. Accordingly, a GEP must fulfil the following mandatory requirements. It must be a public document with dedicated resources for planned actions, among others sex/gender disaggregated data collection and monitoring, as well as awareness-raising and training actions on GE. Additionally, there are five recommended thematic areas that could be considered in the GEP: work-life balance and organisational culture, gender balance in leadership and decision-making, GE in recruitment and

career progression, integration of the gender dimension into research and teaching content and measures against gender-based violence, including sexual harassment.

The Report provided an overview of GE in the Circle U. alliance and put it in the general context of GE in academia. To that end it provided a Template for the overview of GE work (see Appendix J of the Report). The starting point of the Template is putting in place a GEP or gender action plan (GAP).

3. GUIDELINES FOR A CIRCLE U. GEP

These Guidelines are meant to assist in the structuring of the future Circle U. alliance GEP. They should be treated as recommendations that, together with the Report, lead to the creation of the GEP.

3.1. CONSIDERATION OF THE NATIONAL CONTEXTS

When considering national contexts of the member universities, the Report summarises this aspect in the following way:

Within the higher education sector, contextual factors vary among the member countries of Circle U. in relation to gender mainstreaming, the requirement for GEPs, the implementation of certification or award systems, the establishment of gender quotas for leadership or scientific staff positions and the obligation to monitor and report on GE progress. Similarly, there are variations in contextual factors concerning recruitment practices, including policies promoting open advertisement of vacancies, the utilisation of gender-balanced short-lists, and the formation of gender-balanced assessment panels to ensure fair and unbiased selection processes. These contextual factors reflect the specific approaches and measures taken by each country to address GE in higher education, contributing to the diversity of legislation, policies and practices observed within the Circle U. alliance (see Table 3 and Appendices A-I of the Report).

The Report also notes that it is evident that the progress and effectiveness of GE initiatives at universities are closely intertwined with broader societal norms and perceptions. The challenges posed by these general cultural factors underscore the need for comprehensive efforts to address deeply ingrained beliefs and stereotypes in order to foster change and promote GE within the universities. The detrimental impact of the lack of support from the government and other national bodies on GE work at the institutional level was a significant concern raised by interviewees in the Report and may be considered a challenge in the implementation of the planned alliance GEP.

3.2. MANDATORY REQUIREMENTS FOR THE FUTURE ALLIANCE GEP

As the planned Circle U. GEP will need to comply with the Horizon Europe GEP eligibility criterion (5), the GEP will be structured and implemented in an analogous fashion starting with the four mandatory process-related requirements for a GEP:

- i) Public document,
- ii) Dedicated resources,
- iii) Data collection and monitoring, and
- iv) Training.

All of the Circle U. member universities have institutional GEPs and have experience in implementing them. The Report provides an extensive presentation of all the university GEPs (see Table 4 of the Report). A brief summary of these findings follows. The nine national contexts in which the Circle U. universities and

their GEPs exist are significantly diverse. Consequently, these differences may be evident in the GEPs themselves, encompassing variations in their content, structure and approaches. Among the nine GEPs, significant differences were observed in terms of their focus areas, number of activities, duration and renewal frequencies. Some GEPs were extensive, spanning over twenty pages with detailed activity descriptions, while others were more concise, under ten pages long. Similarly, the renewal frequencies of the GEPs varied, with some specifying timelines for renewal after a certain number of years, some allowing for potential renewal and some not addressing renewal at all.

While focusing on the content of the GEPs, it is worth noting an additional element of interest. Some GEPs explicitly mention a focus on diversity and inclusion in addition to GE, while others solely concentrate on GE. Consequently, in order to fit the needs of all member universities and, as already stated previously, the Circle U. GEP would need to have an intersectional approach. This approach is additionally justified through concerns raised in the Report by some interviewees. When discussing the challenge of internal resistance, which intersects with the relationship between GE and diversity, they expressed concerns that efforts to promote diversity could potentially divert attention and resources away from GE. There is a fear that broadening the scope to encompass other dimensions of diversity might dilute the focus on GE, resulting in limited resources and slower progress in addressing gender imbalances.

The relationship between GE and diversity has been discussed at length and divergent opinions have been expressed within the field of GE. Some individuals perceive it as a potential barrier to GE, while others argue for an integrated approach that recognises the interconnectedness of GE and broader diversity considerations. An additive approach to intersectionality (7) could provide the flexibility needed to address the very different local circumstances at every alliance member university. The decision on how to approach intersectionality in the GEP will need to be aligned with the upcoming Circle U. EDI strategy.

As stated above, all of the alliance members have GEPs defining activities at the individual university member. In that respect, it would be necessary to consider the scope of the alliance GEP. One option, the optimal one, is that the alliance GEP would encompass all aspects of member university activities. Another, based on concerns about internal resistance, is that the GEP would address only some aspects of alliance activities. It remains to be seen which degree of GE work at the alliance level would have the optimal impact on the alliance academic community.

To that end, it is also worthwhile considering whether a gender equality officer should be appointed at the alliance level. If yes, the duties of this officer would need to be clearly defined in the GEP and resources allocated accordingly.

3.2.1. PUBLIC DOCUMENT

In order to fulfil the first requirement, the future alliance GEP needs to be a formal document, approved by the Circle U. Management Board, and published on the alliance's website, signed by the top management of the alliance and actively communicated within the alliance member universities. The alliance GEP will be fully aligned with existing member university GEPs and will demonstrate a commitment to GE.

The GEP will set clear and realistic goals and detailed actions and measures to achieve them in a way that will both meet the expectations of the alliance as a whole and the individual needs of the member universities.

The Report supports this approach by finding that GE is so much more than achieving a numerical balance. As the creation of meaningful change is a long and slow process, it is essential to maintain the commitment to GE and persevere in advocating for change, being aware that even small steps contribute to the overall progress.

Considering the duration and outcomes of the Erasmus project Circle U. 2030, an alliance GEP covering a three-year period, 2026-2028 would allow for the implementation of the GEP to start during the project and for it to define activities one year after the end of the project. Such a time frame would provide ample time to prepare a new GEP for the subsequent period.

3.2.2. DEDICATED RESOURCES

The planned alliance GEP will have dedicated resources and relevant expertise in GE at the member university level based on their regular funding of GE work and these resources will be used to create the GEP.

As stated in the Report, the structure and organisation of GE work at the nine universities are highly diverse (see Table 5 of the Report). There are significant differences in the actual organisation of the work, including the number of bodies, committees or individuals involved in GE activities. Some universities have several units that work together, while others have a single central unit. Some bodies are very large and include representatives from all areas of the universities, while others are smaller and consist of only a few members. Furthermore, a few universities have individuals dedicated solely to GE, rather than formal bodies and committees. The extent of involvement in the design and implementation of member university GEPs also differs. Some bodies and committees play a fundamental role in designing and implementing the university GEPs, while others are involved in either one or the other. There is also a significant difference in the engagement of these committee members, ranging from full-time and part-time to voluntary contributors. The composition of these bodies and committees and whether university leadership is represented, which may indicate the commitment of leadership to GE work, also varies across the universities.

The Report noted that the inadequate allocation of resources, both in terms of human and financial support, emerged as another challenge hindering the progress of GE work. Insufficient resources lead to superficial efforts that fail to address the root causes of gender inequalities. University GEPs and related initiatives are sometimes seen as a mere formality, fulfilling requirements without leading to substantial changes. Recognising the importance of allocating adequate resources is crucial to enable comprehensive and effective GE work. Consequently, the Circle U alliance and its members will define the type and volume of resources that will be required to support the process of sustainable organisational change.

3.2.3. DATA COLLECTION AND MONITORING

As stated in the Report, sex/gender disaggregated data on personnel and students with annual reporting based on indicators is already being performed at member universities, enabling facile monitoring

of these indicators. The indicators will be used to follow the targets that will be defined in the GEP for individual universities. In line with the Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) strategy of Circle U., some decisions will need to be made at the alliance level in order to select the most relevant indicators, as well as means to collect and analyse the data, the resources required to do so, including regular annual publishing and monitoring. The data will provide input for monitoring the implementation and evaluating the impact of the GEP, specifically the realisation of the GEP's objectives and targets, indicators and ongoing evaluation of progress. If an alliance working group for collecting, monitoring and evaluating sex/gender disaggregated data were to be introduced, its duties would need to be specified in the alliance GEP and some resources allocated based on already existing resources for GE work..

It is of special note to align the collection and monitoring of, now standard, gender-related data and the recently developed collection and monitoring of data on EDI.

3.2.4. TRAINING

There are numerous examples of best practices in the area of GE within the nine Circle U. universities that may be proposed in the planned GEP. The GEP will include awareness-raising and training actions on GE designed in a way that will optimally address all the member universities, regardless of the degree of their engagement in gender issues. These activities will engage the member universities and provide advancement of the whole alliance and monitor evidence-based, ongoing and long-term process. The activities will be tailor-made to address the training needs of staff and decision-makers or any other target groups in the alliance.

3.3. THEMATIC AREAS FOR THE FUTURE ALLIANCE GEP

In addition to the four mandatory requirements, the future alliance GEP may consider five recommended thematic (content-related) areas:

- i) Work-life balance and organisational culture,
- ii) Gender balance in leadership and decision-making,
- iii) GE in recruitment and career progression,
- iv) Integration of the gender dimension into research and teaching content, and
- v) Measures against gender-based violence, including sexual harassment.

Considering the challenges facing academic communities, it would be beneficial if the alliance GEP were to upgrade the five recommended thematic (content-related) areas to mandatory ones.

3.3.1. WORK-LIFE BALANCE AND ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE

The Report deals with the both the issues of work-life balance and organisational culture. The findings clearly indicate that the challenge of work-life balance encompasses multiple factors that have a

significant impact on women's careers. Women often encounter numerous disadvantages when trying to balance their family responsibilities and professional aspirations. Consequently, many women feel compelled to make a difficult choice between starting a family and pursuing a career, as these two aspects frequently conflict with each other. Overcoming this challenge requires member universities to develop strategies, structures and practices that better support work-life balance.

The Report shed light on the challenges associated with the culture within member universities, not only in specific institutional contexts, but also within academia as a whole. The prevailing gender imbalance, in particular as to decision making positions, emerged as a significant concern, with fewer women in management and leadership positions and a lower number of female professors. The “leaky pipeline” phenomenon, where women face obstacles and delays in advancing their careers, is a common issue. These issues were attributed to various factors, including the competitive nature of academia, the sense of exclusion experienced by some women and the presence of “old boys' networks” that hinder women's progress within different scientific fields. The conservative nature of universities as historic institutions is a significant factor, perpetuating norms and beliefs that impede GE. Hierarchical systems, power structures and conservative cultures were highlighted as key challenges, hindering the promotion of GE within academia. Moreover, the assessment procedures and methods employed were found to disproportionately value certain activities over others, leading to the undervaluation of tasks typically performed by women, such as teaching and committee work. Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach, including promoting gender balance at all levels within universities, fostering inclusive and supportive cultures and reforming assessment procedures to recognise and value the diverse contributions of all university staff.

Finally, the Report also noted that internal resistance to GE efforts within universities was also identified as a significant challenge. The attitude that GE has already been achieved and that any gender disparities arise from women's personal choices regarding their careers and ambitions has become widespread. This perspective individualises the issue rather than recognising it as an organisational concern. Consequently, it fosters the belief that additional efforts towards GE are unnecessary, especially since current initiatives are perceived as disadvantaging men.

The alliance GEP will aim to promote GE through the sustainable transformation of organisational culture that will be defined by the GEP activities and recommendations. This transformation, albeit slow, will lead to the development of a more open and inclusive working environment, the visibility of women in the university/alliance and externally and that the contribution of women is properly valued. Inclusive work-life balance policies and practices may also be considered in the GEP, including parental leave policies, flexible working time arrangements and support for caring responsibilities.

3.3.2. GENDER BALANCE IN LEADERSHIP AND DECISION-MAKING

Despite variations in the member university GEPs, some common focus areas emerged, including gender balance and equality in management, leadership and decision-making bodies. Increasing the number and share of women in leadership and decision-making positions touches upon all aspects in a GEP. There are numerous measures to ensure that women can take on and stay in leadership positions. They can include

providing decision-makers with targeted gender training, adapting processes for selection and appointment of staff on committees, ensuring gender balance through gender quotas, and making committee membership more transparent.

In the findings of the Report, it was consistently noted that women were underrepresented in leadership and management positions compared to men, particularly at the highest levels of the university hierarchy. It was stated that the underrepresentation of women was not limited to management positions alone but extended to all well-paid roles, including full professorships. It was suggested in the interviews that there was a direct correlation between the low number of female full professors and the proportion of women in management positions. More specifically, it was argued that because the pool of candidates for management positions mostly consisted of full professors and that there were relatively few female professors, it was difficult to achieve gender balance in leadership. The small share of female professors also has the consequence that there is a lack of female professors as role models that students can identify with or aspire to.

3.3.3. GE IN RECRUITMENT AND CAREER PROGRESSION

Another common focus area in most university GEPs that was identified in the Report was the recruitment of staff and students, with an emphasis on gender balance and non-discrimination, as well as career development, progression and support, including skills development. The Report also found that interviewees emphasised that the culture, practices and procedures of most universities discouraged women from pursuing academic careers and created challenges in retaining them. In many cases the division of work and the way assessment procedures and methods functioned in connection with career advancement, resulted in women being over-worked by tasks that were neither acknowledged nor rewarded.

The critical review of selection procedures and the reduction of biases may ensure that women and men get equal chances to develop and advance their careers. The establishment of recruitment codes of conduct, involving GE officers in recruitment and promotion committees, the proactive identification of women in underrepresented fields and the consideration of workload planning models can be significant measures that may be considered in the alliance GEP.

Major reform is necessary in the professorial career progression model. The re-assessment of research careers is currently being undertaken by CoARA with one of its working groups specifically dealing with the re-assessment of academic careers. Concurrently, there are ongoing activities in the EUA on re-assessing academic careers. These activities are promising developments that may improve general conditions for the recruitment and career progression of both men and women.

Especially inspiring is the case of Ghent University. They published the following press release in 2019 - "Ghent University is deliberately choosing to step out of the rat race between individuals, departments and universities. We no longer wish to participate in the ranking of people." (8)

3.3.4. INTEGRATION OF THE GENDER DIMENSION INTO RESEARCH AND TEACHING CONTENT

This thematic area was not established as a common element in the member university GEPs. However, the analysis of potential sex and/or gender differences and issues related to GE are currently generating added value in terms of research excellence and creativity. Such an approach provides in-depth understanding of all people's needs, behaviours and attitudes and enhances the societal relevance of R&I. This thematic area also integrates the gender dimension into educational activities, including teaching curricula. It is essential for the proper training of the next generations of researchers and educators.

The implementation of this aspect is fraught with internal resistance, especially in areas of teaching and research that do not seem to have an obvious link to gender. The alliance GEP may consider how sex and gender analysis could be included in the research or educational outputs of the alliance members. This aspect should not be disregarded as it is becoming a mandatory part of evaluations of research projects submitted to research funding organisations (RFO).

Regarding the different national contexts of legislation and language, the future GEP should consider the appropriate use of gender just language in order to properly reflect the values of the alliance members.

3.3.5. MEASURES AGAINST GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE, INCLUDING SEXUAL HARASSMENT

As elaborated in the Report, all the countries of the universities in the alliance have existing legislation regarding sexual harassment and the member universities have corresponding policies. Even though regulations exist, their implementation is complex for many reasons. Thus, the planned alliance GEP should consider ensuring clear institutional policies on sexual harassment and other forms of gender-based violence. The policies should establish and codify the expected behaviour of employees, outline how members of the organisation can report instances of gender-based violence and how any such instances will be investigated and sanctions applied. They should also consider how information and support is provided to victims or witnesses and how the whole alliance can be mobilised to establish a culture of zero tolerance toward sexual harassment and violence.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FACILITATING SYNERGIES AMONG THE MEMBER UNIVERSITIES

The Report offers recommendations aimed at facilitating synergies among the member universities of the Circle U. alliance. These recommendations encompass various levels, including the alliance and university levels, focusing on the organisation, implementation and follow-up of GEPs. The recommendations adopt a culturally contextual approach, acknowledging the multifaceted nature of the GE issue and emphasising the importance of tailoring all initiatives to the distinct individual university contexts. It is essential to acknowledge that each GE policy instrument is both distinctive and contextual. Its uniqueness arises from its precise design and implementation within a specific context, encompassing socio-cultural and organisational dynamics, at a particular point in time and within a distinct local administrative tradition.

A summary of the recommendations follows. The detailed set of recommendations is presented in Section 5 of the Report.

i) Enhancing commitment and prioritisation of GE by all member universities

Ensure that leadership at different levels at all member universities prioritise GE work and integrate it into institutional values. Establish clear lines of responsibility and implement mechanisms to hold leadership accountable. Member universities should demonstrate a collective commitment to GE, maintaining its prominence, allocating sufficient resources (human and financial), promoting transparency and actively fostering a supportive and inclusive environment.

ii) Fostering closer collaboration on GE

Foster closer collaboration and coordination among member universities. Encourage the sharing of best practices, experiences, and human resources to support collective learning and improvement. Establish dedicated platforms and task forces for regular communication and exchange among the universities to facilitate the co-creation of solutions and address gender inequality more effectively

iii) Cultivating a shared understanding of GE

To facilitate synergies among the Circle U. member universities, it is recommended to cultivate and promote a shared understanding of GE and GE work. This involves fostering an efficient and consistent approach to GEPs, aligning efforts, strategies, and initiatives to address cultural and structural barriers in a coordinated manner.

iv) Establishing a common framework for GE work

Establish a common framework for GE work within the alliance, considering the specific socio-cultural and organisational contexts of individual universities. The framework should provide guidance, set common standards and allow for flexibility and adaptation to address the diverse structural and cultural barriers to GE in each university. It should also encourage regular communication and close collaboration among member universities to facilitate the sharing of experiences, best practices, and lessons learned.

v) Implementing systematic monitoring, evaluation and follow-up

Develop a mechanism for systematic monitoring and evaluation of the implementation and impact of GE actions within each university, providing dedicated resources to this task. Regularly assess progress, identify areas for improvement, and adapt actions accordingly. Develop a reporting system for member universities to share their progress in implementing GEPs, making the data publicly accessible. This process will facilitate the identification of successful strategies and areas for further collaboration and improvement in GE work.

vi) Sharing of results, experiences and mutual learning

Establish platforms and mechanisms for sharing results, best practices and lessons learned from the monitoring and evaluation process among member universities of the alliance. Encourage universities with more experience and expertise in GEP implementation to serve as mentors or peer advisors to universities with less experience, facilitating knowledge sharing and collaboration. Foster an environment that promotes openness and mutual learning to enhance the effectiveness of GE initiatives across the alliance.

vii) Building capacities and expertise

Foster competence and expertise in GE and gender-responsive monitoring and evaluation by leveraging the existing knowledge within the alliance. Utilise the collective knowledge and experience within the alliance to provide support and guidance to member universities lacking such capacities. Implement mentorship programmes that pair universities with expertise in GE and monitoring and evaluation with those in need of support, facilitating knowledge transfer and capacity development.

5. METHODOLOGY – THE PATH AND TOOLS FOR CREATING AND IMPLEMENTING A GEP

The creation and implementation of a GEP requires detailed knowledge and understanding of the academic community that it will address. Considering the complexity of the task, a holistic approach may prove to be the best way of creating a GEP that will lead to tangible organisational changes.

The European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) has developed *the GE in Academia and Research (GEAR) tool* (9). The GEAR tool offers guidance and information on how to implement a GEP in an organisation to promote structural and cultural change towards GE. Other Gender Equality Audit Tools (GEAT) have also been developed and various resources on GE work are available (see Section 9.2 of the Report).

5.1. ITINERARY TO DESIGNING, IMPLEMENTING AND FOLLOWING UP ON GEPS

An *Itinerary to Designing, Implementing and Following Up on GEPs* was developed in the Report (see Section 5.2 of the Report) on the basis of previous best practices (10). The process of developing and implementing GEPs entails several crucial steps, which involve the entire organisation. By following this road map and implementing the corresponding recommendations, member universities of the alliance and the alliance as a whole can effectively design, implement and follow up on GEPs. The steps and recommendations of the *Itinerary* are briefly outlined below.

Step 1. State-of-play analysis

Recommendation 1. Base policy on an in-depth analysis of contextual institutional issues and reliable data. Highlight the importance of evidence-based decision-making and a thorough understanding of the specific GE issues within the university. Identify the institutional challenges and map the existing competency in achieving gender balance. Ensure that all actions are informed by evidence and research on gender disparities and challenges.

Step 2. Developing a strategy and designing the GEP

Recommendation 2. Formulate strategies, concrete actions, clear objectives and allocate adequate human and financial resources. Align the GEP strategy with the broader institutional goals and values. Involve the leadership in developing the strategy and in the designing process to ensure commitment and support. Set clear, measurable, and time-bound objectives to guide the implementation process. Set short-term as well as long-term goals. Establish clear lines of responsibility and accountability, ensuring that all stakeholders understand their roles and contributions.

Recommendation 3. Recognise that hidden inequalities and biases are persistent and require continuous and comprehensive efforts, encompassing multiple actions, to achieve structural and cultural transformation. GE actions should be seen as long-term commitments rather than one-time interventions.

Step 3. Implementing the GEP

Recommendation 4. Communicate the value and impact of GE in research and innovation both internally and externally. Increase awareness that inequalities and biases threaten meritocracy and the quality of scientific outcomes. Emphasise that GE and inclusion are integral to achieving excellence in research and innovation.

Recommendation 5. Keep gender issues in the foreground. Provide training and capacity building opportunities to enhance the skills and knowledge necessary for effective implementation. Be flexible and test out new approaches. Commit the entire leadership at different levels - regularly train the leadership and hold it accountable.

Recommendation 6. Use a top-down and bottom-up approach. Inform and involve all actors in GE work to create GEP ownership and motivation. Establish bodies dedicated to GE work to drive change. Involve multiple actors and establish alliances with external actors. Anticipate and proactively address resistance by identifying strategies to navigate it effectively.

Step 4. Monitoring and evaluation

Recommendation 7. Acknowledging the Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning strategy of Circle U., develop a comprehensive monitoring and evaluation framework tailored to the GEP's objectives and actions. Collect and analyse sex-disaggregated data to track progress and identify gender disparities. Involve stakeholders in the evaluation process through surveys, focus groups or interviews to gather feedback and insights. Use the evaluation results to inform decision-making, adapt strategies and improve the effectiveness of the GEP.

Recommendation 8. Foster a culture of transparency in which GE efforts are visible and progress is tracked. Disseminate results and share them with staff and students. Transparency in reporting challenges and progress is important for accountability.

Step 5. Follow-up and sustainability

Recommendation 9. Establish mechanisms for ongoing follow-up and continuous improvement of the GEP. Reflect on the effectiveness of strategies and actions, taking into account emerging challenges and changing conditions and review and update the GEP to ensure that actions remain relevant and effective. Share results, experiences, and lessons learned, fostering a culture of mutual learning.

5.2. A TOOLKIT TO ACHIEVE GE OBJECTIVES THROUGH GEPS

A Toolkit of strategies and actions was developed in the Report (see Section 5.3 of the Report) (11), which may be applied based on a thorough analysis of the current state and the specific needs of each university within the alliance or the alliance itself. The strategies and recommendations aim to create sustainable structural and cultural change within universities, fostering gender balance.

Strategy 1: Creating a women-friendly environment

In order to promote gender balance and inclusivity within universities, it is crucial to create a women-friendly environment that supports the integration, progress and success of women researchers. This not only benefits individual women researchers but also enhances the overall research environment by harnessing a broader range of perspectives and talents

Strategy 2: Promoting gender-aware science

Challenging gender stereotypes and biases in science and creating an inclusive and diverse scientific community are key to expanding perspectives, methodologies and research agendas, ultimately advancing scientific knowledge. The proposed actions aim to challenge and mitigate gender biases and stereotypes deeply ingrained in scientific processes, fostering a more balanced and representative scientific community.

Strategy 3: Supporting women's leadership in science

To support women in attaining key positions in research practice, management, innovation and science-society relationships, many supportive actions may be taken such as providing high-profile women with opportunities to increase their visibility, systematically disseminating information about them to raise awareness and recognising and promoting women researchers' access to top-level scientific and professional networks and research environments.

6. SWOT ANALYSIS FOR THE CIRCLE U. GEP

The SWOT analysis was performed in order to identify key issues related to creating the GEP. The lists should serve as a guideline and should be revisited before commencing work on the document.

Strengths	Weaknesses		
<p>A shared understanding of GE,</p> <p>Existing expertise at member universities,</p> <p>Support of top management,</p> <p>Recommendations for the document are based on existing research.</p>	<p>Uncertainty of acceptance of the document by alliance members,</p> <p>Possible lack of commitment of academic community and managers at different levels,</p> <p>Insufficient engagement of men in GE work.</p>		
Opportunities	Threats		
<div style="text-align: center; border: 1px solid black; width: 30%; margin: 0 auto; padding: 5px;"> Diversity in the alliance </div> <table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <td data-bbox="188 1034 794 1890" style="width: 50%; vertical-align: top; padding: 10px;"> <p>Synergies and further development of alliance capacities,</p> <p>Supportive EU and/or national legislation such as the Horizon Europe GEP Eligibility Criterion,</p> <p>Cooperation with other entities such as the cross-alliances forum,</p> <p>Peer learning within alliance – sharing of experiences and best practices,</p> <p>Existing Circle U. resources such as the Women in Science Group and the Female Founders Network.</p> </td> <td data-bbox="794 1034 1401 1890" style="width: 50%; vertical-align: top; padding: 10px;"> <p>Challenges in changing deeply rooted structural and cultural factors,</p> <p>Sustainability issues - Insufficient funding and human resources,</p> <p>Lack of follow-up and evaluation,</p> <p>Influence of contextual actors,</p> <p>Internal resistance/gender fatigue,</p> <p>Changing political situation in Europe.</p> </td> </tr> </table>		<p>Synergies and further development of alliance capacities,</p> <p>Supportive EU and/or national legislation such as the Horizon Europe GEP Eligibility Criterion,</p> <p>Cooperation with other entities such as the cross-alliances forum,</p> <p>Peer learning within alliance – sharing of experiences and best practices,</p> <p>Existing Circle U. resources such as the Women in Science Group and the Female Founders Network.</p>	<p>Challenges in changing deeply rooted structural and cultural factors,</p> <p>Sustainability issues - Insufficient funding and human resources,</p> <p>Lack of follow-up and evaluation,</p> <p>Influence of contextual actors,</p> <p>Internal resistance/gender fatigue,</p> <p>Changing political situation in Europe.</p>
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7. ABBREVIATION LIST

- AU – Aarhus University
- CoARA – Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment
- EC – European Commission
- EDI – Equality, Diversity & Inclusion
- EIGE – European Institute for Gender Equality
- ERA – European Research Area
- ERIA – Empowering Research and Innovation Actions in Circle U.
- EU – European Union
- EUA – European University Association
- FOREU1– First generation European university alliances
- FOREU2– Second generation European university alliances
- GAP – Gender Action Plan
- GE – Gender Equality
- GEAR – Gender Equality in Academia and Research
- GEAT – Gender Equality Audit Tool
- GEP – Gender Equality Plan
- HEI – Higher education institution
- HU – Humboldt University of Berlin
- KCL – King’s College London
- R&I – Research and Innovation
- RFO – Research financing organisation
- RPO – Research performing organisation
- SDG – United Nations Sustainable Development Goals
- UB – University of Belgrade
- UCLouvain – Université catholique de Louvain
- UiO – University of Oslo
- UN – United Nations
- UniPi – University of Pisa

UniVie – University of Vienna

UPCité – Université Paris Cité

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9. European Institute for Gender Equality, Gender Equality in Academia and Research – GEAR Tool, https://eige.europa.eu/gender-mainstreaming/toolkits/gear?language_content_entity=en
10. The itinerary is based on the EIGE GEAR Tool, set up by the EC, see <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-mainstreaming/toolkits/gear/what-gender-equality-plan-gep>, the GENERA project <https://genera-project.com/> and the KIF Committee's recommendations for gender balance, see <https://kifinfo.no/en/kif-committees-recommendations-gender-balance> (see Ref 6).
11. The Toolkit is primarily based on the results of the PRAGES, STAGES and EFFORTI projects (see Ref 6).