

Article

The Transformative Potential of Gender Equality Plans to Expand Women's, Gender, and Feminist Studies in Higher Education: Grounds for Vigilant Optimism

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Abstract: The introduction of women's, gender, and feminist studies (WGFS) into higher education (HE) curricula has primarily been driven by individual efforts rather than institutional objectives. This article employs a multimethod approach to comprehensively understand the potential contribution of gender equality plans (GEPs) to strengthening the integration of WGFS in HE curricula and pedagogical practices. The study's documentary corpus includes data from GEPs in implementation, semi-structured interviews with 27 WGFS lecturers, and a web survey of 118 lecturers who teach courses related to or integrating gender aspects. This approach reveals divergent perspectives on the role of GEPs in HEIs, summarized into three categories: cautious optimism, skepticism, and simplistic views. The tensions and constraints associated with the contributions of the GEPs, as perceived by many involved in incorporating gender issues into teaching, outline a vigilant optimism for the future implementation of these mechanisms. Nonetheless, given the historically limited role of institutional initiatives in consolidating WGFS in Portuguese higher education, we argue that the potential contribution of GEPs to this field should not be underestimated, as integrating WGFS into institutional planning can legitimize, support, and leverage efforts that have predominantly been individual.

Keywords: higher education; gender equality plans; teaching; women's, gender, and feminist studies; Portugal; multimethod approach



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1. Introduction

The paths of women's, gender and feminist studies (WGFS) in Portugal have been marked by numerous advances and setbacks, convergences, and ruptures [1] in a construction that "has been neither easy nor linear" [2] (p. 88). Despite the significant expansion of the field and its progressive institutional presence observed since the early 2000s, a recent systematic analysis of the incorporation of WGFS into higher education (HE) curricula reveals the still incipient, accessory, and precarious nature of this field of study in the country's curricular structure [3].

As observed in other geographical contexts [4–7], the introduction of WGFS into HE curricula in the country has been seen more as an individual initiative than an institutional objective. The existence of the area and efforts to integrate it into established disciplines have been more the result of individual efforts by lecturers/researchers than of national or institutional policies with this objective, reflecting the individualized nature of the institutionalization of the field in Portugal [1,3,8,9]. On the other hand, several accounts note that it entered more easily into the praxis of research than teaching [10,11].

In recent years, the mobilization of higher education institutions (HEIs) to introduce institutional-level policies for the integration of the gender dimension in teaching and research has been strongly driven by European bodies, particularly in the context of research funding from the European Commission (EC) which, since its 5th Framework Program, has encouraged the development and implementation of gender equality plans (GEPs). More recently, the requirement of a GEP in implementation as an eligibility criterion under the Horizon Europe program (2021–2027) has prompted a veritable “race” for GEPs by HEIs in Portugal. These international regulations, along with the competitive pressures facing higher education institutions, have fostered various types of institutional isomorphism [12], with gender issues becoming critical criteria for accountability purposes.

In this article, we aim to discuss perspectives and practices on the contributions of institutional policies and initiatives to strengthening the integration of WGFS in the curricula and pedagogical practices of HEIs in Portugal, namely through the adoption of GEPs. We pursued a multimethod approach comprising a comparative content analysis of the GEPs being implemented, interviews with 27 lecturers in WGFS study cycles, and a questionnaire survey of 118 lecturers of courses in the field or which integrate gender aspects into their programs. Our objective is not only to characterize strategies and lines of action to strengthening the WGFS integration in the institutions’ formal policy mechanisms but also to explore the views on the relevance, effectiveness, and impact of these mechanisms of those involved in introducing gender issues into teaching.

This study provides an innovative contribution to the literature on GEPs by integrating the perspectives of WGFS lecturers with a content analysis of the GEPs. Listening the insights of WGFS lecturers—key actors in the institutionalization of gender studies in HEIs [1–3,8,9]—offers informed and critical viewpoints on the development and implementation of GEPs, rooted in their involvement in gender studies. By engaging with WGFS lecturers, we gain insights that are crucial for understanding the practical challenges and opportunities associated with these plans, approached as instruments of institutional isomorphism [13], and provide a reflective assessment of the potential of GEPs for driving structural and cultural change within HEIs. This comprehensive methodology offers a holistic understanding of these institutional change mechanisms by combining formal strategies and measures with the lived experiences, perspectives, and expectations of those directly involved in the integration of gender perspectives into teaching and research. This dual approach enables us to analyze not only formal rules, procedures, and norms but also symbolic systems, cognitive schemes, and ethical models that provide “patterns of meaning” guiding the actions of the agents involved [14]. By incorporating a social constructivist perspective, we recognize that the identity and self-image of social actors are coconstituted from institutional forms, images, and signs, allowing us to compare and assess competing representations of the curricular integration of WGFS.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Gender Equality Plans as a Strategy for Strengthening WGFS in Higher Education

The mandate to mainstream gender in education was defined as an international priority at the Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing, 1995), which officially inaugurated the era of gender mainstreaming policies. Issues related to HE curriculum have been addressed since the late 1990s by various European Union (EU) recommendations and developed in the creation of the European Higher Education Area, which mandated the inclusion of women’s and gender studies in the reorganization of undergraduate and postgraduate programs [15]. Gender mainstreaming, endorsing the incorporation of a gender equality perspective “in all policies, at all levels and at all stages” [16] (p. 15), has been invoked at political and institutional levels as a crucial means of producing substantive changes in gender relations, also in the academic context.

Understood as a mechanism for gender mainstreaming, the organizational model of a GEP has been championed by several national and international schemes to promote gender equality in research and higher education [17,18]. Since the European Commission’s

2012 Communication on the European Research Area established the integration of the gender dimension in research as a key priority [19], institutional change through GEPs has been recognized as a key element of national policy frameworks on gender equality in research and innovation in Europe [20,21].

At the level of EU policy and intervention, the focus on GEPs as a mechanism to address gender inequalities in HEIs marks a transition from an approach of “fixing women” to one of “fixing institutions” [22,23], namely towards a strategy centered on systemic barriers and institutional transformation [18]. This reorientation in the approach of the EU and other international bodies reflects the recognition that gender equality cannot be achieved without structural changes that challenge institutional processes and practices and the social norms that produce gender inequalities [24,25]. The EC definition of GEPs embraces the structural nature of transformative approaches, understanding these instruments as “a set of commitments and actions that aim to promote gender equality in an organization through a process of structural change” [26] (p. 11). Through a standard planning process involving the identification of gender inequalities and biases, the design and implementation of corrective measures, the setting of objectives and targets, and the monitoring of progress through indicators, this policy instrument aims to sustainably transform organizational processes, cultures, and structures to combat and reduce gender imbalances and discrimination [14,23]. In academic and research contexts, GEPs tend to incorporate measures to address gender issues in academic careers, working conditions, organizational cultures, educational content, and research innovation [17,27]. One important dimension that is typically covered by GEPs is precisely the integration of gender perspectives into teaching. The literature emphasizes the relevance, for the effective integration of the gender dimension into curricula and pedagogical practices, of the development of institutional policies and actions of a structural nature (including policies on training, recruitment and career progression, and combating violence and gender stereotypes) that induce a comprehensive transformation of institutional norms and practices which (re)produce gender inequalities in universities [28].

It has therefore been under the impetus of EU bodies that political action for gender equality, typically in the form of GEPs, has become widespread, although with considerable variation in relation to national coverage [29], as well as the timing when these initiatives were first introduced in each country [30]. In Portugal, GEPs in HEIs have only begun to gain expression in the last five years. By 2015, out of around one hundred HEIs in Portugal, only two had adopted a GEP, and only one was still active. In 2020, the number rose to seven (most involving just one department/faculty), an increase sustained essentially by involvement in projects funded under Horizon 2020. Despite this increase, the adherence to this type of organizational strategy for equality was far from that registered in other national contexts, particularly in Western and Northern European countries [29], which have been characterized as much more proactive [31].

Since the presence or absence of legal provisions mandating the implementation of GEPs is a central variable in understanding the initiative to adopt GEPs [17,18,24,32], it is unsurprising that the introduction of a funding requirement for HEIs to implement GEPs would significantly expand and expedite initiatives to establish such action plans [31,33]. In Portugal, the EC’s requirement for HEIs to have a GEP to access its main funding program, Horizon Europe (2021–2027), marked a significant turning point that triggered a veritable “race to adopt a GEP” in HEIs. While in mid-2021, before the criterion was established, there were only three active equality plans (approved and under implementation) in Portuguese HEIs, the most recent data, gathered as part of this research, shows that there were forty-five plans under implementation, most of which were approved/published between 2022 and 2023, reflecting the influence of the EC’s funding criteria.

This rapid adoption and implementation of GEPs in response to external pressures can be understood through the lens of institutional isomorphism, whereby organizations become similar to one another. DiMaggio and Powell distinguish between coercive isomorphism—arising from power dynamics and dependencies on the state—mimetic

isomorphism—where organizations model themselves on each other in response to uncertainty—and normative isomorphism, which is related to professionalization. Organizations achieve legitimacy by adjusting to these institutional influences, using methods such as complying with guidelines, mimicking other organizations, or adhering to norms and rituals [13]. Non-compliance with institutional expectations regarding accountability can negatively affect organizational legitimacy. The adherence to GEPs by Portuguese HEIs not only reflects a response to the EC’s funding requirements but also indicates a broader trend of institutional isomorphism driven by the need to achieve and maintain legitimacy in a competitive academic landscape [34].

In Portugal, state institutions themselves have reacted to the new European requirements for access to research funding by introducing gender requirements for evaluating R&D institutions, starting from 2023. The promotion of gender equality is also now an element in the assessment of HEIs by the national accreditation agency (A3ES), as set out in the “Manual for the Institutional Assessment Process in Higher Education 2022”, which specifies that the institution should describe the initiatives planned, designed, and implemented to promote gender equality and the integration of minorities and/or more disadvantaged social groups [35] (pp. 7–8).

In addition, mimetic and normative isomorphism exert a significant influence through the dissemination of performance certification tools in the international reputational capital market for achieving excellence in research production and education provision. There has been a proliferation of prestigious awards, prizes, and certificates of best practices that serve as benchmarks in international guidelines for HEIs globally (for example, the EUHRS4R-Human Resources Strategy for Researchers [36]). As a result, an emerging trend of isomorphism has been initiated in the revision of medium- and long-term strategic plans, wherein incorporating gender sensitivity has become a crucial element [32].

This leads us to question to what extent these isomorphism processes are perceived by strategic agents operating in the field as inducing effective and sustainable transformations in the integration of WGFS into HE in Portugal.

2.2. The State of the Art of Integrating WGFS into HE Curricula in Portugal

Especially since the beginning of the 21st century, we have seen a significant development of WGFS in Portugal. At the level of HE, this process has been characterized by an increase in the training offer and a trend towards the “autonomization” of the field in its own study programs. Until 2001, the country had only one master’s degree program in WGFS; between 2002 and 2008, seven new degree programs were created—two doctoral and five master’s degrees. The number of independent study programs has remained stable since then.

This radical change, especially at the level of training offer, was associated, on the one hand, with Portuguese society’s greater openness to gender equality discourses and the increased demand for training due to the projectivization of equality policies [37] and, on the other hand, with profound transformations in Portugal’s scientific and university system [9,38]. Following a gradual reduction in state participation in the budgets of the country’s public universities throughout the 2000s, universities were forced to resort to other sources of funding to compensate for the decrease in public participation, such as the direct contribution of students through the payment of tuition fees. This process took place at the same time as important transformations in the structure of national HE as part of the implementation of the Bologna Process at the European level. The adaptation of Portuguese HE to the Bologna Process involved splitting the previous four- or five-year degrees, which were subsidized by the state and whose maximum fees were set by the government, into three-year 1st cycle courses and two-year 2nd cycle courses, which were generally offered at higher fees that were not set by the government [9] (p. 76). As a result, the institutions saw the creation of new postgraduate programs as good opportunities to increase their income, especially “interdisciplinary master’s programs, as well as programs

in emerging areas of science and knowledge” [39] (p. 15), which favored the expansion of WGFS.

Despite the expansion of the field in the last two decades, and the public climate of acceptance and recognition of the importance of gender as an object in many disciplines and institutions [40] (p. 201), a recent systematic analysis of the incorporation of WGFS into HE curricula in Portugal revealed the still incipient and accessory nature of this field of study in the country’s curricular structures [3]. This feature is typical of the earliest phases of the field’s institutional incorporation [41,42]. Examples of integrating WGFS into HE curricula include establishing specific degree programs or courses dedicated to gender studies, incorporating gender perspectives into existing courses or modules, using course literature and other teaching materials that address gender issues, including gender criteria in teaching awards, and increasing the visibility of women in authorship, scientific outputs, and bibliographic references. The study showed that, in general, gender is not part of the knowledge proposed by HEIs in Portugal and is largely absent from the formal curriculum in most institutions: only around a third of institutions (and 5% of degree programs) integrate WGFS into their formal curriculum. The analysis also revealed an understanding of gender knowledge as marginal and complementary, as evidenced by the tendency for the WGFS offer to be optional (*ibidem*), which is not exclusive to the national context [5,43,44]. The current situation results also from the Bologna reform of higher education curricula since 2006, which shortened study cycles and led to the disappearance of curricular units or the integration of their contents into others [45].

Despite the vigor of the initiatives to strengthen the disciplinary legitimacy of WGFS, reflected in particular in the strong weight of WGFS on offer in autonomous/independent study programs in the total curricular offer of this field [3], they are still eminently individual and are not the result of institutional policies and strategies designed for this purpose, as was remarked by several authors [8–10,45,46]. We can identify several reasons why this dynamic is still in place. The lack of disciplinary legitimacy/autonomy is evidenced by the need to anchor WGFS degree programs to traditional disciplines in the accreditation process by official bodies. The absence of bachelor programs in the training offer and the absence, with one exception, of tenured positions reserved for WGFS in universities [3] perpetuate the dependency and precariousness of individual initiatives.

In this context, the initiative to implement GEPs in Portuguese HEIs emerges as particularly relevant for defining institutional strategies, objectives, and actions to strengthen WGFS.

3. Materials and Methods

In this article, we pursue a multimethod approach to gain a comprehensive understanding of the (potential) contribution of GEPs to strengthening the presence of WGFS in curricula and pedagogical practices at HEIs. The study’s documentary corpus is made up of data from GEPs in implementation, semi-structured interviews with 27 lecturers in WGFS study cycles, and a questionnaire web survey of 118 lecturers in courses that fall within this area of studies or integrate gender aspects into their curricular units.

3.1. Documentary Analysis: Gender Equality Plans

The GEPs in implementation were collected through a desk survey on websites of HEIs in Portugal (97 at the time of data collection, in September 2023). This online search identified 38 HEIs with active GEPs, corresponding to 39% of the universe of HEIs.

GEPs are more prevalent in public HEIs, covering 82% of institutions (see Table 1). In seven out of the ten private institutions with plans, a single GEP encompasses multiple institutions designed to connect all the subsidiary institutions. University institutions show greater receptivity to this type of strategy for institutional change, with more than half having a GEP in place, compared to less than one-third of polytechnics. University institutions, which tend to be more research-oriented, rely more heavily on competitive funding for research, particularly from European-level funding instruments. These instruments have served as strong catalysts for the implementation of GEPs in Europe, especially in national

contexts where plan implementation is not mandatory, as is the case of Portugal. The significant weight of scientific and academic reputation for universities, which strive for research excellence and scholarly recognition, impacts their funding and attractiveness [47]. This drive can lead them to adopt and implement GEPs more readily as part of their strategic objectives. Polytechnics, on the other hand, emphasize vocational and professional training, which might prioritize teaching and immediate practical outcomes over long-term strategic changes like GEP implementation. However, the recent trend towards blurring the binary or dual systems in Portuguese higher education [48]—between professionally oriented institutions like polytechnics and research-oriented institutions like universities—may influence the growing interest and need for polytechnics to develop GEPs as they evolve to incorporate more research activities and compete for similar funding opportunities. With the option of awarding doctoral degrees since 2023, the adoption of GEPs may become increasingly relevant and necessary. Furthermore, the greater institutionalization of gender studies in universities [3], through dedicated departments or autonomous study programs or research groups, may also have an impact. This institutional support can facilitate the implementation of GEPs by providing a foundation of expertise and advocacy within the institution, enhancing the credibility and perceived importance of GEPs, and encouraging broader acceptance and commitment from the university community.

Table 1. HEIs with GEPs in implementation, by education sector and subsystem (2023).

	No. HEIs	No. HEIs with GEP	% HEIs with GEP
Private	63	10	15.9
Public	34	28	82.4
Polytechnic	62	19	30.6
University	35	19	54.3
TOTAL	97	38	39.2

Almost all the GEPs (42 out of 45) were published after the EC’s requirement that HEIs have a GEP to access its main research funding program came into force in May 2022 (see Table 2).

Table 2. GEPs under implementation, by year of approval/publication.

	No.	%
2020	1	2.2
2021	11	24.4
2022	27	60.0
2023	6	13.3
Total	45	100.0

Documentary analysis and content analysis of the GEPs were conducted with the aim of extensively and intensively characterizing the objectives, strategies, and lines of action specifically aimed at strengthening the integration of WGFS in curricula and teaching practices, that are present in the institutions’ formal policy provisions. We focused primarily on the textual elements and examined the characteristics of the language used, analyzing both the explicit content and the contextual nuances within the text [49].

3.2. Semi-Structured Individual Interviews

Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with two groups of lecturers: founders (proposers and first coordinators) of WGFS programs and lecturers of WGFS courses. The first group comprised 12 coordinators/founders, ensuring representation from all 18 postgraduate programs created in Portugal (some individuals interviewed

coordinate/founded more than one program). All the program founders and current program coordinators were invited to participate.

The second group consisted of 15 lecturers (13 women and 2 men) from the 7 active WGFS degree programs, selected to ensure representation from all programs, while also achieving diversity in terms of sex, age, and academic position. The individual interviews, conducted by two members of the research team, took place between November 2022 and May 2023, mostly online via the ZOOM platform, lasting on average 60 to 90 min. The script was drawn up by the team based on the literature review and research questions, incorporating some of the results obtained through the desk research on the extent and modalities of gender mainstreaming in HE curricula. In this article, we focus the analysis on the findings related to the part of the interviews centered on the potential of the plans to leverage structural change in the institutions regarding the integration of gender-responsive teaching in higher education. While following a structured approach, questions were open and flexible, allowing participants to freely discuss their perspectives and experiences regarding the relevance, effectiveness, and impact of mechanisms for mainstreaming gender dimension in HEIs [50]. The specific questions addressed whether the institution had an equality plan, who was/is involved in its design, the interviewees' perceptions of its design, implementation, and outcomes, their views on the plan's transformative potential, and any recommendations they had for improving the plan's effectiveness.

All the interviews were fully transcribed. Thematic content analysis of interview data utilized thematic categorization, reflecting key ideas conveyed [51]. This mixed categorization process [52] (pp. 313–314) combined predefined categories/themes based on literature review with categories induced from data analysis. Since we were dealing not only with themes and sub-themes borrowed from previous research but also with inductively constructed categories, the analysis process was iterative, involving several rounds of revision, correction, and improvement to refine the categories and our understanding of the data. MaxQDA software assisted this process, making the complexity and dynamism of building and analyzing the data corpus more manageable. Using this tool made it possible to organize and streamline the processes of categorizing, coding, controlling, searching, and “questioning” the data, facilitating the analytical and interpretative process. All the research team members participated in the data collection and coding. The data were first analyzed individually, reading the transcripts several times to understand the position and experiences of each interviewee. We then formulated a set of questions, constituting the core codes, partly coinciding with questions that were part of the initial interview script, and supplemented by others suggested by the interviewees' discourses.

3.3. Questionnaire Survey

A questionnaire survey was applied to two groups: (i) lecturers of courses in the field of WGFS, regardless of the study cycle, and/or (ii) lecturers integrating gender aspects into the courses' syllabi. The survey base consisted of 342 lecturers identified from surveys mapping the availability of specific WGFS courses and programs incorporating gender aspects. This mapping, conducted by desk research of the websites of all HEIs in Portugal, covered the academic years 2020/2021 and 2021/2022.

Survey invitations were sent to lecturers' email addresses. The questionnaire was administered electronically via a secure online link using the LimeSurvey platform. The survey was open from 11 April to 26 May 2023. Of the 342 lecturers invited, 118 responded, representing a slightly above-average response rate for online surveys (34.5%). To ensure data validity and reliability, a pilot test of the questionnaire was conducted with a small sample of participants, addressing issues and refining the questionnaire for clarity and understanding.

The survey instrument was developed through a comprehensive review of relevant theoretical and empirical literature on gender mainstreaming and GEP implementation in higher education, which provided foundational insights that guided item selection. Insights from preliminary qualitative interviews with WGFS lecturers not only refined the survey

but also enriched the development of nuanced questions, highlighting the contributions of GEPs to strengthening WGFS in teaching. Preliminary results from qualitative interviews with lecturers of WGFS refined our survey and provided valuable insights into the perceived contributions of GEPs to strengthening WGFS in teaching. These insights directly influenced the development of nuanced survey questions. The questionnaire was organized into four thematic sections: A. Professional characterization; B. Gender mainstreaming practices in teaching; C. Opinions on gender mainstreaming in curricula; and D. Perspectives on the institutional context. In this paper, we focus on a specific question from the last section regarding opinions on GEPs, which benefited from insights gained from prior empirical studies (specifically, [18,23]). Ten ordinal qualitative variables were analyzed using an ordinal measurement scale ranging from 1 to 6, where 1 denoted strongly disagree, 2 disagree, 3 partly disagree, 4 agree, 5 partly agree, and 6 strongly agree. Quantitative data collected through the questionnaires were analyzed using SPSS statistical software (version 26), employing various descriptive and inferential statistical analyses including frequency analyses, contingency analyses, and factor and regression analysis techniques.

Drawing on the findings from both the survey and interviews, our objective was to delve into the perspectives and insights of key players involved in teaching about gender issues regarding the contribution of GEPs to strengthening WGFS in HE.

The research protocol was approved by the Ethics Committee, ensuring compliance with ethical guidelines. Informed consent was obtained from participants, integrating the principles of informed consent, privacy, and confidentiality throughout the research process. Participants were informed of the study's purpose, confidentiality procedures, voluntary participation, and their right to withdraw at any time. Consent was requested as part of both the questionnaire and interview procedures.

3.4. Mixed-Methods Sequential Explanatory Design: Integrating Quantitative and Qualitative Approaches

To effectively address the research objectives, our study was influenced by the principles of mixed-methods sequential explanatory designs, as suggested by Creswell et al. [53]. This approach typically utilizes extensive quantitative analysis to provide a general understanding of the research problem, followed by intensive qualitative analysis to deepen our understanding of these initial findings.

Initially, we conducted descriptive, bivariate, and multivariate statistical analyses of institutional GEPs and survey questionnaire data from a broad sample of lecturers. This phase aimed to ascertain the prevalence of reported practices, processes, and representations, establishing patterns and typologies of representations and practices in gender mainstreaming in higher education. We selected indicators related to GEPs from the survey and applied factor analysis to uncover latent factors, resulting in three distinct perspectives: optimistic, skeptical, and simplistic.

Subsequently, we performed qualitative analysis, where we conducted interpretative analysis of transcriptions from semi-structured individual interviews with lecturers from EMGF programs. This analysis was informed by the broad typology defined through the factor analysis. The qualitative data were crucial for elaborating on and explaining the quantitative results, providing in-depth insights into the participants' perspectives and experiences on GEPs' contribution to the integration of WGFS in the educational content provided by HEIs. To visualize and further clarify the relationships among the identified themes/topics and sub-themes, a thematic matrix was developed.

This matrix, detailed in Figure 1, organizes the main and secondary themes, illustrating the patterns that emerged from the interview data. The analysis explored through this matrix was triangulated with the quantitative results in the Results and Discussion section, ensuring a comprehensive and integrated presentation of our findings.

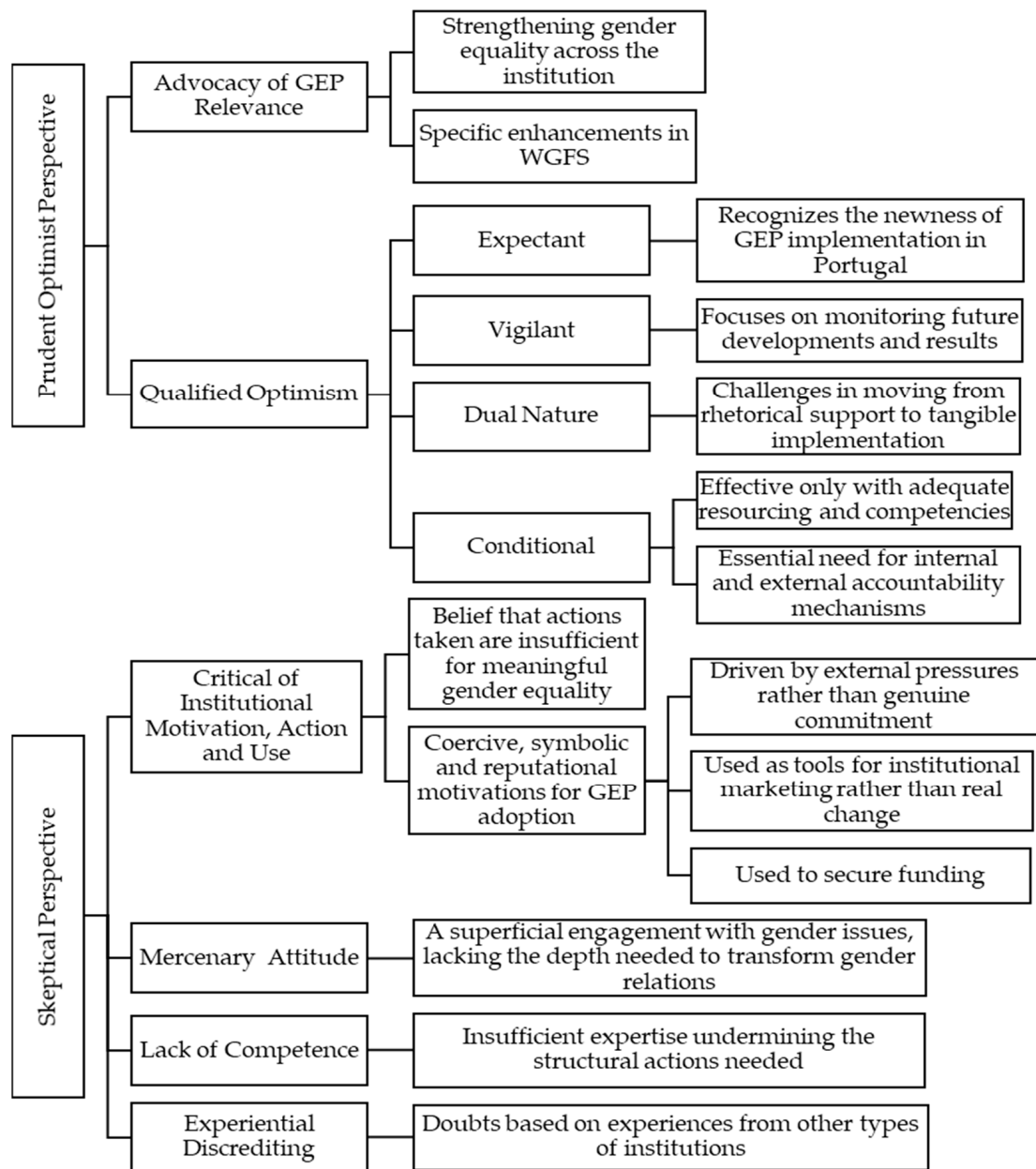


Figure 1. Thematic matrix: Perceptions of GEP Contributions to Gender Mainstreaming in Higher Education (The simplistic perspective identified through factor analysis was not found in the interviews with the smaller group of founders/coordinators/lecturers in WGFS programs).

This sequential methodology allowed for the integration of quantitative and qualitative findings. Bivariate and multivariate analyses identified complex relationships and patterns that were further contextualized and interpreted using qualitative data. The strength of the quantitative analysis results was complemented by in-depth explanatory descriptions obtained through qualitative analysis, primarily from interviews.

With this methodological strategy, we carried out integrative triangulation, which was considered the most suitable way to relate parts, segments, and layers of the social phenomenon under study. The role of each part in the whole, at both meso (institutional) and micro (individual) levels, was defined according to the theory of structural change [30].

This comprehensive analysis, combining both qualitative and quantitative data, facilitated an in-depth exploration of the complex relationships between the implementation of GEPs and the enhancement of EMGF in curricula and pedagogical practices at HEIs.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Building Profiles of Representations about GEPs

To discern trends in representations of GEPs in HEIs and their implications for widening WGFS, we employed exploratory statistical procedures. We began by selecting indicators related to GEPs from the survey and applied factor analysis to uncover latent factors.

Three latent factors emerged, explaining the relational structure of perceptions and conceptions of GEPs, collectively accounting for 65% of the total variance in the data (the factors underwent Varimax rotation to enhance interpretability, resulting in a clearer factor structure) (see Table 3). These factors were labeled to reflect their dominant themes.

Table 3. Factor weights of each statement in the 3 retained factors, eigenvalue, and % of variance explained by each factor.

Statements about Institutional Initiative/GEP	Factor		
	A—Optimistic	B—Skeptical	C—Simplistic
1. It’s something that HEIs create, but it’s not part of their operational priorities	−0.002	0.661	−0.116
2. It is an important mechanism for integrating gender content into curricula	0.629	0.218	0.222
3. It is easily implemented	0.035	−0.073	0.893
4. It’s irrelevant to raising teachers’ awareness of gender inequalities	−0.680	0.176	0.403
5. It is a tool for assessing inequalities in terms of gender, sexual orientation, racial/ethnic origin, and religion	0.763	0.082	−0.179
6. It creates a more favorable internal environment for the development of WGFS in teaching and research	0.857	−0.145	0.137
7. When evaluating educational institutions, the Higher Education Accreditation and Evaluation Agency (A3ES) should include gender equality in the criteria	0.541	0.265	−0.381
8. It is an important mechanism for reviewing and transforming institutional procedures and practices that reproduce inequalities in higher education careers	0.860	0.111	0.037
9. The institution where I teach has been silent on initiatives to integrate gender dimension into teaching	0.156	0.774	0.111
10. My institution has been silent on initiatives to support the integration of gender dimension into research projects	−0.007	0.825	−0.076
Eigenvalue	3.233	1.911	1.238
Variance explained	32.3%	19.1%	12.4%

Note: Factor weights greater than 0.3 (highlighted in green) and less than −0.3 (highlighted in orange) in absolute value are shaded to indicate significance.

The first factor, termed the “optimistic perspective”, accounted for 32.3% of the total variance and highlighted positive views on GEPs. This factor underscored their potential to deepen inequality diagnoses (statement 5), transform institutional structures (statement 8), and enhance WGFS in teaching and research (statements 6 and 2). It also emphasized the importance of external requirements, as political legislation, for gender inclusion in HEIs (statement 7).

The second factor, labeled the “skeptical view”, explained 19.1% of the variance. It presented a critical outlook on GEP implementation and its impact on WGFS. While expressing disbelief in GEP effectiveness (statements 1, 9, and 10), it acknowledged the importance of accreditation requirements for gender integration (statement 7). This factor contains some ambivalence, as it does not exclude all the potential for change associated with GEPs, specifically regarding the integration of gender issues into formal curricula (statement 2). The high factor weights of statements about certain institutional negligence in GEP implementation, along with moderate weights of statements recognizing the importance

and potential positive contributions of such instruments, suggest that skepticism is primarily directed towards institutional actions (or inaction) rather than GEPs themselves as mechanisms for promoting WGFS in teaching and research. It is notorious that there is a kind of suspicion that underlies the answers that this factor aggregates.

The third factor, termed the “simplistic perspective”, explained 12.4% of the variance and portrayed a nuanced view of GEPs, blending aspects of positivity and indifference. This perspective viewed GEP implementation favorably (“[The GEP] Is easily implemented”) but showed indifference to its impact on teacher awareness (statement 4) and resistance to including gender equality as a criterion in Higher Education Accreditation and Evaluation Agency (A3ES) evaluations. There seems to be a certain kind of disparagement implicit here, covering both negative and positive attitudes towards the effectiveness of GEPs.

This analysis revealed diverse patterns reflecting the varying perspectives concerning GEPs in HEIs that possibly also show how and which institutional changes are occurring. We then conducted additional statistical analyses, such as correlation and regression analyses, to delve deeper into these perspectives and their correlations with pertinent sociodemographic and professional variables. These profiles were further enriched by insights from interviews, for a more nuanced understanding. The composition of the profiles of perspectives and representations on GEPs was informed by the results of the interviews, as summarized in Figure 1 presented in the Materials and Methods section. This figure outlines the main and secondary themes from the interview data, which are detailed and triangulated with the survey results below, enabling a comprehensive and nuanced analysis of each profile.

4.1.1. Cautious Optimistic Perspective

The **optimistic, enthusiastic, or advocate perspective** is prominent not just among survey respondents who teach WGFS courses or incorporate gender dimensions into their teaching but also among the founders/coordinators of WGFS postgraduate programs and those responsible for specific courses in those programs.

The survey data, detailed in Appendix A, indicate an overall strong endorsement for the relevance of GEPs in strengthening gender equality in HE. Responses consistently exceed the midpoint (3.5) of the Likert scale, with particularly robust support for the role of GEPs in diagnosing inequalities and driving institutional change. Average values for these aspects surpass 5, with a mode of 6. However, while support for GEPs’ relevance to WGFS in teaching and research remains strong, it is slightly less pronounced, with average values just below 5 and a mode of 5.

The **advocacy for the relevance of these plans** in enhancing gender equality across institutions, and specifically within the realm of WGFS, is evident in the discourse of interviewed WGFS lecturers. Interviewees emphasize the potential of these plans as both a stronghold and a catalyst for institutional intervention—a dimension historically absent in Portuguese HEIs. By integrating this aspect into institutional agendas, formal planning, and management processes at the organizational level, a **foundation is established for legitimizing pro-gender equality action within institutions** and addressing community demands related to gender issues.

We know that a plan doesn’t solve everything. (...) it’s not the plan that’s going to change everything, but the plan is an instrument for change and it’s important that it exists. It makes these issues visible in a way, puts them on the agenda, which is an important thing, and then this change has to be achieved with everyone. (WGFS Program lecturer, 12)

However, the optimism towards GEPs reflected in this profile is often tempered, reflecting a cautious optimism akin to that evidenced in other studies [40]. That is why we categories this tempered optimism under the label of “**cautious optimism**”, encompassed by several attributes or categories.

Firstly, it embodies an **anticipatory optimism**, as the **history of GEP implementation in Portuguese HEIs is relatively brief**. Consequently, many academics feel it is premature

to gauge the full impact of these initiatives on institutional structures, culture, gender profiles, and the quality of implementation. Thus, there exists a **vigilant optimism** regarding **future developments in implementing, monitoring, and evaluating the plans** and their potential.

The plan is very recent, it was approved just this month, so we still don't know how... But we do know that... I'm aware that it was drawn up precisely because of this external constraint (...) Let's see its effects. We know that in terms of equality, progress is made a lot due to external constraints, legislation, policies, guidelines, and Portugal is a very good student, it's a country that, in fact, follows many guidelines and has very strong policies in terms of legislation. We have great legislation, but then, as everyone knows, the real problem is implementing it, putting it into practice. (WGFS Program lecturer, 13)

The lack of a consolidated history in GEP implementation leads to a **dual optimism**, as expressed by one university lecturer who remarked, "the potential and importance of GEPs is one thing, but their actual implementation and impact is another". This duality characterizes the discourse of many interviewees, who express enthusiasm for GEPs' relevance alongside a critical awareness of the need to translate institutional commitments into a consequent narrative:

But it's always a problem with plans whether it's just a narrative or whether it's consequent. (...) (...)I hope it's not just rhetoric. There's debate, there's a network set up... (Founder/coordinator of WGFS program, 1)

Within this optimistic perspective, **the dichotomies of policy versus practice, rhetoric versus implementation**, commonly discussed in literature on gender equality initiatives in academia [13,30], do not negate the initiative's timeliness and relevance, nor the change it brings about, as seen in the following excerpts.

I understand the discussion, but the discussion is a bit like regulating quotas. It's exactly the same thing. Is it cosmetic or is it profound? Do we want it to be cosmetic or deep? And from a certain point of view, in the abstract, I could even say "oh, the quotas". (...) The fact that the plan exists inevitably brings about change (...) People must at least look like they care about these issues. If they start off looking like it, then they'll convert or if they never convert, but as well as looking like it, they have to show some practical work. (WGFS Program lecturer, 9)

In this profile, there is **widespread recognition that external factors drive the creation of GEPs in HEIs**, constituting a process of coercive isomorphism [54]. This recognition coexists, sometimes with tension, with the belief that regulatory mechanisms such as legislation, public policies, funding requirements, and accreditation/evaluation are crucial for stimulating institutional action and transformation. This recognition is prevalent throughout this profile, particularly evident in the discourse of founders/coordinators of WGFS postgraduate programs.

But there is an evolution, very slow, but there is some. And I have some hope, because we always operate in this coercive isomorphism, that this obligation to have equality plans, for funding, will change, that it will introduce some more transformative force from the point of view of the institutions. (...) I always like to have some optimism about the processes underway, but I also know that when there is no coercion, when there is no imposition, things are often diluted. That's why I was talking earlier about a directive or a superior guideline on accreditation. I think that if it doesn't happen that way, it really will take a long time to happen. (founder/coordinator of WGFS Program, 1)

The belief that GEPs should be incorporated into educational institution evaluations is widely shared among survey respondents, as evidenced by their strong agreement with the statement "In the evaluation of educational institutions, the Higher Education Accreditation

and Evaluation Agency (A3ES) should include GE in the criteria” (mean of 4.6, median of 5, and mode of 6). This attitude was also reflected in the factor we identified as the “optimistic view”, indicating that the consideration of GE in evaluation criteria is a significant aspect within this construct.

A key aspect of the cautious optimism observed in interviews is its **conditional nature**. While the approval and publication of GEPs are considered important steps, they are viewed as insufficient for effectively transforming gender regimes within institutional frameworks. According to WGFS lecturers interviewed for this profile, the validity and effectiveness of GEPs are contingent upon two essential factors: the **establishment of monitoring and accountability mechanisms** (both internal and external) and the **provision of resources** (financial, human) and **gender competence**.

The emphasis on external accountability mechanisms underscores the need for national-level legislation and policies to promote GEP development, monitoring, and outcomes assessment, enacted by government bodies, funding agencies, and organizations in driving top leadership commitment to addressing gender inequalities in HEIs [17,18,21,27,32]. Lecturers stress the importance of integrating gender issues in the requirements for accessing science funding and in HEI accreditation/evaluation processes.

We have the national plans themselves, which I think are very interesting public tools. And I think the question of the equality plans that the institutions themselves must have, the question of A3ES, now, of evaluation.... What would be important for me would be for the very funding that exists in Portugal for research to valorize this issue of Gender Studies. (WGFS Program lecturer, 13)

A regulatory framework is crucial for supporting initiatives, serving as a foundational structural element for initiating sustainable change, despite the risk of being perceived as a formal requirement with limited impact [55,56].

Internally, the establishment of robust monitoring and evaluation systems for GEPs is deemed critical for measuring results, ensuring implementation commitment, and fostering transparency and accountability within institutions.

And the institutions answer to whom? So, who do they answer to when they plan? They don't have to report on its implementation. But even so, I mean, at least we could see a network that brings together people from the various organizational units. The pressure should also be applied within each institution. (founder/coordinator of WGFS Program, 1)

However, while monitoring mechanisms are important, the availability of resources, particularly gender-specific competencies in plan design, implementation, and evaluation, by gender specialists is considered central to GEP effectiveness:

The equality plan is being made by people who have the right positions, feminists, etc. (...) Ours is being made by people from X [University] who have always worked on gender, either in psychology or sociology, ... (...) We're a group of people who have always been linked to gender, so we don't just fall over ourselves, do we? This plan for equality is being made with the people who work on gender at the university. (founder/coordinator of WGFS Program, 5)

4.1.2. Skeptical Perspective

The skeptical perspective is characterized by a critical and generally **pessimistic outlook on the implementation of GEPs in HEIs**. While this perspective is less common, it is founded on a widespread recognition of inadequate institutional action concerning gender mainstreaming and the enhancement of WGFS.

Survey data, as shown in Appendix A, reflect moderate to low levels of support for statements critiquing institutional initiatives. For instance, the statement “[The GEP] is something that HEIs create, but which is not part of their operational priorities” garnered majority agreement with a mean value of 4.2 and a mode of 4. Conversely, support for statements regarding institutions’ proactive efforts to integrate gender diversity into

teaching and research projects is weaker. Although most respondents tend to disagree with these statements (mean value of 3.1 and 3, respectively, median of 3, mode of 2), more than a third of lecturers expressed some level of agreement.

Unlike the previous profile, where the duality of GEP rhetoric and practice is expressed through conditional or expectant optimism, the skeptical perspective is marked by a **pessimistic view toward the effectiveness of these institutional change mechanisms**. There is a perception that institutional action is insufficient in addressing inequalities and promoting gender equality. For instance, one respondent conveyed this opinion in the questionnaire:

Institutions use gender equality mainly to appear democratic and modern, but they're not at all. It's only equality on paper. (Assistant Professor, public university education, 56 years old)

Although a minority, a pessimistic and skeptical perspective on the effectiveness of GEPs was also evident in the interviews with WGFS lecturers, reflected in positions that **recognize an ambivalence between the discourse on GEPs and their enforcement in consistent action**. Our documentary analysis of the actions and measures included in the GEPs (see Table 4) supports this view, highlighting concerns about the real transformative capacity of the proposed activities and measures, as well as the instrumentalization of GEPs within the context of neoliberal competition in the HE market. From this viewpoint, the adoption of GEPs, **primarily driven by mimetic, coercive, and reputational pressures [45], is often seen as an imposition or inevitability, lacking a genuine commitment to structural change**. Instead, it is perceived as consisting of one-off, symbolic measures:

Table 4. Types of Measures for Integrating the Gender Dimension into HEI Plans (N = 29).

Types of Measures	No. Measures
Gender in teaching content	
Integrating the gender dimension into degree programs/courses	18
Development of gender-specific modules/courses	15
Training and capacity building	
Training for teachers/course coordinators	9
Guides/guidelines for gender mainstreaming	3
Communication and awareness raising	
Raising awareness/dissemination among students/academic community	6
Teacher awareness and dissemination efforts	5
Gender in teaching methods	
Incorporation of inclusive language	1
Introduction of new pedagogical methodologies/models	1
Change in gender-relevant provisions and procedures	
Implementation of gender criteria for teaching awards	1
Integrating gender dimension into student satisfaction surveys	1
Structures for integrating gender dimension into teaching (e.g., working groups, committees)	1

We'll definitely have an equality plan. It's fool proof because without it you won't be able to get funding. It will probably produce some results too. I don't doubt that, but until I see it, I have some doubts about the degree of integration and effectiveness that this plan will have. Because we need something more in-depth here, not just one-off measures, and I don't see that happening. But I hope I'm wrong and, in a year or two, I'll be giving good news. (...) As a friend of mine says, "systems inertia is very powerful". (...) There are other things that always

seem to be more pressing, and so that is always secondary. (founder/coordinator of WGFS Program, 4)

This apparently prescriptive culture may also be a response to the regulatory and coercive institutional isomorphism imposed by the state, combined with the need for institutions to find financial support for their survival and competitiveness [48].

The absence of institutional commitment to implementing GEPs, a key feature of this profile, is evident in the **lack of mechanisms ensuring their effective operationalization**. For example, a WGFS lecturer highlights a significant limitation of the plans—the absence of additional resources allocated to their implementation:

The problem, as with everything, is this: we're good at making laws and plans. (...) When we look at a plan like this, the first thing that comes to mind is: the additional work, the additional burden that this is going to bring to our agendas. (...) In terms of defining the objective, the concern, recognizing the problem and the need for action, everything is fine. The problem is allocating resources to it. (WGFS Program lecturer, 8)

The **lack of institutional commitment**, particularly from top leadership, is widely discussed in the literature on GEP implementation as a major obstacle to their effectiveness [17,18,21,27,55,57] and has profound implications for resource allocation and collective mobilization within institutions. As Clavero and Galligan emphasize, “without this commitment, institutional change is unlikely to be achieved, since GEPs can easily become a bureaucratic box-ticking exercise” [30] (p. 1124). In such circumstances, interventions for gender equality are essentially viewed as tools for “marketized benchmarking” [56] (p. 890), often influenced by international mimetic and normative processes of isomorphism, through mechanisms like global rankings and benchmarks, along with a growing desire to imitate “elite” leading institutions [27] (p. 3).

Two common elements in skeptical discourses relate to the superficial knowledge of initiatives and processes within the university context and **the skepticism based on experiences in other types of institutions**, such as municipalities, where GEP implementation history is longer.

Universities must have an equality plan. Yeah, well, so do local councils and we know how it works, don't we? Because I can have a plan for equality and that doesn't mean that it will then materialize in concrete actions, in a change in people's ways of thinking and acting and in concrete policies that allow for gender equality. And I don't see that happening. (...) I may be wrong, and something very well-structured and very integrated may be being prepared, but there is still too much of this idea that this is a job that must be done. (WGFS Program lecturer, 15)

Drawing on the context of municipal plan implementation, a factor contributing to the skepticism in this profile is the perceived **lack of gender competencies** and the **lack of regulation** associated with designing and implementing GEPs in institutions, a deficit that undermines structural action for equality.

I know because I've witnessed and been able to observe teams—I'm not talking about the university, but maybe the university too, I'm not saying it's not—but teams at the local authority level with projects approved to implement plans, where the people in charge of it don't even know their names. The likelihood of these equality plans being the biggest crock of shit on the face of the earth and just money thrown away is high. I think that, at the moment, if in a way it was important in political terms—now there is no money for anything if there are no gender equality concerns—that on the one hand is good, but if people think that this can be done without any kind of regulation, they must be dreaming. (founder/coordinator of WGFS Program, 5)

Linked to the perception of a lack of competencies is the belief in the **prevalent instrumental, opportunistic, and symbolic appropriation of GEPs to access funding opportunities and enhance reputation**, both institutionally and individually.

There has been growing funding linked to equality plans and equality areas. Particularly in municipalities, in other contexts. And many people weren't sensitized to equality issues and didn't want to work on equality issues. But money was coming in. So, as European money was coming in, people started working. (WGFS Program lecturer, 10)

The **"mercenary attitude"**, as described by the coordinator/founder of a WGFS program fitting this profile, has been fostered by funding requirements, leading to individuals lacking knowledge of gender dynamics becoming involved in the feminist agenda for institutional change. This results in a **superficial and restricted application of gender concepts and approaches, lacking potential to transform gender relations**.

Why are universities making plans for equality now? Because of the European requirement, otherwise, they won't get funding. (...) (...) Nobody knows anything, but everyone has something to say. (interview with founder/coordinator of WGFS Program, 6)

Utilitarian and instrumental approaches to gender equality interventions have given rise to a "feminist market" [58], where feminist commitments to public policy agendas are increasingly mediated by private sector organizations according to market logic. This trend integrates gender equality mechanisms into neoliberal market reform, undermining transformative and feminist definitions of gender mainstreaming, which require redistribution, civil society participation, and policy reorientation [59].

4.1.3. Simplistic/Passive/Resistant Perspective

The simplistic or passive perspective is the least common among WGFS lecturers and/or those integrating gender dimensions into their teaching and is virtually absent, as expected, among interviewees from the smaller group of founders/coordinators/lecturers in WGFS programs. This profile is statistically associated with older respondents at lower levels of the teaching career, such as assistant professors, and we understand that it can be interpreted as a sort of resistance to equality policies [60].

In the survey, the key factor shaping this profile, "[The GEP] is easily implemented", garnered just over one-third of respondents' agreement, with average agreement values of 3.2 on a scale of 1 to 6 (with a mode and median of 3). The statement "[The GEP] is irrelevant to raising teachers' awareness of gender inequalities" received even lower levels of agreement, with a mean of 2.4 and a mode and median of 2. Conversely, the statement that tends to distance itself from the passive/simplistic view, "In the evaluation of educational institutions, the Higher Education Accreditation and Evaluation Agency (A3ES) should include GE in the criteria", had low levels of disagreement, with only 15 percent of respondents opposing it.

The benevolent attitude, typical of this profile, seems to reflect a superficial understanding and/or distortion of the assumptions and institutional implications associated with implementing an instrument of structural change for equality. This is evident in its ambiguity, being optimistic about implementation possibilities and institutional prioritization, but less enthusiastic about potential impacts on individuals and institutions. The view of GEP implementation as lightweight and the belief in voluntarism, initiative, and institutional commitment to equality action are expressed in the rejection of the relevance of framing these devices within external regulatory mechanisms, such as accreditation and evaluation of HEIs. This perspective is grounded in the pleading of institutional autonomy and the importance of voluntary change for sustainability and credibility of intervention in this field.

The stances adopted by this profile reveal an attitude of “trivializing gender equality”, identified in the literature on GEP implementation in academic contexts as resistance to gender mainstreaming in HEIs [44,60]

4.2. Limited Strategies and Lines of Action for Integrating the Gender Perspective into Curricula and Teaching Practices

In this section, we delve into the strategies and action lines aimed at reinforcing WGFS within the formal policy frameworks of institutions for equality and gender, particularly within GEPs. Our analysis not only maps out the objectives and measures for integrating gender dimensions into teaching but also assesses their clarity and consistency.

The integration of measures in this realm of action encompasses the majority (more than two-thirds) of the 45 active plans in Portuguese institutions. However, in most plans, the level of materialization and operability of the indicated measures is notably limited. This limitation extends to both delineating and guiding action, as well as to tracking and monitoring implementation progress and evaluating the attained results (see Figure 2).

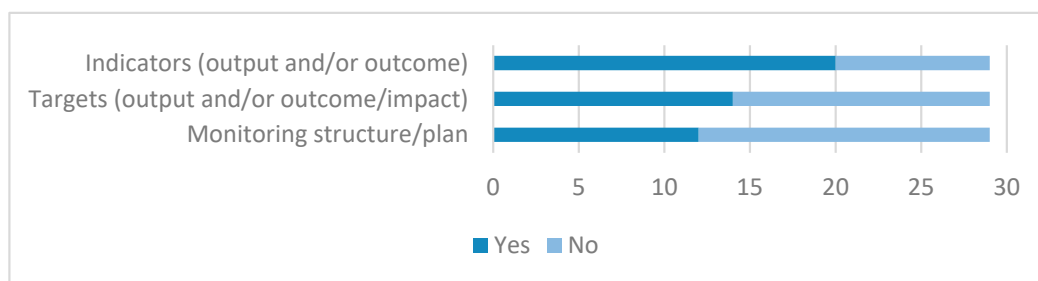


Figure 2. Provision for Monitoring/Accountability Mechanisms in the GEPs (N = 29).

Many proposed actions within GEPs are, indeed, often stated vaguely, framed as objectives rather than specific measures. Only 15 out of 29 plans include objectives or measures accompanied by indicators and targets to assess their fulfillment. In an additional five GEPs, measures are accompanied by indicators but lack associated targets. Moreover, merely 12 plans outline a consistent monitoring and evaluation structure or plan, delineating the mechanisms and responsible parties for overseeing the process. Overall, only 10 of the 29 GEPs feature elements constituting a robust internal monitoring and accountability system, which offers some assurance of internal accountability. The weak operational effectiveness of the actions included in the GEPs provides materiality to the **cautious expectations** of the lecturers surveyed in the study, whose **optimism is tempered by concerns about the actual implementation and monitoring of these plans**.

Among the array of measures aimed at reinforcing gender diversity in education outlined in the plans (see Table 4), promoting the integration of gender dimensions into the content of subject programs emerges as the most frequently identified action, encompassing almost two-thirds of the plans covering this thematic area. However, as already underlined, these measures often lack concrete operationalization.

The definition of the measures frequently lacks concrete action verbs, such as create, realize, or do. Instead, we find soft action verbs, which we can consider to be of the order of desire, such as encourage, stimulate, and sensitize. For instance, sentences like “Raise awareness of the issue of parity through educational content” or “Introduce gender diversity into the institute’s curricula (where relevant)” lack clarity on how to effectively enact these changes in curricular content and pedagogical processes, potentially limiting their actual impact. The language used in these plans often reflects a cautious or tentative approach to gender integration, with terms like “raise awareness” and “introduce where relevant” suggesting a **lack of commitment to concrete action**. This cautious language resonates with the superficial understanding and benevolent attitude observed in the “simplistic/passive/resistant” profile, which tends to trivialize the relevance of gender equality measures. Additionally, it aligns with the concerns of the “skeptical” profile,

which highlights the **absence of institutional commitment**, viewing GEPs as potentially becoming mere **bureaucratic exercises without substantive change**.

Proposals to create specific WGFS courses, aligning with the assertion of WGFS as an autonomous field, are less common than those for the “non-explicit” integration of WGFS but are still present in more than half of the GEPs. We also found ambiguous, non-binding formulations regarding the creation of these units within the scope of this type of measure, e.g., “Evaluate the creation of cross-curricular courses or of several that could be offered annually to students in terms of inclusion and diversity”; “Encouraging the creation of courses in the areas of gender equality, inclusion, and non-discrimination”. This type of formulation reflects concerns well expressed by one of our interviewees (founder/coordinator of WGFS Program, 4) already quoted in Section 4.1.2, who questions the effectiveness of the proposed measures and the degree of transformative depth of the GEP.

Despite weaknesses in operationalizing actions and commitment to their implementation observed in both types of measures, it is important not to overlook their potential contribution to reversing the ghettoized nature of this field of study in HEIs in Portugal [3]. Concern about the marginalization of the field as a specific niche isolated from the rest of the academic curriculum is present in the statements of the WGFS program teachers interviewed, who describe the transformative potential of integrative approaches in other disciplinary fields.

I think the disadvantage of separate, independent WGFS programs is that it conveys the idea that this is an area that isn't transversal and is part of the specific interests of a 'minority'. (WGFS program founder/coordinator, 2).

Where I think these themes can have a more transformative impact is in disciplinary programs not specific to WGFS. (...) I think it's in these disciplinary courses that the transformative potential is greatest because there a question is introduced that has never been asked before. (WGFS program lecturer, 12).

Teacher training actions, essential to support any intervention in this area, and especially for the accomplishment of gender mainstreaming in different areas of study, are much less frequent and are present in less than one-third of the plans. In addition to training actions, capacity-building efforts involve, in three cases, the creation/dissemination of guides and guidelines for mainstreaming gender dimensions in education. It is common to find alternative formulations, of a more or less vague nature, to training or capacity building, which refer to raising awareness/promoting the gender perspective among lecturers (mentioned in five GEPs): e.g., “Carry out actions to raise awareness of the need to integrate topics that include gender dimension, gender, equity, equality, and diversity into curricular units”. Efforts to raise awareness of the integration of gender perspectives in teaching among a wider range of actors in the academic community (namely students or the academic community in general) are present in six plans.

Actions of a structural nature [54], with the potential to bring about long-term change, involving modifications of organizational procedures, are very uncommon. Only in two plans did we identify the implementation of gender criteria for teaching awards and integrating gender dimensions into student satisfaction surveys. The scarcity of such actions seems to **reflect a superficial engagement with gender issues**, as indicated by the perceptions and beliefs of skeptical lecturers in the field, suggesting that institutions often **propose measures without committing to substantial structural changes**. Thus, although initiatives for integrating WGFS into teaching are present in most GEPs, their soft and inconsistent character conditions the effectiveness and commitment to implementation in many HEIs. This gives consistency to the vigilant optimism that characterizes the vision of many of the lecturers, which emerges in their speeches as being conditioned by the existence of robust monitoring/evaluation systems that guarantee a basis for accountability at HEIs. On the other hand, the weakness of these systems internally highlights the importance, as clearly stressed by the experts in the field interviewed via web survey or interview, of

setting up external mechanisms for monitoring/supervising the results of the interventions proposed in the action plans.

5. Conclusions

In Portugal, the integration of WGFS into the higher education curriculum is still in its early stages [3], primarily driven by the initiatives of individual academics or small groups. The recent push for implementing GEPs in HEIs presents an opportunity to boost WGFS in curricula and pedagogical practices. In this paper, we have examined the (potential) contribution of formal institutional policies to the integration of the gender dimension in Portuguese higher education, drawing from the experiences and perspectives of those involved in integrating gender issues into teaching and analyzing institutional planning documents.

Our multimethod approach has provided a comprehensive understanding of the different perspectives on the contributions of gender equality plans to gender integration in teaching, revealing divergent visions of their role in HEIs, as well as diverse types of institutional isomorphism. These divisions were summarized into three perspectives: cautious optimism, skepticism, and simplistic. While characterized by different attitudes, optimistic or pessimistic, the first two profiles share tensions widely recognized in gender mainstreaming literature: between theory and implementation, between policy rhetoric and practice, and between expert participation and market instrumentalization [61–65]. Although the relevance and opportunity of GEPs for strengthening the WGFS agenda in HEIs is widely acknowledged, both perspectives highlight the risk of technocratic, instrumental, and symbolic appropriation as obstacles to their implementation [18,30,66,67]. Expressions of resistance to gender mainstreaming in HEIs, as identified in the literature [44,60], were found among those involved in integrating gender perspectives into teaching, particularly within the “simplistic/resistant” profile, which trivializes the relevance of gender equality in academia.

The tensions and constraints associated with the contributions of the GEPs, as reflected in the perspectives of many individuals involved in integrating gender issues into teaching, outline a vigilant optimism for the future of these mechanisms, whose history is still very recent in Portugal. Although we found a wide range of mechanisms and measures within the plans analyzed, such as the development of new gender-specific courses and programs, the integration of gender dimensions into the content of academic programs, and awareness raising/capacity building on gender-sensitive teaching, the vague formulation of these measures and weak operational effectiveness in many GEPs analyzed may reflect a lack of commitment to concrete transformation.

On the other hand, the weak prevalence of actions of a structural nature with the potential to bring about long-term change, involving modifications of organizational procedures, such as the incorporation of gender criteria into teaching and research awards, the inclusion of gender dimensions in student and teacher evaluations, and the establishment of structures such as committees and training groups to integrate gender into pedagogical processes, points to a superficial engagement with gender issues in many HEIs.

The roadmap outlined for the effectiveness of these arrangements presupposes the observation of conditions and factors that call for the mobilization of institutional means to substantiate formal commitments. Considering the information we gathered from both the documentary analysis of the GEPs and the insights from experts and program coordinators through interviews and surveys, we concluded that the allocation of resources (financial, human) and gender competencies, along with the provision of internal and external monitoring and accountability mechanisms, are fundamental. Our study highlights the critical role of gender experts [18,21,23,55,66], particularly those actively engaged in gender studies programs or courses, in designing, implementing, and monitoring/evaluating GEPs to ensure that the gender dimension in teaching moves beyond rhetorical commitments to achieve substantive, transformative impacts. By leveraging the perspectives of these privileged interlocutors, we can tackle the superficial engagement with gender issues and foster

more meaningful and lasting changes within HEIs. The analysis of the plans also reveals the inadequacy of the implementation guarantees provided at the design level of the formal policy mechanisms. This emphasizes the importance of establishing external accountability mechanisms to address the valid concerns expressed by feminist academics heard in this research, who view the current actions as more cosmetic than effective. The provision of external regulatory mechanisms to incentivize the development of GEPs and institutional accountability for their results is therefore critical to the effectiveness of these devices, as the extensive literature on the implementation of plans in HEIs has shown [18,27,32,55,56]. However, such mechanisms can promote coercive institutional isomorphism [12] rather than being grounded in epistemic recognition and specialization of knowledge, which are key factors for cultural transformation. This duality is reflected in our findings, where there is widespread recognition that external factors drive the creation of GEPs in HEIs, constituting a process of coercive isomorphism. Yet, while sometimes with tension, this recognition coexists with the belief that regulatory mechanisms such as legislation, public policies, funding requirements, and accreditation/evaluation are crucial for stimulating institutional action and transformation. While the coercive pressures of institutional isomorphism play a critical role in the adoption of GEPs, ensuring these plans lead to substantial and lasting institutional transformation requires a challenging balance with other types of (mimetic/normative) incentives, fostering genuine commitment to institutional change and epistemic recognition of gender studies. Contrary to the often-negative view of isomorphic processes, which may alter the original purposes of institutions, we argue that in this case, coercive isomorphism could have a positive impact, especially as it has been internalized to a certain extent by the national accreditation and evaluation bodies of higher education institutions.

Given the limited role that institutional-level initiatives have played in consolidating WGFS in higher education in Portugal, we argue that the (potential) contribution of GEPs to strengthening this field of study should not be underestimated. The inclusion of initiatives aimed at integrating WGFS in teaching into institutional planning instruments makes it possible to legitimize, underpin, and institutionally leverage efforts that have been essentially individual so far. The strengthening of WGFS should be seen as part of the strategy of promoting gender equality in institutions.

This study serves as an initial exploration that lays the groundwork for future analyses enriched with more robust documentary and narrative data on actual implementation and impact. Given that the majority of the GEPs in Portuguese HEIs are relatively new, our findings are primarily prospective, highlighting the preliminary assessments and cautious expectations of the lecturers surveyed, as well as the operational effectiveness of planned measures and actions included in institutional documents. As this field continues to evolve, ongoing research will be crucial to validate these initial perceptions. Longitudinal studies will be essential to thoroughly assess the effectiveness of GEPs in achieving their intended outcomes and long-term organizational and systemic impacts. This includes evaluating whether HEIs have initiated a structural cultural shift towards greater social inclusion and the eradication of stereotypes and gender-based discrimination and whether this systemic change is particularly driven by the enhanced integration of WGFS into general educational content and training. Furthermore, it is imperative to investigate whether this organizational transformation can extend beyond the confines of HEIs into the broader societal context or if the adoption of GEPs might turn out to be a superficial, unsustainable measure, potentially leveraged by neoliberal competition in the HE markets for purposes of accountability, fundraising, and reputational enhancement.

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Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, approved by the Ethics Committee of the Centre for Social Studies of the University of Coimbra (approval number 46, dated 18 May 2023).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The datasets presented in this article are not readily available because they are part of an ongoing study, and sharing them at this stage could compromise the integrity of the research. Additionally, due to technical and time limitations, the data require further processing before they can be made available. Requests to access the datasets should be directed to Mónica Lopes (monica@ces.uc.pt).

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Appendix A. Opinions on the GEPs and the Institutional Initiative to Strengthen the WGFS—Statistical Summary

Statements	Mean	SD	Median	Mode
1. It's something that HEIs create, but it's not part of their operational priorities	5.1	1	5	6
2. It is an important mechanism for integrating gender content into curricula	5.1	1.1	5	6
3. It is easily implemented	4.8	1	5	5
4. It's irrelevant to raising teachers' awareness of gender inequalities	4.8	1	5	5
5. It is a tool for assessing inequalities in terms of gender, sexual orientation, racial/ethnic origin, and religion	4.6	1	5	6
6. It creates a more favorable internal environment for the development of WGFS in teaching and research	4.2	1	4	4
7. When evaluating educational institutions, the Higher Education Accreditation and Evaluation Agency (A3ES) should include gender equality in the criteria	3.2	1	3	3
8. It is an important mechanism for reviewing and transforming institutional procedures and practices that reproduce inequalities in higher education careers	3.1	1	3	2
9. The institution where I teach has been silent on initiatives to integrate GD into teaching	3	1	3	2
10. My institution has been silent on initiatives to support the integration of GD into research projects	2.4	1	2	2

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