

Intersectional policy in Research and Innovation: Translating ambitions into actionable practice

First working paper KSH3 – Intersectionality

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THIS DOCUMENT IS FOR PRACTITIONERS INVOLVED IN DESIGNING AND IMPLEMENTING INCLUSIVE, INTERSECTIONAL GEPs

1. INSPIRE Project Insights to Date

The goal of Knowledge & Support Hub 3 (KSH3) on Intersectionality is to **develop innovative knowledge and tools to address intersecting inequalities in Research & Innovation (R&I) organisations** across Europe and potentially beyond. More specifically, this hub will look at how such organisations can move from Gender Equality Plans (GEPs) and Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) interventions to inclusive intersectional GEPs fostering structural, lasting change towards intersectional equality.

Gender equality has been one of the founding principles of the European Union (EU) since 1957. However, the principle shifted over time from a restrictive economic impetus of equal pay for equal work between women and men to a wider aim of “gender mainstreaming” at all levels of an organisation. In 2022, the European Commission (EC) made GEPs an eligibility criterion for funding for all public bodies, higher education and research organisations in the EU. **GEPs are “a set of commitments and actions that aim to promote gender equality in an organisation through the process of structural change”** (European Commission 2021a).

More recently, intersectional equality policies, which expand the historical focus on tackling gender inequality to include multiple axes of inequality and their intersections, have become one of Horizon Europe’s top priorities. As stated in its Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025, its Strategic Plan for Research & Innovation 2020-2024 (European Commission 2020a; 2020b), and the 9th Framework for Research and Innovation 2021-2027, the EC increasingly considers intersectional policies as crucial for the creation of an inclusive organisational climate (Garcia and Zajicek 2022). We define **intersectional policies as equality policies that aim to address inequalities and discrimination that occur jointly along multiple, intersecting discrimination axes including gender, race, ethnicity, disability, age and sexual orientation**. These policies focus on how inequalities simultaneously operate **on the individual, organisational and structural levels**.

While there is a growing body of literature on intersectionality that deals with persisting intersecting inequalities in research organisations, much **less is known on how an intersectional approach can be incorporated into policies and practices** to ensure more inclusive Higher Education and Research (HE&R) organisations (Christoffersen 2021). Envisioning, designing and implementing policies and practices tackling intersecting inequalities in HE&R organisations therefore remains an important challenge for practitioners.

To gain an understanding of how intersectionality is used in equality policies in HE&R organisations, a scoping literature review (D2.1) of published academic research on doing intersectionality in equality policies in HE&R organisations was carried out. The goal was to **map the conceptualisations of doing intersectionality in HE&R organisational equality policies, discuss the policy recommendations that stem from this scientific literature and identify knowledge gaps for further research.** Systematic searches were conducted between November 2022 and January 2023 in the databases Web of Science and Scopus using the keywords *intersectional* policy* and *higher education* or *STEM* or *science*. The final time scope of the sample is from 2007 to 2022.

The results show that the available studies on intersectional equality policies in HE&R organisations are rather limited (n= 61) and primarily emerged in the last 10 years (n=57), with a significant increase from 2020 onwards (n=40). Most studies are **empirical qualitative studies** and were **conducted in the United States and the United Kingdom**, with a smaller number situated in South Africa and the remaining countries of the Anglosphere. **Gender as a discrimination axis was included in every study, mostly intersecting gender with race/ethnicity, whilst intersections with other axes of discrimination** such as class, sexual orientation, religion and disability **remain understudied** or, when included, they are as second-rank “add-ons”. The analysis of the 61 articles' conceptualisations of doing intersectionality in HE&R organisational equality policies and policy recommendations resulted in the identification of three types of studies.

The first type includes the majority of the identified studies. It documents **the lived experiences of minoritized students and staff facing intersecting inequalities** in HE&R organisations and formulates policy recommendations based on the insights from these narratives (n=40). The results show that their experiences are often strongly characterised by a **sense of not belonging and a negative self-concept or feelings of deficiency and lacking the necessary skills to succeed in HE&R organisations. This could lead to isolation mechanisms, the pressure to assimilate, and the underreporting of discriminatory behaviour.** Important factors hampering recognition and inclusion identified in this literature are the absence of minoritized staff, a **lack of role models, curricula that do not reflect minoritized students' cultures and life experiences, high levels of microaggressions, the lack of support mechanisms** (such as financial support for community building and safe spaces), and a **lack of accountability of perpetrators of sexual harassment and aggressions.**

Overall, these studies point to the lack of recognition of the needs of intersectionally minoritized students and staff and attribute it to the ineffectiveness of existing gender equality and EDI policies. These

studies accordingly recommend adopting practices that increase the sense of belonging of students and staff and **transform the norm of the “ideal academic” into an inclusive one** by giving space and support to intersectionally minoritized groups.

A second type of studies (n=12) analyses **the content of the HE&R organisational equality policy documents** and shows the need for intersectional sensibility. These studies find an increased commitment to diversity and inclusion measures in recent years, yet point to the predominance of EDI policies as opposed to intersectional equality policies. They highlight that, although both EDI policies and intersectional equality policies focus on differences and multiple strands of discrimination, they are not interchangeable. **Intersectional equality policies are distinct from EDI policies in that they recognise the unique needs of minoritized students and staff that result from the intersection of multiple forms of discrimination and privilege and address the interplay between the individual and structural level.** These studies further argue that current policies put too much responsibility for achieving inclusion on (minoritized) individuals themselves and lament the absence of data on multiple discrimination grounds, which makes it harder to acknowledge different experiences and design effective intersectional measures that ensure inclusion.

The main recommendations of this type of studies centre around increasing the organisation's accountability for achieving intersectional equality, including the collection of data for policy-making, monitoring and evaluation. They advise **stimulating a dialogue between diverse stakeholders in different power positions** such as students, researchers, professors, specialised counsellors, (HR) managers, diversity officers, etc., with both minoritized and non-minoritized backgrounds, in order to make intersectional equality a shared responsibility.

A third and final type of studies **theoretically reflects on how intersectionality can be used as a critical theory in policymaking processes** (n=9). These studies highlight the need to create an intersectional inclusive culture. Rooted in Black feminism and Critical Race Theory (CRT), they discuss why **HE&R organisations are currently unable to tackle interlocking systems of oppression and privilege.** They argue that current policies are insufficiently grounded in the intersectional experiences of minoritized groups and the way that they are connected to issues of Blackness and whiteness, patriarchy, classism, ableism, ageism, religious hegemony, cis-heteronormativity, and other forms of oppression.

The main recommendations are centred around the acknowledgment and inclusion of **the needs of minoritized students and staff. They foreground how giving voice** should be placed at the heart of intersectional policymaking.

Overall, the insights that emerged from the scoping review point to a number of avenues for future research on intersectional policies in HE&R organisations. Future research should:

- 1) investigate policies and practices designed to foster equality between minoritized and non-minoritized groups along intersectional axes (as opposed to investigating single-axis policies)

2) evaluate the effectiveness of existing policies as part of a broader organisational setting (rather than solely investigating experiences of non-recognition and exclusion of minoritized students, which are necessary but not sufficient to gain insights into how to policies should be designed, implemented and governed to effectively foster equality)

3) attend to the whole process of designing, implementing and governing intersectional policies fostering equality, with particular attention for the involvement of multiple stakeholders with different backgrounds and in dissimilar positions (as opposed to just examining the content of policies).

The results of the scoping literature will be integrated with insights from the grey literature to inform a **large study of 10 HE&R organisations (D3.4) across Europe with relevant policy experience with (intersectional) gender and diversity**. These case studies involve analysing relevant documents, conducting semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders, and doing occasional (non-)participant observations. The goal is to **generate theory on the nature and characteristics and the design, implementation and governance of intersectional GEPs in R&I organisations more widely that effectively foster equality**, as well as on relevant organisational and extra-organisational factors affecting their effectiveness. The results will be published as a book and good practices will be shared.

2. INSPIRE CoP and KSH to date

In KSH3, we have three CoPs that approach intersectionality from different (sub)fields.

1. The **WISE CoP** is working towards **Inclusive Strategies for GEPs in the Health ecosystem**.

This CoP has 10 members from 5 countries (Spain, Portugal, Poland, Italy and Germany). Their current objectives are divided into three main aims:

1. To combat systems of privilege and oppression within health research and medical institutions by promoting strategies and synergies to counter it.
2. To reflect on the intersectionality effects in the treatment of equity and diversity within research practice and scientific careers policies of health research institutions.
3. To build capacity towards promoting institutional changes to achieve more inclusive and transformative health research and design new intersectional interventions for new GEPs editions.

Their main activities are centred around collaborative sessions, best practice exchange sessions and workshops/webinars to raise awareness and foster mutual learning on inclusive GEPs and EDI measures in the R&I health sector.

2. The **Intersectionality for Change CoP** is working on **intersectionality in gender policies, especially on Gender Based Violence (GBV)**. This CoP has 22 members from 13 universities or research centres in Spain, Chile, Ireland, Lithuania and Portugal. Their current objectives are divided into four subthemes to which a team of members is assigned that manage or focus on achieving the set goals.

1. Team 1: Conceptual frames. Develop more complex **conceptual frames** (from an intersectional perspective) to analyse gender-based violence in research and institutional policies.
2. Team 2: Practical incorporation. Contribute to the **practical incorporation** of the intersectional approach in the gender policies of the organisations that make up the CoP, particularly for ensuring the **application of this perspective** to fight gender-based violence in their organisations.
3. Team 3: Monitoring & Evaluation. Contribute to the **mainstreaming of an intersectional approach in monitoring and evaluation** of institutional policies to promote gender equality.
4. Team 4: Research & Teaching. Explore how to introduce the intersectional perspective in **research and teaching**.

Their main activities are centred around analysing Gender-Based Violence, both in theory and in practice, from an intersectional approach and how to integrate this within the evaluation of institutional policies and the curricula of research institutions.

3. The **OpenEU CoP** is working towards developing projects and initiatives that are related to the digital dimension of education and innovative digitally-enhanced pedagogies; digital skills and capacity building; the development of micro-credentials and lifelong learning (LLL); or the inclusion and diversity in education. This CoP has 10 members from 10 universities in Bulgaria, Greece, Spain, the Netherlands, Portugal, Iceland, Germany and Latvia. The cooperation of most of OpenEU's partners dates back to 2006, and has resulted in **over 100 joint publications** (scientific articles, conference papers and book chapters between two or more researchers of our institutions) and in about **fifteen joint European funded projects**. Their current objectives are divided into two main aims:
 1. Facilitate a space for joint reflection to share rising challenges and doubts, brainstorm over creative, original and dynamic actions and solutions, etc. and to put digitisation as a core issue of the debates, focusing on how online, open and distance universities can work to introduce and mainstream intersectionality through digital tools, spaces and ecosystems.
 2. Create an organic, collaborative and trusting space capable of working on the development of an Institutional Inclusive GEP (IGEP) specific to the OpenEU consortium. An institutional IGEP that, in turn, will enable each OpenEU institution to adapt its own IGEP to its specific reality and social context.

Emergent themes and Questions

The institutionalisation of intersectionality in EU policymaking is still rather recent. How to apply this intersectional approach in R&I organisations and translate it into policies and practices remains a challenge. Derived from the current research insights and the CoP objectives, there are three emerging themes that we currently identify that need to be further explored via the empirical and CoP work: the pragmatic use of intersectionality to foster equality, data collection and the analysis and operationalisation of an intersectional approach within an R&I organisation.

1. *How can we move beyond the conceptualisation of intersectionality towards a common and contextual understanding of how to operationalise an intersectional approach in R&I policies and organisations?* The theory of intersectionality originates in social movements. It was coined in academia to expose systems of oppression and privilege that occur on intersecting axes of inequality. In order to adhere to this social justice perspective in the implementation of policies, it is important to not only focus on discursive discussions of intersectionality but attach a critical praxis that fosters intersectional equality.
2. *How to collect and analyse (sensitive) data to improve the effectiveness of inclusive and intersectional GEPs?* The lack of (sensitive) data remains a conundrum as prohibitions of data collection exist on a national and institutional level, and as individuals might be suspicious of how and why this data is collected and analysed. The need for the collection and analysis of data on multiple grounds of discrimination (race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity and disability) is foregrounded in the empirical and the CoP work to acknowledge different experiences and design effective intersectional measures that ensure inclusion. However, more insights are needed on how to do so and which tools are available for analysing these complex intersections.
3. *How to pragmatically use an intersectional approach to foster structural change towards more equality in R&I organisations?* Intersectionality is not (yet) a widely used term in organisations, of which R&I institutions form no exception. Diversity and inclusion research and policies are increasing, yet remain in the process of institutionalisation. The shift towards an intersectional approach might not always have the desired impact at this current moment as it is still in its infancy in terms of translating the theory into practice. As the literature shows, more research is needed on how to institutionalise an intersectional approach into GEPs and EDI policies and practices. In order to achieve its goal and foster equality within organisations, a careful reflexivity is needed on which concepts to pragmatically use in order to convince policymakers to adopt an intersectional approach to counter possible resistances.

3. KE documentation of reflective discussions



The first Knowledge Exchange (KE) event took place virtually on the 13th of March, from 3pm until 6pm. There were thirty participants, including all KSH leaders, three of the four experts and members of each CoP. The goal of this first KE event was to discuss common understandings of intersectionality and the challenges of how to apply an intersectional approach to R&I organisations. Notus prepared and moderated the event and UHasselt presented the current research insights (see section 1)¹. It further involved a bottom-up and participatory approach to provide insights by using the online collaborative platform Miro², breakout rooms and plenary discussions.

The event was designed in a participatory way involving both Hub leaders and the four experts. A first outline was discussed around a list of eight triggering questions. These questions would be used to articulate the event and enable a discussion for CoPs' members and experts to provide inputs and insights that would link the research insights gathered by UHasselt with their own contextualised practices.

¹ Notus and UHasselt are the two INSPIRE's partners leading the Knowledge & Support Hub 3 on Intersectionality. The hub also counts on the support of four experts: Ashlee Christoffersen, Bruna Cristina Jaquetto Pereira, Irina Lungu and Barbara de Micheli.

² <https://miro.com/about/>



Figure 1. Outline of the work process from the scoping review and research insights to this working paper, through the KE event.

The discussion around the triggering questions and the inputs from our experts evolved into a more grounded design of the event, that was finally divided into 3 main blocks:

1. A first part where all CoPs could present their members, main objectives and planned activities to the rest. The main objective of this section was to get to know each other and create the first links amongst CoPs and their members to enable a better and more oriented collaboration, while outlining a common direction for all.
2. A second part where UHasselt presented the summary of the scoping review and main research insights to date, after which the first group interaction was organised: 3 breakout rooms, each one with mixed participants of the 3 CoPs and one expert, in which participants held a discussion opposing what intersectionality means vs how it is actually used in their institutions. The aim was confronting theory vs practice from the very beginning and setting a common understanding of intersectionality and its implications.
3. The last part of the event revolved around the identification of barriers. Again in breakout rooms with mixed participants different from the first groups — to allow all members to interact with as many co-participants as possible —, CoPs' members reflected upon the questions “What are the difficulties for using the concept in your context?” and “Do you experience resistances that hamper the use of intersectionality in your institutions?”. The aim was sharing and unveiling the main difficulties faced by intersectionality practitioners, that would help identify common obstacles as a starting point to building common strategies to counteract them.

The main features considered for this design were the exploratory nature of the event and the intention to avoid a purely theoretical and lecture approach but a bottom-up participatory approach. The results of these discussions were systematised and shared with all participants, and UHasselt further analysed them to draw up a SWOT-analysis on how to apply an intersectional approach to one's organisation.



Notes and main results from breakouts and plenary sessions

In the first breakout room, the strengths and opportunities of using intersectionality in their organisation were highlighted. Intersectionality is considered as a conceptual and theoretical approach and an analytical tool to understand how structures of oppression and privilege are interconnected with the overlapping identities of minoritized individuals and groups who experience inequality based on multiple grounds of discrimination. It **raises awareness and widens the diversity & inclusion and gender perspective** in universities and the health sector on how to tackle these issues in their teaching, research, policies and overall strategy. **However**, and aligned with the research insights, the application of intersectionality in their organisation is more difficult. It is often conflated with diversity and inclusion measures and **might not always be the most useful term to use in policymaking as it is still not understood** as part of policymaking. When intersectionality is used, it remains on an individual level through researchers' work, via surveys and more recently through the selection of panellists. On an organisational level, it is still considered insufficiently applicable due to the lack of human resources, interest for the approach and overall knowledge on such an approach. To conclude, there was a **common understanding** among participants **on the usefulness of an intersectional approach** to tackle inequalities that occur on a micro, meso and macro level within R&I organisations, **yet the translation and application remains a thorny issue.**

Regarding the results of the second group interaction, the first identified barrier was its **primary focus on gender issues**, which already faces resistances within conservative discourses, and the added barrier to including the intersection with other axes of inequality. A third barrier is the idea of **questioning one's privilege**. On the one hand, individuals often find it difficult to recognise or to give up their privilege. On the other hand, calling people out on their privilege might also lead to overt resistances. One way to counter the resistances that were mentioned, is to **highlight the gains of applying an intersectional approach** by formulating, for example, a business case for intersectionality next to a social justice case. A last barrier was the **lack of data and training/knowledge** on how to collect and analyse data on a national and organisational level. This often is reinforced by the **lack of interest** to include an intersectional approach and the suspicion of minoritized individuals on what will happen with this data. This data gap and disinterest often lead to minoritized staff being overburdened with installing an inclusive culture in their organisations, without sufficient support. As a conclusion, an intersectional approach was recognised as having both its opportunities and its challenges. More research is needed on how to turn these opportunities into strengths and overcoming the barriers, while acknowledging its possible limitations.

4. KSH experts' reflections

1. *Bruna Cristina Jacquetto Pereira*

There are four points I would like to highlight on the issue of how to design and implement intersectional HE&R policies. Some of my concerns are already reflected in the document to some extent, but I am mentioning them here because some of these problems are often found in HE&R policies.

In designing and implementing such policies, it is important to avoid representing those affected by intersectional discrimination as the source of the problem. This leads to further stigmatization, with marginalized groups being portrayed as lacking skills and ability to participate in HE&R. Additionally, it leads to action to “empower” the discriminated against, as if they were responsible for fixing the institutional failures resulting in their marginalization. Instead, the focus should be on (intersectional) institutional culture and discriminatory practices that result in exclusion. This will also avoid the promotion of inclusion without tackling discrimination.

On the other hand, intersectional HE&R policies should adopt a bottom-up approach that promotes the listening of marginalized groups. While they should not be charged with the responsibility to fix the institutional problems and discrimination, their voices should be heard at all steps of the policy formulation. This is especially relevant because those affected by intersectional discrimination are rarely in charge of the institutional mechanisms that can promote changes. Participatory processes of policy formulation themselves may reveal institutional and policy gaps and bring hidden/silenced forms of tension into light. Partnerships with stakeholders (student collectives, NGOs, etc.) play an important role in setting the agenda, defining priorities, and providing insights. (Intersectional) data collection is also crucial because it can uncover dimensions of discrimination and exclusion that are yet unknown.

My research has shown that, while intersectionality is advancing in framework HE&R policies, it tends to gradually fade away in the design of more specific measures. This further stresses the need to ensure continuity in the macro, meso, and micro levels of the policies.

Finally, I suggest that the process of formulation and implementing intersectional HE&R policies is regarded as a pedagogic and democratic process, in which everyone, but particularly institutions and privileged groups, can learn to listen to experiences that have remained silenced thus far. Feelings of frustration, guilt, and disappointment can be expected, and so does conflict. As I see it, these should be embraced and conducted productively, generating empathy and a commitment to engaging in far-reach, long-term social transformation.

2. *Ashlee Christoffersen*

In the context of research and innovation, intersectionality asks us to analyse the context-specific ways that structures of inequality - including sexism, racism, colourism and colonization, antiBlackness and white supremacy, heterosexism, cisgenderism, ableism, and borders - *shape*, and are *shaped by*, institutional policies, processes, and procedures. These policies, processes, and procedures have tended to create and reproduce inequalities, leading to the inequalities we observe today. They may alternatively, as is the case with GEPs, aim to reduce them. In spite of this aim, even policies, processes and procedures that aim to reduce inequalities can have the unintended effect of reproducing inequalities by focusing on those who are singularly disadvantaged (e.g. women for whom gender based discrimination is the only form of inequality that they experience). Intersectionality asks us to build our knowledge of *all* of these structures of inequality, *as well as* the ways that they intersect – this is very different from conceptualising inequalities additively, as is the case with most EDI policies. Other inequalities cannot simply be added onto gender, rather they change its qualities. Indeed, the key takeaway of literature on intersectionality’s policy applications in general is that additive approaches do not work to reduce intersecting inequalities. These inequalities are produced relationally, meaning that someone’s disadvantage produces another’s privilege. Therefore, meaningfully addressing power and privilege are not optional. This will centrally involve reflexive action on our own privilege, biases and prejudices. Operationalising intersectionality in these contexts is fundamentally about *reducing inequities* experienced by those most intersectionally marginalised, and will therefore importantly involve positive/affirmative action to redress inequalities, and address their causes and not merely their symptoms.

The transformative nature and potential of intersectionality cannot be overstated. Intersectionality is not supposed to be an easy addition to existing work, but rather requires us to rethink institutional policy entirely.

Reflecting on the current work of the CoPs, I would also note that a lack of data is also used as an excuse by institutions / a rationale to do nothing. Moreover, I am not sure that an authentically intersectionality-informed approach is compatible with ‘pragmatism’. Indeed it requires careful contextual analysis and a social justice orientation.

3. *Barbara De Micheli*

The document is very interesting and well shaped. Following Bruna’s comment on the importance to focus on changing the systems, I would like to further emphasize the (potential) transformative approach of Gender Equality Plans in supporting institutional change and in questioning power dynamics in the organisation. Although not always implemented, due mainly to organisational resistances to change this is the most interesting aspect of GEPs. They help organisations become aware of their processes, to acquire a picture of their gendered power dynamics, to name and quantify discriminations and gaps.

Moving from this we could then reflect on how GEPs can be made intersectional from the design to the different steps of GEPs implementation.

When we refer to practices and tools we could try to organise them according to the different phases of the GEPs as we know them (data collection, data analysis, organisational assessment, discrimination gaps identification, transformative objectives identification, actions definition, evaluation indicators definition) in order to suggest what should be done (which data should be collected, which actions should be implemented, which practices we could suggest etc) to achieve institutional change in an intersectional perspective.

4. *Irina Lungu*

In my opinion, the transformative approach of GEPs and in general of EDIs are drawing strength from the organizational culture that in itself reflects the power dynamics of the organization.

Depending on the organization internationalization level, the organizational culture can be profoundly or only superficially linked/reflected into the regional/country culture feeding from historical stereotypes and biases, that in turn leads to action plans that do not have enough power of transformation.

As an example, hierarchical versus egalitarian culture is limited in its potential to open for change, in building a bottom-up approach in designing policies and action plans, thus triggering resistance to practices and tools in implementing GEPs.

Intersectionality, although significantly difficult as it requires a full rethinking process of organizational change, has the power to speed up the development of the organizational cultural intelligence. This generates the critical mass of stakeholders for which research and innovation is also cultivating the identity of active citizens, reducing the feeling of isolation and nurturing the intercultural engagement and communication.