

**How inclusive governance should drive
gender equality in universities:
A proposed methodology**

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Abstract

The article tackles the topic of inclusive governance in institutional change and gender equality in universities. It has two objectives. First, it envisions inclusive governance as a method to effectively convey cultural change aimed at gender equality and proposes the implementation of a pilot case applied to the University of Brescia through a mixed-method approach. It develops a framework for the participatory governance process that lies on the theoretical basis that inclusive governance promotes institutional change and drives gender equality. In particular, the research identifies and describes three core elements: actors and roles, legitimacy and delegation, and participation process. Second, based on this framework, the analysis suggests a methodology to evaluate the participatory governance process for introducing a Gender Equality Plan (henceforth GEP) within universities.

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The research employs a mixed-method approach and proposes a parallel convergent design that adopts three instruments: interviews, questionnaires, and focus groups. The article provides insight into understanding whether deep levels of cooperation in the GEP implementation through a participatory governance process would enhance the gender mainstreaming capacity of public administrations.

Keywords: inclusive governance, participatory governance process, gender equality, Gender Equality Plans, mixed-methods.

1. Introduction

A Gender Equality Plan (GEP) represents a systematic and strategic tool. It prioritises concrete and context-related objectives and specific measures to improve gender equality within private and public organisations through cultural institutional change (Clavero and Galligan 2021). A GEP aims to activate organisational and cultural change at the institutional level and is not limited to the mere planning and implementation of minute measures dedicated to a specific target group of people. Instead, it is a complex tool for changing processes, cultures, and organisational structures from a gender mainstreaming¹ perspective (Mergaert *et al.* 2022). It is a transformative and cross-cutting approach that highlights the need to reorganise policy processes usually presented within institutions as a strategy focusing on gender equality rather than on women as a “special category” (Vingelli 2005).

In 2021, with the introduction of Horizon Europe, the European Commission made GEPs mandatory for participation in its research framework programme

¹ The European Commission defines gender mainstreaming as a strategy of “(re) organising, improving, developing, and evaluating policy processes to incorporate a gender equality perspective into all policies at all levels and all stages, from the actors normally involved in policy-making” (European Commission 1996).

(General Annexes Horizon Europe 2021-2022 Work Programme). As a formal document, it must include a commitment to provide sufficient gender equality resources and expertise for its implementation. It must envision a progressive monitoring process through collecting and analysing sex-disaggregated data and awareness-raising and training activities on gender equality for the entire organisation (Drew and Bencivenga 2017).

The EIGE (European Institute for Gender Equality) reports how obstacles to creating, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating a GEP are diverse and frequent (EIGE, 2022). Multiple types and levels of impediment have been recorded in the interventions implemented to date at the European level, which is needed to consider *ex-ante* as possible elements that disadvantage the implementation of GEPs (Lombardo and Naldini 2022; Mergaert *et al.* 2022). While there is a physiological resistance inherent in any process of cultural and paradigm change, poor stakeholder involvement in the early stages of the GEP development process and the lack of institutional and organisational authority of the staff accountable for implementing the GEP represent a specific restraint. In some cases, the assumption that implementing a GEP is a “women’s problem” with little participation by men, combined with the lack of understanding of the importance and need for promoting gender equality, prevents the endorsement of structural change (Peterson and Jordansson 2022).

Institutionalised resistance to gender equality initiatives in academia appears embedded in the structures and processes of higher education: formal institutional rules and policies featuring gender equality and equal opportunity have been jeopardized by informal practices that have maintained the *status quo* (Peterson *et al.* 2021).

EIGE also reports as an obstacle the view that initiatives to promote equal opportunity run counter to the meritocratic approach that an academic and research-dedicated environment should maintain (EIGE 2022). The GEP is also occasionally

considered unnecessary because women are well represented in some research areas. There is an idea that gender inequalities can be resolved over time by itself without particular interventions.

Finally, the failure to allocate dedicated resources plus the lack of expertise in gender studies represent other possible obstacles (Bencivenga *et al.* 2017; EIGE 2022).

Another issue emerges: Universities are public administrations, but of a “very special kind” (Ajani *et al.* 2017) since the autonomy of universities and research institutions is given solely in the freedom of science. As a result of its diversity, the University comes to find itself in a difficult position to govern and manage. If on the one side, as a public operator, it must comply with provisions and rules that the entire public administration system must respect. On the other hand, as an architect and builder of the future, it needs to change, experiment, and innovate (*ibidem*). This is a constitutive element which distinguishes public universities from any other private institution, but which differentiates them among public administrations, constituting one *species* among others, quite particular.

In this article, we argue that to achieve substantial changes, institutional formalism and hierarchical decision-making process represent a restraint: an inclusive and participatory process would support a more effective GEP implementation. A deeper reflection on participatory governance, as the method leading toward the outcome of inclusive governance, comes in (Baccaro and Papadakis 2008).

The present article has two objectives. First, it develops a theoretical framework for the participatory governance process that lies on the theoretical basis that inclusive governance promotes institutional change and drives gender equality. In particular, the article identifies and describes three core elements: actors and roles, legitimacy and delegation, and participation process (Laverack 2012; Buemi *et al.* 2015; Sacchetti and Tortia 2020). Second, based on this theoretical

framework, the article suggests a methodology to evaluate the participatory governance process for introducing a GEP within universities. In particular, the article suggests employing a mixed-method approach (Creswell and Plano Clark 2011) with the specific objective of analysing and evaluating the implementation of inclusive governance through the participatory governance process. Specifically, we propose a parallel convergent design that adopts three instruments: interviews, questionnaires, and focus groups.

The European Commission has made GEP mandatory for European and Italian universities from 2022: our measurement method allows us to test *in itinere* the implementation of GEPs in a “pioneering” stage.

The case study involves the University of Brescia (Italy). In line with international policies, Italian public institutions are all called upon to plan strategies and measures to increase gender equality, including introducing the GEP². If we specifically look at the Italian academic context, gender equality is a topic of significant interest also for universities³. Equal opportunity is a crucial issue for each research and innovation organisation, and it should appear in their statutes as a general and guiding principle⁴. In 2019, the Conference of Italian University Rectors (CRUI) published guidelines for all universities aiming at adopting a gender budget report. The guidelines outline the gender budget report as a fundamental planning, reporting, and monitoring tool. According to the CRUI (2021): “The GEP is placed in a planning perspective and is part of the Strategic Plan, placing itself among the

² The 2007 Directive of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers of 23 May 2007 (G.U. n.173 of 27 July 2007), includes measures to implement gender equality and equal opportunities in public institutions, and recommends the use of the gender report in all public administrations, while the Legislative Decree 150/2009 mentions this document as an essential part of the performance plan.

³ Law of 30 December 2010 No. 240 delegates to the autonomy of the academic institutions’ statutes and regulations and defines the rules on “gender” based on equal opportunity.

⁴ According to article 21 of Law no. 183/2010 the Central Guarantee Committee for equal opportunities in universities (*Comitato Unico di Garanzia - CUG*) are established. Their role is fundamental for the preparation of the gender budget report. Moreover, the committee exercises its competencies intending to ensure, within the framework of public work, equality and equal gender opportunities, the protection of workers against discrimination and mobbing as well as the absence of any form of physical and psychological violence.

University's development guidelines. The strategic actions are placed concerning the gender budget report in both the forecasting and reporting phases"⁵. The GEP is a three-year strategic plan and consists of the following areas of interest: work-life balance; political roles and academic careers; gender research and teaching; countering violence.

The University of Brescia brings extensive experience in gender equality, GEP and gender budget report. The university relies on a growing number of offices and instruments for gender equality: internal committee on equality (CUG); the Trust Advisor (*Consigliera di Fiducia*), who is also accountable for prosecuting behaviours and incidents including direct or indirect forms of discrimination, sexual harassment, physical or psychological violence and mobbing. Moreover, in November 2019, it opened the research centre LOG (*Laboratorio Osservatorio Studi di Genere*), a laboratory and observatory on gender studies. Furthermore, in line with the gender budget report published in 2021, it implemented its first Gender Equality Plan 2022-2024. Finally, the University is part of the consortium of the Project "Budget-it" and leads the data collection⁶. With an academic staff (professors, technical and administrative) of about one thousand, we consider the University of Brescia an appropriate object for our analysis. University of Brescia case study allows us to propose functional tools to measure whether the participatory governance method adopted one year after the GEP implementation is effective or

⁵ Considering Italian legislation, according to Article 48, Legislative Decree 198/2006, the Positive Action Plan (PAP) is a document that all public administrations (thus including public universities and other public research institutions) must adopt to ensure "the removal of obstacles that prevent the full realization of equal opportunities in employment and work between men and women". The Gender Equality Plan fits in this strategic and systemic logic.

⁶ The project BUDGET-IT! Building Gender Equality Through Gender Budgeting for Institutional Transformation (BUDGET-IT) has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2023 research and innovation programme. It started in February 2023 and uses gender budgeting to transform institutions to advance inclusive gender equality and enhance the reputation, inclusiveness, and research excellence among the consortium. Università degli Studi di Brescia is part of the consortium (<https://budget-it.eu/>).

whether it needs to be modified to be sure of arriving at the end of the three-year plan with long-term results.

This article is structured as follows: section 2 presents inclusive governance, providing examples of its adoption; section 3 explains implementing inclusive governance through a participatory governance process. The methodology is offered in section 4, which includes quantitative analysis, qualitative analysis, timing and structure of the survey and discussion; section 5 relates the conclusions, starting from the assumption that the implementation of a tool devoted to a cultural change such as the GEP produces more positive effects if it is conveyed through the participatory governance method. We propose a mixed method tool for evaluating and measuring the process put in place to modify it *in itinere* if necessary.

2. Inclusive governance

Governance has multiple interpretations and meanings; however, the literature is unanimous in defining it as a set of processes, procedures, resources, institutions and actors that determine how decisions are made and implemented (Rhodes 2007). Governance is how decision-making authority is distributed among actors (Cashore 2002; Pierre and Peters 2020). In particular, participatory governance is a process of management and decision-making involving all community stakeholders in the organisation's policy-making, activity planning and decision-making (Sacchetti 2019). Participatory governance states that decisions are made collaboratively and that the involvement of diverse perspectives and expertise can lead to better and shared outcomes than the traditional centralised governance model, in which a small group of individuals makes decisions (Bobbio and Pomatto 2007; Galego *et al.* 2022).

Feminist institutional approaches also have provided a theoretical framework to analyse development and change in the gendered nature of institutions. The

type of actions and consensus built, including the narratives behind them, are not “ideological free”. So, analysing what kind of framework is implicitly or explicitly used by those planning or approving GEPs and the type of resistance encountered is crucial to capture not only levels but also the type of inclusive governance and type of change ultimately promoted (Guido *et al.* 2023).

The participation process holds out the promise of inclusion (Cornwall 2003). Namely, inclusive governance emphasises that, to achieve the institutional strategic objectives, it is crucial to have both a structure and an organisational practice based on a participatory culture among stakeholders, thus highlighting a broader vision than the methods which are based instead primarily on efficiency (Coase 1953; Williamson 1975).

Through participatory governance processes, inclusive governance enables increased knowledge, strengthens cooperation and leads to team learning, improves skills and generates co-produced solutions in the face of shared problems (Buemi *et al.* 2015). Inclusive governance and participatory decision-making processes are functional in increasing knowledge as they benefit from the skills and experiences of all the participants. In addition, personal involvement and the opportunity to express one’s opinion enable mutual learning, creativity and increased motivation (Amabile 1982; Laverack 2012; Galengo *et al.* 2022). Some studies relate possible inclusive governance solutions to the ability to include and involve different stakeholders to promote the collective interest (Cornwall 2003; Buemi *et al.* 2015; Galego *et al.* 2022). In the latter case, these are experiences of participation in decision-making choices made explicit for some specific thematic areas (Bobbio and Pomatto 2007).

Literature reports experiences of inclusive governance applied to different contexts and institutions (Siza 2018; Sacchetti 2019; Pasinetti *et al.* 2021). There are recorded discourses and practices in Development Programmes (Cornwall 2003) and Community-driven planning (Leone and Prezza 1999; Siza 2018). Interventions

in urban regeneration and social policies are often achieved through participatory processes, in which the various stakeholders together identify and define solutions to complex problems (Perkins and Zimmerman 1995; Bussu *et al.* 2022). In health promotion services, an operational model has been proposed to combine traditional planning and design processes in public health programs with the need to capture the views, goals and resources of those who are beneficiaries of the interventions themselves⁷ (Laverack 2012). At the Italian level, cooperative companies adopt inclusive governance at the structural level, with stakeholders participating on boards of directors or being present in decision-making bodies (Pasinetti *et al.* 2021; Sacchetti 2019).

Participatory and gender-sensitive methodologies for analysing gender mainstreaming within an organisation are developed by international organisations (Unwomen 2014; International Labour Organization 2007; 2012; Guido *et al.* 2023). Inclusive governance could dialogue with feminist participatory action research on how to promote the engagement of participants with an inclusive debate. Feminist participatory action research explicitly develops the links between feminist theory, participatory action research's use of participatory methods to achieve social change, and critical engagement with issues of power and structural inequalities (Tolhurst *et al.*, 2012).

⁷ The method is called Parallel Tracking. The author, describing the direction of control in health promotion interventions, uses the “top-down and bottom-up approach”. The term top-down describes the direction of programs in which the identification of the problem comes from the top, from the institutional structures that hold control over the centres of power and responsibility at the community level (the civil service, research institutions, schools, etc.). By bottom-up, on the other hand, we mean the bottom-up direction of control, in which it is the community itself that identifies its problems and either communicates them to those with decision-making authority or acts directly to take charge of them.

3. Implementing inclusive governance: participatory governance process

According to our framework, implementing inclusive governance through a participatory governance process comprises three core elements: actors and roles; legitimacy and delegation; participation process (Table 1) (see Sacconi 1991; Laverack 2012; Buemi *et al.* 2015; Sacchetti and Tortia 2020; Bussu *et al.* 2022).

<i>Actors and Roles</i>	<i>Legitimacy and Delegation</i>	<i>Process of Participation</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Promoter - Technical director - Facilitator - Representative stakeholders 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Legitimation of authority from the top - Delegation toward a widespread problem solving attitude - Organizational coordination 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Share of information - Constructive discussion - Involvement of all actors - Integration of different point of view and shared solution

Table 1 - Framework of the participatory governance process of implementing inclusive governance. *Source:* Authors' elaboration

3.1. Actors and Roles

Regarding Actors and Roles, it should be made clear what is required in terms of contribution from the actors to be involved. Specific roles characterise every participatory process (Sacchetti and Tortia 2020).

The roles of the involved actors that we identified are diverse: the political role (i.e., promoter) guarantees the process and objectives; the technical role (i.e., technical director) coordinates the process; the facilitation role (i.e., facilitator) is played by a person from outside the organisation, neutral concerning the interests at stake and competent in mediation; stakeholders (i.e., representative stakeholders) bring relevant points of view on the issue to be addressed (Pasinetti *et al.* 2021). Given these multiple roles, it is necessary to determine the correct

actors to be involved in the activities for different roles and which stakeholders are essential to the process.

The presence in decision-making roles of professional profiles (e.g. promoter, technical director and facilitator) with transversal and organisational skills, capable of leading listening and discussion tables and coordinating complex processes, is necessary (Pasinetti *et al.* 2021) and should be combined with the ability to identify and value one or more “change agents” within the workgroup, regardless of their hierarchical roles. These people can visualise the change and promote actions that will build it and subsequently have it recognised as a necessary step in achieving the goals (Rebora and Turri 2008). This is also why a participatory governance process needs a gradual, step-by-step implementation path (Buemi *et al.* 2015).

Moreover, methodical and careful stakeholder mapping and analysis is the basis for a successful governance participatory process (Pasinetti *et al.* 2021). Indeed, all viewpoints relevant to the thematic area of intervention must be represented. In particular, the principle that should guide the identification of stakeholders is inclusiveness (Sacchetti 2019). It is necessary to analyse the context and the reference community to identify the actors involved with the thematic scope of the intervention (Laverack 2012). The mapping is followed, with the use of structured methodologies, by a thorough analytical work, which investigates for each actor in particular, the relevance (based on the level of interest and the ability to influence), the benefits that the actor receives from participating in the process and the contributions it brings (Buemi *et al.* 2015). It is crucial to emphasise how participatory governance pathways allow for the involvement of different stakeholders, changing their roles from subjects to be controlled or benefited to people who make a positive contribution, learn, and engage if conditions allow (Maslow 1998; Sacchetti and Tortia 2020).

3.2. Legitimacy and Delegation

The managerial aspects of Legitimacy and Delegation are crucial in defining a participatory governance process. On the one hand, legitimisation from the organisation's top makes the mandate official (Laverack 2012). On the other hand, the assumption of delegation to operate within an organisation enables the creation of participation processes. Such processes should avoid a top-down governance approach in which the apex roles are the decision-makers and instead move toward a widespread and shared capacity for problem-solving (Sacchetti 2019). In this framework, the delegated figure (i.e., facilitator) is not the actor who has to solve the problem. Still, he/she is the delegated and legitimated figure who can create the right organisational conditions to promote concerted solutions and strategies, leveraging co-responsibility (Labonte 2002; Ison and Wallis 2017).

Another important aspect of Legitimacy and Delegation is the organisational coordination to which authority is attributed. This should be justified by prior agreement between the parties involved. This type of coordination allows the authority to be used with criteria such as inclusion, equity and, most importantly, participation. Stakeholders thus legitimise authority as long as their demands are considered, and the results represent those expected (Sacconi 1991). Legitimacy and Delegation is functional to the process of increasing knowledge, and especially its socialisation, as people benefit from the experiential skills of those who participate. In addition, involvement and the opportunity to express one's opinion allow for mutual learning, creativity and increases motivation (McGregor 1960; Amabile and Hirschmann 1982). Another aspect emerges from the literature on practice and experience (Polanyi 2009) as the main sources of learning and on the creation and dissemination of knowledge in enterprises (Nonaka and Takeuchi 1995)⁸.

⁸ The same conclusion was reached by Laverack (2012) who expresses, in the "Parallel tracking" method, the opportunity to develop Empowerment and Empowerment of the beneficiaries involved through the "bottom up" method.

3.3. Process of Participation

The participation process is the activation of a structured, not spontaneous process in which the objectives and expected results are clearly defined, as well as the stages of work, the actors and roles, the timing and how interaction takes place (Newig *et al.* 2017). In such a way, the actors can contribute effectively (Buemi *et al.* 2015).

Several approaches, techniques, and tools for managing participatory processes have been tested and refined recently (Bobbio and Pomatto 2015). First, users must not fall into the trap of thinking of a specific approach as blueprints to be blindly followed. Praxis, which is methodologically robust, always involves the adaptation of the method to the context, and all users should be open to using the more effective tools (Ison and Wallis 2017).

Second, it is crucial to assess the most suitable participatory design tool to activate the participation process (Fung 2006) effectively and efficiently. In particular, to ensure the real participation of all actors and to achieve shared results, it is necessary to allow all participants to express themselves, succeeding in integrating different points of view and valuing different positions, also involving actors who would very unlikely have had the opportunity to confront each other (Newig *et al.* 2017). Various techniques have been designed and tested to select participants, encourage them to listen to each other, enable non-experts to talk to specialists, resolve conflicts, and prepare agreements that can hold up in the long run (Labonte 2002). In particular, existing facilitation techniques are geared toward making sure that everyone has adequate information, that they try to listen to and understand each other, and that they are enabled to arrive, when possible, at shared solutions or otherwise openly address conflicts (Laverack 2012).

4. Proposed methodology

This study proposes a comprehensive methodology to evaluate the participatory governance process for introducing a GEP within Universities and understand if this process has enhanced the gender mainstreaming capacity of public administrations.

GEP 2022-2024 of the University of Brescia (Italy) is the case study we focused on⁹. This is the first Gender Equality Plan implemented within the university, and it is in its second year of implementation: this allows a consideration of the method for evaluating the participatory governance process and an *in itinere* analysis. The Commission for drafting the GEP was given an official assignment on 15th January 2022 by the then-acting Rector and the General Director, with the role of promoters. They appointed a Professor as head of the Commission and as technical director and a Rector Delegate as facilitator. People with specific skills and professional knowledge related to the GEP area of reference (work-life balance, political roles and careers, gender research and teaching, countering violence) were chosen. A list of representative stakeholders constitutes the members of the Commission¹⁰: technical and administrative staff, professors, lecturers, researchers, and students (at the bachelor, master, and doctoral levels). Once actors and roles have been defined, legitimacy and participation process has been developed, including sharing of information, constructive discussion, involvement of all actors and integration of different points of view toward shared solutions.

This article proposes a mixed-method approach, integrating quantitative analyses for generalizability and qualitative analyses for a deeper understanding (John-

⁹ The authors were personally involved in the design and implementation of the GEP, which allowed them to develop firsthand knowledge of governance processes.

¹⁰ Some actors already participated in drafting the gender balance report in 2021.

son and Onwuegbuzie 2004; Creswell and Plano Clark 2018). In this way, the limitations of both quantitative and qualitative approaches can be addressed by combining their respective strengths (Creswell 2014). A triangulation basis is also suggested to ensure results convergence (McGrath and Brindberg 1984).

Selecting the appropriate mixed method design¹¹ requires careful consideration of several factors, including the priority of data types, whether the analysis should be conducted concurrently, sequentially, or both, and how mixing strategies will be applied (Creswell and Garrett 2008).

This study suggests adopting the convergent parallel design that involves using both quantitative and qualitative methods simultaneously during the data collection phase, giving equal priority to both approaches while data integration occurs only at the study's conclusion (Fig. 1) (Creswell and Plano Clark 2011). Thanks to this design, researchers can create parallel issues for both the qualitative and quantitative components, allowing them to gather data from different sources and use different samples (Picci 2012).

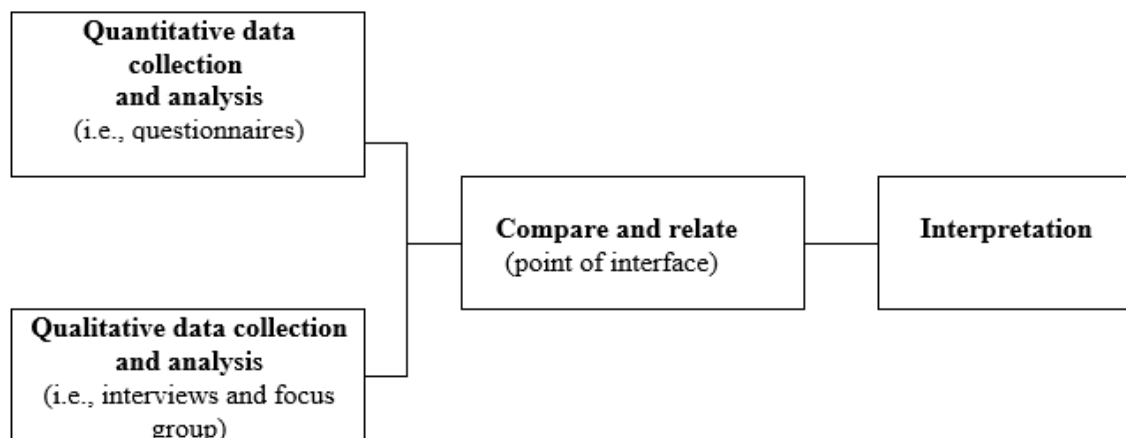


Fig. 1: Convergent parallel design
 Source: Authors elaboration from Creswell and Plano Clark, 2011

¹¹ To collect, analyse and interpret data, we can identify four main designs: convergent parallel design, explanatory sequential design, exploratory sequential design and embedded design (Creswell and Plano Clark 2011).

There are several reasons for choosing qualitative instruments. First, analysing the participative governance process requires more exploratory research that can generate theories to understand the phenomenon under analysis (Newig 2018). Qualitative methods allow us to go beyond the simple measurement of a phenomenon and seek to understand the causal relationships underlying the observed phenomena to answer the complex questions that characterise these topics (Eisenhardt 1989). The qualitative approach enhances knowledge about the topic under investigation by providing answers to “why” or “how” questions (Ghauri and Grønhaug 2020).

Many techniques can be used as a qualitative approach (e.g., structured, semi-structured and unstructured interviews, participant observation, remote observation, and focus groups). To evaluate the participatory governance process for introducing a GEP within Universities and understand if this process has enhanced the gender mainstreaming capacity of public administrations, we suggest adopting two different instruments: semi-structured interviews and focus groups.

We suggest collecting data through two questionnaires (i.e., quantitative analysis), interviews and focus groups (i.e., qualitative analysis). The sequence involves administering the questionnaires simultaneously as the individual interviews and a focus group. After collecting the data from both approaches, we suggest proceeding with separate analyses for the qualitative and quantitative datasets, adhering to the specific procedures relevant to each research method (Creswell and Plano Clark 2011). Only at the end of the study, during the interpretation phase, we integrate the findings by combining and comparing the results obtained from both methodologies (Creswell and Plano Clark 2011) shown in Table 2.

The research will be conducted with the four tools by asking the interviewee for a personal opinion and, for some questions, an evaluation concerning possible scenarios.

	<i>Survey</i>	<i>Target audience</i>	<i>Expected number</i>	<i>Focus on</i>
<i>quantitative analysis</i>	Set of questions in the GEAM questionnaire regarding the topic knowledge, the possible involvement in the future;	Academic staff (professors; technical and administrative)	500	-Overview of the topic knowledge; -Interest regarding the issue.
	A questionnaire concerning participatory governance process: actors and roles, legitimacy and delegation, participation process	Academic staff involved in the draft of the GEP and in realising its actions, with expertise on the topic.	70	-Evaluation of the process that brought the university to the writing and approval of the GEP
<i>qualitative analysis</i>	Semi-structured interviews	Rector's Delegate; Head of the GEP Writing Commission; General Director; Student Delegate	4	-Perception of the effectiveness of the method used;
	Focus group regarding activities to be implemented in the short term	Directors of different disciplinary areas of the university	10	-In itinere evaluation how the various sectors of the University are involved concerning the implementation of GEP activities and next steps improvement

Table 2 - Framework of the analysis. *Source:* Authors' elaboration

4.1 Timing of the proposed methodology

We suggest administering various data collection tools (e.g. interviews, questionnaires, focus groups) during the implementation of the GEP, halfway through the three-year period, which allows an ongoing evaluation of the implemented process to be recorded, albeit at a preliminary stage, the initial results and the perception of effectiveness. This will make it possible to adjust intervention choices and guide

future programmatic directions with greater coherence and adherence to the detected context.

The work plan we propose follows the timeline shown in Table 3.

ACTIVITIES	TIMING								
	Mon th 1	Mon th 2	Mon th 3	Mon th 4	Mon th 5	Mon th 6	Mon th 7	Mon th 8	Mon th 9
Design of the tools and stakeholder engage- ment	x	x							
Questionnaire 1 general stakeholder			x	x	x				
Questionnaire 2 specific stakeholder					x	x	x		
Interviews					x	x			
Focus group							x	x	
Evaluation and results									x

Table 3 -Timing of the analysis. *Source:* Authors' elaboration

4.2. Quantitative analysis

Quantitative data are collected through questionnaires (Yin 2003). The unique features of standardisation, which involves closed-ended responses and administering them uniformly, makes the instrument functional for comparing and explaining the behaviours, attitudes, and opinions of actors participating in the survey.

The validation of the questionnaires goes through a series of evaluations: the effective ability to detect the object of the research; stability, understood as the ability to measure the phenomenon correctly; comparability of data obtained from observations carried out in different areas (*ibidem*). The pilot test, administered to a few people involved in the participatory process, is considered relevant to validating the questionnaires and specifically testing the clarity of the questions,

the logical sequence of the questions, the fluidity of the questionnaire structure, and the timing.

In particular, to evaluate the participatory governance process for introducing a GEP within Universities and understand if this process has enhanced the gender mainstreaming capacity of public administrations, we propose to collect quantitative data through two different questionnaires to two different targets.

The first questionnaire addressed academic, administrative and technical staff to evaluate actions implemented within the University (see Appendix 1). The proposed questionnaire should be included in the core GEAM (Gender Equality Audit and Monitoring) questionnaire¹². The GEAM tool is an integrated environment for conducting survey-based gender equality audits in academic organisations or organisational units. The main instrument is a flexible questionnaire framework which includes a collection of questions on aspects of gender equality in academic organisations, providing high-quality data for designing and implementing gender equality measures and assessing their impact over time¹³. Our proposed questionnaire integrates the core questionnaire with an addendum¹⁴. The questionnaire starts with a set of demographic questions collected in the initial part of GEAM questionnaire. The second part consists in an addendum that specifically focuses on the activities implemented in the field of gender equality in University of Brescia: namely the gender budget report and GEP. It includes a set of rating scale questions aimed at knowing whether these instruments are known and whether

¹² The Gender Equality Audit and Monitoring (GEAM) is a tool that has been developed within the project funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme. GEAM does not replace human resource-based data collection and analysis but provides an additional layer on people's perceptions, experiences, working conditions, and needs (researchers, managers, students, assistants etc.). The GEAM questionnaire is currently available in multiple languages. It also has a report template (based on R Bookdown) that can automatically generate a report with descriptive statistics (frequency tables) and illustrations) (<https://geam.act-on-gender.eu/> retrieved 29 July 2023).

¹³ The GEAM questionnaire has been used for the data collection in the above-mentioned project Budget-it.

¹⁴ The addendum is to be submitted to the University of Brescia population in Autumn 2023.

they are considered useful and effective tools for planning action in the field of gender equality. An open question to collect possible input on important issues missing is also envisioned. A second set of rating scale questions investigates the level of knowledge on specific affirmative action led during the first year of GEP's implementation. We also want to explore whether such activities are valued as change drivers. The questionnaire aims to determine the level of active participation in drafting the gender budget report and GEP and whether respondents want to be involved in future editions. All the academic staff (professors, technical and administrative) represent the target audience, with an expected number of 500 respondents.

The second questionnaire we propose addresses key actors, defined by their participation in governing bodies, commissions or scientific workshops on gender equality issues (see Appendix 2). Based on Laverack's (2012), we suggest collecting the opinions of the actors involved in the writing and implementation of the GEP. The survey instruments chosen are functional for evaluation according to the top-down and bottom-up approaches. The questionnaire could be addressed to:

- University governing bodies composed of the Rector (previous and current), General Director, members of the Senate (previous and current), delegate(s) of the Rector, for a total of at least 20 people (i.e., top-down approach);
- members of the committee delegated to write the GEP, members of the committee in charge of implementation, representatives of male and female students (at the bachelor, master, and doctoral level), Trustee Advisor, members of the Guarantee Committee (Comitato Unico di Garanzia CUG) (previous and current), members of the Gender Studies Observatory Laboratory (*Laboratorio Osservatorio Studi di Genere - LOG*) (previous and current), technical and administrative staff and researchers involved in the

implementation of the GEP, assignees to different extent dealing with gender equality (i.e., bottom-up approach).

This questionnaire is structured into three sections, namely the three core elements of participatory governance (i.e. actors and roles, legitimacy and delegation, participation process). The proposed questionnaire is structured as follows. A set of demographic questions is collected in the initial part. The first section aims to evaluate the process that leads to the drafting and approval of the GEP. It includes both open questions and rating scale questions that investigate whether the process is perceived as complete and with defined objectives. The second section of the questionnaire is on participatory governance and includes three sub-sections. The questions on actors and roles in the first sub-section explore the topic of stakeholder representation and top management involvement. The set of questions on legitimation and delegation in the second sub-section regards the top management legitimation and the identification of agents of change. Finally, the last sub-section explores the participation process through a selection of rating scale questions on respondents' evaluation of the timing and methods used for the GEP's structure and the working-group cooperation. All the actors involved in the draft of the GEP and in realising its actions, with expertise on the topic, are the target audience, with an expected number of 70 people engaged.

4.3. Qualitative analysis

Given their role in the participatory process, we suggest involving the Rector's Delegate, Head of the GEP Writing Commission, General Director, and Student Delegate. We propose to focus the interviews on the process of designing the GEP:

- assessment of the path that led the University to the writing and approval of the GEP;

- evaluation of the degree to which participants were involved in designing the GEP;
- perception of the effectiveness of the method used.

Issues of the quality of participation will be investigated, whether the result was consistent with the idea brought by the participants, whether the course conducted strengthened the cooperation of the working group, and whether the course led to learning by improving the participants' skills.

The focus groups we propose should address specific areas (e.g., activities to be implemented in the short term) and will be a place to experiment with a participatory methodology. Participants will be asked to evaluate how the various sectors of the University are involved in the implementation of GEP activities and the ways GEP activities were implemented. The focus group will have: circumscribed duration, explicit evaluation and discussion questions on one of the core topics of the GEP, the importance of achieving it in all areas (work/life balance, career advancement, presence in governance, gender in teaching and research; violence), and depending on the specific time at which it is carried out. It will aim to have participants experience the construction of some activities in a participatory way, which will be carried out in the different departments of the university.

The core for successful participation is how these meetings will be conducted. The facilitator will be someone with experience in group management and conducting focus groups external to the organisation so that he/she cannot have any influence from people in senior roles who might be in the focus group. He/she will give room to different voices, also conflicting, and create a reflexive and self-reflexive space, as feminist participatory action research teaches.

This method of activity definition will lead to experimenting with participatory governance and knowledge empowerment.

5. Conclusion

To facilitate participatory processes, it is deemed necessary to create a governance capable of enhancing the contribution of individuals, with the specific intention of disseminating acquired value to the collective intelligence of the working group and implementing participatory projects even of an experimental nature.

The article describes the participatory governance process by identifying three fundamental elements: actors and roles, legitimacy and delegation, and participation process. Such a tool, if adequately used, can become an element of the development of transversal projects and an opportunity to enhance the organisation and innovative skills.

Crucial nodes include the fact that the political body of reference (in the case of the University of Brescia, the GEP Commission) cannot be tied to formal nomination disconnected from the expertise on the topic and must include figures with specific skills and professional knowledge related to the area of reference of the GEP (work-life balance, political roles and careers, gender research and teaching, violence). Equally important, the technical body that reports to the political body must be competent and motivated, also through dedicated training courses.

The choice of approaching a project through a participatory approach is the result of a series of elements of both a formal nature (i.e., legitimacy and assumption of the role) and organisational culture (able to consider organisational and management skills aimed at the shared result a competence to be valued), as well as organisational processes that experience the involvement of different subjects and stakeholders at multiple levels (with evidence of the results achieved).

Let's consider the university context and the people who work in it (i.e., the stakeholders of reference in the context of the Gender Equality issue), whether they are technical and administrative staff, academics, researchers, and students. We can think of deep levels of cooperation in a complex organisational context in

which the University is managed through a person-centred approach and the quality of stakeholder relations, prioritising their participation, equity, and empowerment.

The article suggests employing a mixed-method approach to evaluate the participatory governance for introducing a GEP within Universities. In particular, the proposed comprehensive methodology adopts the convergent parallel design and adopts three instruments: interviews, questionnaires, and focus groups. This design facilitates two independent phases of data collection. The outcomes of quantitative and qualitative analysis, firstly analysed separately and secondly compared, offer extra elements and a richer overview of the context. The overall pattern which combines the two parallel methods grounds the pathway for the future steps of both the implementation and evaluation scheme at the end of the first GEP. Feedback regarding the actions implemented must come from listening to the people who experience the University's activities daily through tools such as surveys.

Concerning the issue of involvement and inclusion, in addition to abstract descriptions and planning, the case study allows for substituting meaning comparisons with lived experience in the field around real objects of work with defined frames perceived as instances of value. Deepening gender equality issues through inclusive governance is important because it allows building blocks for the development of the organisation of which the team members themselves are part.

These tangible objects, collectively analysed and programmed, facilitate generative exchange within heterogeneous groups in terms of roles, age, gender, and skills and allow different levels of the organisation to experiment with new approaches to problem-solving and development.

The present research, the first of its kind, is based on a single case study and could be expanded through comparison with other universities, possibly related to different institutional settings. The mixed method approach and the two proposed

questionnaires could be adapted and employed by other universities following the context-related process. The research could also have future methodological development by using other quantitative and qualitative techniques.

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APPENDIX 1.

This section regarding demographic data is part of GEAM questionnaire and will be collected for both questionnaires

SECTION 0: DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

1. *In what year were you born?* _____

You are:

- A man
- A woman
- A nonbinary person
- I prefer not to state
- Other _____

2. *What is your country of origin?* _____

3. *What is your citizenship?* _____

4. *Do you currently feel part of a majority or minority ethnic group?*

- Majority
- Minority
- Don't know
- I prefer not to declare

5. *Do you have any disabilities or long-term health problems?*

- No
- Yes
- I prefer not to declare

6. *What is the highest level of qualification you have obtained?*

- No formal education
- Primary school/ elementary school
- Secondary school/ middle school
- High school or high school diploma
- Technical school
- University - bachelor's degree
- University - master's degree
- University - Doctorate
- University - Post Doctorate
- I prefer not to declare
- Other _____

7. *What is your current job position within the organization you work for?*

Academic/Researcher refers to academic teaching staff, researchers/researchers, including doctoral or research grant positions. Technical staff includes laboratory technicians, research assistants and other staff supporting roles in academic or research positions. Administrative staff refers to personnel administrative, secretarial, financial management, management or human resources staff human resources. Even if your position does not exactly match one of those listed, please select the one that most closely matches.

- Academic - Researcher/researcher
- Technical staff
- Administrative staff

8. *How many years have you been working for the organization you work for?*

- less than 2 years
- 2-5 years
- 5-10 years
- more than 10 years

9. *Do you have a permanent or fixed-term/expired contract?*

- Fixed-term/expiring
- Permanent
- Other _____

10. Do you have a full-time or part-time contract?

Part-time is defined as a contract of 80% or less of full-time.

- Part-time
- Full-time

Questionnaire 1: ACTIVITIES IMPLEMENTED IN THE FIELD OF GENDER EQUALITY

11. Did you read the University of Brescia Gender Budget Report published in September 2021?

- Yes
- No

12. If your answer is "Yes":

To what extent do you agree with the following statements regarding the University of Brescia Gender Budget Report, published in September 2021? (1= little agree, 5=very agree)

- *a. Gender Budget Report is a useful tool to position the University about gender issues*

1 2 3 4 5

- *b. Gender Budget Report is a useful insight tool for planning actions in the field of gender equity*

1 2 3 4 5

- *c. Gender Budget Report is also a useful tool for other stakeholders outside the university to know the university's positioning about gender issues*

1 2 3 4 5

- *d. Did you read the Gender Equality Plan (GEP) 2022-2024 of the University of Brescia?*

Yes No

13. If your answer is "Yes":

To what extent do you agree with the following statements regarding the Gender Equality Plan of the University of Brescia, approved on 22 April 2022? (1= little agree, 5=very agree)

- *a. The GEP defines concrete actions*

1 2 3 4 5

- *b. The actions planned by the GEP are difficult to implement*

1 2 3 4 5

- *c. Resistance (internal and/or external) will hinder the implementation of the GEP*

1 2 3 4 5

- *d. The GEP is not an effective tool to achieve real change*

1 2 3 4 5

14. Do you think that important issues, to be monitored or addressed, concerning gender equality are missing in the Gender Balance and GEP documents?

15. To what extent do you agree with the following statements concerning the actions set out in the GEP approved in June 2022 and carried out by the University of Brescia during the first year of its implementation (e.g. #finiscequi Communication Campaign against discriminations, STEM IN GENERE Project, Gender Language Vademecum, Inclusive Language Training Courses, Gender Violence Questionnaire, Virginia Per Tutte art exhibition)? (1= little agree, 5=very agree)

- a. There are no significant changes concerning gender equality issues

1 2 3 4 5

- b. The timeframe is correct

1 2 3 4 5

- c. The activities carried out are functional/effective in achieving gender equality

1 2 3 4 5

16. Would you like to add comments or suggestions regarding the implementation of the planned actions?

Yes No

17. Did you play an active role in the drafting of the Gender Budget Report?

If you answered "No":

Yes No

18. Would you be interested in participating in the drafting of the next edition?

19. Did you play an active role in the drafting of the Gender Equality Plan? Yes No

If you answered "No":

20. Would you be interested in participating in the drafting of the next edition? Yes No

21. Are you part of the GEP Commission 2022-2024? Yes No

If you answered "No":

22. Would you like to participate in the next GEP Commission? Yes No

23. To what extent do you agree with the following statements concerning the degree of participation of stakeholders in the drafting and implementation of the GEP? (1= little agree, 5=very agree)

- a. What is happening is important

1 2 3 4 5

- b. There is a sense of participation of the people involved

1 2 3 4 5

- c. The method used so far has been effective

1 2 3 4 5

- d. University Governance has been involved to the correct extent

1 2 3 4 5

24. *Would you like to add comments or suggestions regarding participation in the design and implementation of actions?* _____

Appendix 2

Questionnaire 2: Participative Governance

SECTION 1. EVALUATION OF THE PROCESS THAT BROUGHT THE UNIVERSITY TO THE WRITING AND APPROVAL OF THE GEP

1. *Did you actively participate in the drafting of the GEP?*

Yes No

Open Question:

a. *If you answered "No", can you express why you did not participate?* _____

b. *Would you like to add comments or suggestions regarding participation in the construction and implementation of GEP's actions?*

If you answered "Yes":

c. *Do you think the process for drafting the GEP was complete?*

Yes More yes
than no More no than yes No

d. *Do you think the drafting of the GEP had defined objectives?*

Yes More yes
than no More no than yes No

SECTION 2 PARTICIPATORY GOVERNANCE

SECTION 2.1 ACTORS AND ROLES

2. *Do you think all stakeholders were represented in the drafting process?*

Yes More yes than no More no than yes No

3. *Do you think that the University's top management is involved in implementing actions to reduce gender equality?*

Yes More yes than no More no than yes No

4. *Do you think that the actors appointed to lead the drafting and implementation of the GEP properly has adequate capacity?*

Yes More yes than no More no than yes No

5. *Do you feel that the final result for the area where you participated in the drafting/realisation is consistent with what you brought in?*

Yes More yes than no More no than yes No

SECTION 2.2 LEGITIMATION AND DELEGATION

6. *Do you think that the legitimation by the top management and the presence of the Rector's delegate in the drafting of the GEP promoted the appointment and mandate?*

Yes More yes than no More no than yes No

7. *Do you think that the person appointed to lead the drafting and implementation of the GEP can create the organisational conditions suitable for promoting concerted solutions and strategies, leveraging co-responsibility?*

Yes More yes than no More no than yes No

8. *Do you think the identification of "agents of change" within the university could be a useful way to promote gender equality? (A "change agent" is defined as a person who is able to visualise change, promote*

actions that build it and subsequently have it recognised as a necessary step towards the achievement of the set goals).

Yes More yes than no More no than yes No

9. *Have you any suggestions for identifying possible "change agents"?*

SECTION 2.3 PARTICIPATION PROCESS

10. *Do you think the timing and method used (division into specific groups related to the GEP areas) were appropriate?*

Yes More yes than no More no than yes No

11. *Do you think that the course of action has strengthened the cooperation of the working group by generating, in the face of shared problems, the definition of co-produced solutions?*

Yes More yes than no More no than yes No

12. *Do you think that the final result related to the area where you participated in the drafting/realisation is a synthesis of all the positions that emerged during the discussion?*

Yes More yes than no More no than yes No

13. *Do you think that your demands have been considered and included in the final text?*

Yes More yes than no More no than yes No

14. *Do you think that the process has improved the working group's learning and skills?*

Yes More yes than no More no than yes No