

European Policy Brief



EQUAL4EUROPE
GENDER EQUALITY PLANS

Lessons learned: Impartial assessment methodology

Lessons learned from the implementation of the Impartial assessment methodology for monitoring and evaluating progress of Gender Equality Plans at AHMSSBL institutions.

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Introduction

The EQUAL4EUROPE project includes the development and implementation of Gender Equality Plans (GEPs) of six European research performing institutions (RPIs) participating in the project. The six partners pertain to the disciplines Art, Humanities, Medicine, Social Sciences, Business & management and Law (AHMSSBL). Independent project partner Nehem, a consultancy company, was appointed Task 7.1 within Work Package 7 which involves developing an *impartial assessment methodology*, to monitor and evaluate the implementation of the GEPs. The impartial assessment methodology consists of a comprehensive Gender Audit Tool (GAT), including three complementary modules: Desk review; Online questionnaire and Key informant interviews. All three modules are applied to assess the implementation of each GEP in the project, resulting in a written institutional report providing insights into the current gender equality status at each institution and leading to recommendations to further improve efforts beyond the scope of the project.

Looking back on the project, we have identified some significant aspects of the process which we can indicate as lessons learned. Below, these lessons learned are listed – separated in lessons learned during data collection and lessons learned during data analysis. Lastly, some best practices are identified in relation to the entire process of implementing the impartial assessment methodology.

Lessons learned: Data collection

Since the six European RPIs participating in the project were different in size, country of origin and institutional structure, it is not possible to standardize the entire methodology as questions or documents do not all apply to each partner and may not have the same implication or meaning to partners in different countries. This led to complications in the data collection and data comparison processes, as smaller institutions, for example, do not always use the same categories as larger institutions do, have smaller amounts of people to fill in surveys and it can be harder to maintain full confidentiality regarding privacy with sex-disaggregated data. For our

impartial assessment methodology, we had to create more generalized target groups and standardized surveys for the comparability of the data and the findings that thus did not all apply to every institution in the same way. Some concrete examples from the project in relation to each GAT module:

- Desk research: The level of formalization in an institution often relates to the amount of available formalized documents or policies. Some institutions may have everything formalized and thus large datasets to analyse, whereas others have no formalized documents available to analyse.
- Online questionnaire: The amount of employees and/or students in a certain university has significant implications for the type of data that can be collected (i.e. regarding pay gaps and leave structures) and the confidentiality with which the data can be processed.
- Key informant interviews: Different ranking systems in institutions used to determine categories for research, teaching or management staff (i.e. requirements for certain job titles) led to confusion regarding the distinguished target groups as determined prior to the collection process. This meant that not all interview questions are relevant to all interviewees as the category of 'higher management' has different meanings in different institutions.

We would recommend to elaborate on the distinguished categories (i.e. higher management, and middle management) and to ask institutions to help sort interviewees into these categories. Next, when focusing on the comparability of the data, it can be recommended to consider the different structures, sizes and national contexts when finding participating institutions for a similar project.

Further, not all institutions were able to perform all the modules as identified in the impartial assessment methodology. For example, not all institutions were able to conduct a survey within the defined timeframe of the gender audit. Especially in larger institutions, this can be difficult as it may interfere with annual schedules of universities, and the strict planning they often obtain. However, the survey findings provide an important, if not crucial, aspect of the data collection which gathering experiences and data from students, staff and researchers that are not included in the interviews. Missing these datasets has significant implications for the outcomes of the assessment.

In regards to the interviews, we have learned the importance of talking to people in the right order. This is not always possible because the order is largely dependent on the availability of the respondents, and every respondent has a busy schedule. However, we often talked to (higher) management first and to other employees of the organization after, but we realized that it is important to talk to other employees before talking to higher management, to be able to get an idea of the institution, the experiences with (in)equality in the institution and to be able to check certain policy restrictions or structures with higher management later. Additionally, not all project participants were native English speakers. Interviewees were more often than not non-native English speakers (e.g. Spanish, French or Slovenian), and also the EQUAL4EUROPE partners were mostly non-native English speakers. This allows for the risk that some nuances, deeper meanings or metaphors are lost or misinterpretations happen during interviews, as well as it might be harder for people to discuss sensitive topics freely. To combat both of these challenges, we would recommend dividing the categories of interviewees throughout the week of data collection to be able to get different perspectives, and always offer the possibility of a translator present at the interviews to bridge the language barrier.

Lessons learned: Data analysis

As part of the methodology developed, we created a coding structure based structural coding, open coding, axial coding and selective coding. This approach ensures consistency throughout the coding process and gives guidance for the people conducting the analysis. However, since multiple researchers were involved in the coding process, it is difficult to maintain complete consistency between researchers and their coding techniques. As a result, the process did not completely eliminate the risk of personal biases. Therefore, we recommend to have collective training days to thoroughly discuss different codes and processes.

Next, we found complexities when comparing data from the baseline assessment and the gender audit. Both processes were performed by different partners in the project, and of the purposes of the impartial assessment methodology and comparing the data to each other, it can be recommended to make sure that the same partner conducts both assessments.

Best practices

Lastly, we also identified several best practices related to the successful execution of the impartial assessment methodology.

- Planning and scheduling the different modules of the data collection procedure well in advance. For the desk review and quantitative data collection, this is important since most data will be received from the HR department. Collecting the necessary data is often an additional workload, and a complex task because of confidentiality and privacy issues. Therefore, it is crucial to schedule and communicate clear deadlines and tasks. For the surveys, it is important to avoid survey fatigue and make sure the survey is part of a larger annual planning of the institution to avoid survey fatigue when sending out several surveys at the same time and to positively affect the expected response rate. For the interviews, it is important to schedule in advance in order to make sure that the relevant people are available to attend the in-person interviews in campus. As the success of this module is partly dependent on the availability of higher management, this will require planning ahead and clear communication.
- Involve a Gender Equality Officer or clear local contact person. Keep in contact regularly with this person. The involvement of a local contact person is considered a best practice since they are needed to coordinate the data collection processes at the local institution. Especially when an external partner conducting the audit is not from the same country as the institution, it is crucial to be in regular contact to make sure the GAT process runs smoothly: to supply the relevant data, provide insights and knowledge about the institutional structure and communication processes and to support with planning and coordination of the different modules.
- Provide alternative methods when the preferred methods (desk review, online questionnaire and key informant interviews) are not possible. For example, when one of the partner institution is unable to conduct an online questionnaire, Nehem offered the possibility to carry out focus groups as an alternative method. This will not have the exact same results as an online questionnaire, but it allows larger groups to share their experiences, answers and reactions on some key topics in a smaller period of time.
- Conducting the interviews with 2 persons. In order to overcome a possible language barrier, reduce personal biases and make sure to optimize the questions and information gained from an interview, it is important to conduct the interview with at least 2 people. It mainly allows for the division of tasks, having one person focus on asking the right questions and another to take notes and ask additional questions when necessary.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we have identified several lessons learned throughout the process of data collection and data analysis in the EQUAL4EUROPE project. At the start of the process, there was a decision made to include different institutions from different countries, with different institutional structures and sizes. This makes the comparability of data complex, but facilitates the development of broader findings for AHMSSBL institutions in Europe.

Our main takeaways include having clear and elaborate definitions of key concepts in the project (i.e. explanation of what is included in the concept ‘higher management’) and provide a detailed explanation of the organizational structure at the beginning of each institutional report. Simultaneously, it is important to provide a planning well in advance, have regular communication with a local contact person at the institution and prepare for discrepancies in the process by offering alternative methods like focus groups and the possibility of a translator during interviews. To conclude, we find that preparation is definitely one of the most important aspects of the successful implementation of the impartial assessment methodology, and should be combined with clear, detailed and structured accounts of topics, concepts and methods used to avoid confusion or irregularities in the datasets and findings.