

Article

From Plan to Practice: A Maturity Framework for Implementing a Gender Equality Plan: The Case of the University of Primorska

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Abstract

Gender Equality Plans (GEPs) have been an eligibility requirement for Horizon Europe funding since 2022, yet formal adoption does not necessarily alter organizational routines, culture, or resource allocation. This article examines the process of moving from compliance toward institutionalized practice through a longitudinal single-case study of the University of Primorska (UP), a smaller university in a resource-constrained Widening-country context. We compare the first analytical observation period (2021–2025), based on its 2021–2027 GEP, with GEP 2.0 (2026–2030). Evidence combines documentary analysis, selected gender-disaggregated indicators, three focus groups ($n = 24$), and aggregated staff-survey results for 2024–2025. We develop the Gender Equality Plan Maturity Index (GEP-MI), an unweighted six-dimensional heuristic scored from 0 to 18. The document-based, triangulated score rises from 7 to 15, indicating more explicit governance, data routines, and resourcing, but not durable implementation outcomes. Qualitative evidence illustrates three overlapping categories associated with the paper–practice gap: passive resistance (skepticism and box-ticking), active ideological resistance (naturalization and denial), and structural implementation constraints (including administrative infeasibility and unequal care burdens). A documentary comparison with the Universities of Ljubljana and Maribor contextualizes differences in formal design; it does not establish the prevalence of these categories beyond UP. We define audit-induced decoupling under constrained resources as the risk that audited requirements redirect scarce capacity toward demonstrable compliance rather than substantive change. The case offers a transparent monitoring heuristic and suggests that proportionate capacity support warrants consideration alongside European conditionality.

Keywords: gender equality plan; institutionalization; organizational change; resistance to equality; Widening countries; university; audit culture; Horizon Europe



Received: 6 July 2026

Revised: 27 July 2026

Accepted: 1 August 2026

Published: 3 August 2026

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1. Introduction

Gender equality (GE) in academia is increasingly part of the regulatory infrastructure of the European research system. Since 2022, a Gender Equality Plan (GEP) has been an eligibility condition under Horizon Europe for public bodies, research organizations, and higher education institutions. The minimum process-related requirements include public publication, dedicated resources, gender-disaggregated data collection and monitoring, and training ([European Institute for Gender Equality, n.d.](#)). Slovenian law also anchors equal treatment and non-discrimination: the Higher Education Act emphasizes equal opportunities, social responsibility, and an inclusive study and work environment ([Zakon o visokem šolstvu \[ZViS-1\], 2025](#)). GE also forms part of the social dimension of sustainability

and Agenda 2030, particularly Sustainable Development Goal 5 (United Nations, 2015). Throughout this article, GE denotes the substantive objective, GEP denotes the formal institutional plan, and equality policies denote the broader family of rules and measures only where that wider meaning is intended.

Formal adoption does not ensure substantive change. A GEP can be published, communicated, and accompanied by measures while still functioning mainly as evidence of compliance and legitimacy (Ahmed, 2012; Lombardo & Mergaert, 2013; Van den Brink & Benschop, 2012). Institutional theory describes this as a gap between formal structures and routine practice. In competitive, audit-oriented universities, the pressure to demonstrate conformity can further privilege visible procedures over less readily measured cultural and organizational change.

The research gap is therefore not simply whether GEPs are effective, but which mechanisms enable formal commitments to become routine practice, especially in Widening countries. Horizon Europe identifies Widening countries as research systems with lower participation or performance relative to European benchmarks, and Slovenia falls within this policy category (European Commission, 2022). Uniform eligibility and reporting requirements can impose uneven implementation costs when institutions differ in staffing, administrative capacity, and access to stable resources (Clavero & Galligan, 2021; Mergaert & Lombardo, 2014). This tension makes smaller institutions analytically important for understanding when external conditionality catalyzes change and when it produces mainly auditable compliance.

This study has two aims. First, it develops and applies a maturity framework in which institutionalization is indicated by stronger links among goals, resources, responsibilities, data routines, organizational systems, and cultural legitimacy. Second, it traces how these dimensions and the processes associated with the paper–practice gap changed at the University of Primorska (UP) between its first and second planning periods, building on preliminary institutional work (Bojnec & Blatnik, 2025). Two questions guide the analysis: (RQ1) How did UP’s level of GEP institutionalization change across the two periods? (RQ2) Which discursive, administrative, and material processes are reported as sustaining or reducing the gap between formal commitments and everyday practice? A documentary comparison with the University of Ljubljana (UL) and the University of Maribor (UM) describes contrasts in formal GEP design within the same national setting (University of Ljubljana, 2022; University of Maribor, 2021). It is not used to infer the prevalence of mechanisms or implementation effects beyond UP. We define the paper–practice gap as the distance between formally adopted GE commitments and their routinized enactment in decision-making, organizational practice, and resource allocation.

2. Conceptual Framework

2.1. Institutional Theory: Compliance, Institutionalization, and Audit-Induced Decoupling

Institutional theory provides the foundational explanation for the paper–practice gap examined in this study. Organizations may adopt formally legitimate structures in response to external expectations while leaving everyday activity only loosely coupled to those structures (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Contemporary decoupling research further distinguishes gaps between policy and practice from gaps between formally implemented practices and the outcomes they are intended to achieve (Bromley & Powell, 2012). Applied to GEPs, this distinction shifts attention from whether a compliant plan exists to whether its commitments alter responsibilities, resource allocation, data use, and routine decision-making.

Formal adoption, implementation, and institutionalization are therefore analytically distinct. Compliance means adopting and publishing a plan that satisfies formal require-

ments. Implementation means carrying out specified measures. Institutionalization occurs when responsibilities, resources, data use, organizational integration, and cultural legitimacy become part of routine governance. Policy-performativity and audit-culture perspectives further show how indicators and verification can reorganize conduct around what must be made visible and measurable (Shore, 2008; Strathern, 2000). We define audit-induced decoupling under constrained resources as the risk that externally audited eligibility requirements outpace implementation capacity and redirect scarce attention toward demonstrable procedural compliance while routines, resource allocation, and cultural norms change more slowly. The concept specifies both a trigger—audited funding conditionality—and an enabling condition—constrained administrative capacity. It is an analytically plausible risk, not a presumed permanent or universal outcome.

2.2. Maturity Framework and GEP-MI

The maturity framework describes six dimensions of embedded GEP practice. The Gender Equality Plan Maturity Index (GEP-MI) is its additive, document-based operationalization for comparing planning periods within the same case. Yellow Window's impact-driver approach and Capacity Assessment Tool diagnose broad institutional preconditions for GE change (Mergaert et al., 2022, 2024). The GEP-MI differs in purpose, unit of analysis, and output: it uses six document-observable dimensions, a common 0–3 ordinal rubric, and an unweighted total for transparent longitudinal within-case comparison. General maturity-model research cautions that such models require evaluation and validation (Mettler, 2011; Wendler, 2012). The GEP-MI is therefore a descriptive formative heuristic, not a validated universal ladder, predictive scale, causal model, external benchmark, or ranking of universities.

2.3. Organizational Culture, Feminist Institutionalism, and the Political Economy of University Governance

In this study, organizational culture is conceptualized as the informal meanings, expectations, and routine practices through which organizational members interpret what is normal, legitimate, and feasible. In universities, these cultural processes are gendered: formally neutral divisions of labor, evaluation standards, and career routines can form inequality regimes that reproduce unequal outcomes (Acker, 2006). Feminist research on higher education and organizational change likewise shows how policy change is mediated by informal norms, actors' interpretations, and gendered organizational practices (Benschop & Verloo, 2011; O'Connor, 2020). Feminist institutionalism brings these insights together by examining how formal and informal institutions interact through gendered power relations (Mackay et al., 2010).

This perspective specifies how culture enters the present analysis. Naturalization and denial are treated as cultural mechanisms because they frame unequal arrangements as biological, individual, normal, or already resolved; mockery and box-ticking indicate weak legitimacy and low engagement with formal measures. Culture is not modeled as a single measurable variable or assumed to be a stand-alone cause of inequality. Rather, it is examined through participants' accounts and documentary evidence as the informal interpretive context that can legitimate, contest, or impede the enactment of GEP commitments. This conceptualization links the focus-group themes to the GEP-MI dimension of cultural work and stakeholder participation.

Critical feminist institutionalism therefore directs attention to who performs equality work, whose routines remain protected, and why formally neutral procedures may reproduce inequality. Political-economy critiques of the neoliberal university add the effects of competition for funding, managerial measurement, and reputational incentives (Deem, 2001; Shore, 2008; Tzanakou & Pearce, 2019; Vida, 2021). In EU research governance, policy

framing and implementation can also depoliticize GE or filter it through organizational resistance and limited capacity (Mergaert & Lombardo, 2014; Vida, 2021). Together, these perspectives position the paper's two linked contributions: the GEP-MI traces uneven institutionalization, while audit-induced decoupling under constrained resources identifies a context-specific mechanism that can sustain the paper–practice gap.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Study Design and Case Selection

The study uses a longitudinal, data-anchored case design with an embedded documentary comparison. UP is theoretically informative as a smaller public university operating under the same national and European requirements as the larger UL and UM but with more limited central administrative capacity. It is therefore a revealing, rather than statistically representative, case for examining how resource constraints may condition the translation of audited policy requirements into routines. UL and UM serve as most-similar documentary contrasts: the three institutions share a regulatory and funding setting while differing in scale and administrative organization. The comparison describes variation in formal design; it does not identify shared causal mechanisms, rank the universities, or estimate population-level effects.

3.2. Documentary Analysis and the GEP-MI

The documentary corpus comprises UP's GEP 2021–2027, adopted in September 2021, and GEP 2026–2030, adopted in December 2025 (University of Primorska, 2021, 2025). We compare the 2020 baseline used in the first plan with updated data through 2024 and implementation evidence available through 2025. We therefore use 2021–2025 to denote the first analytical observation period while retaining the official 2021–2027 title of the plan. This distinction avoids treating the early adoption of the second plan as evidence that its measures have already produced durable outcomes.

The author-developed GEP-MI operationalizes six dimensions of institutionalization: formal commitment and public accountability; governance and responsibility; data infrastructure; implementation capacity and resources; integration into organizational systems; and cultural work and stakeholder participation. Each plan-period is assessed across the six dimensions using observable documentary evidence such as named responsible actors, recurring reporting, gender-disaggregated data, documented staff time or funding, and links with human-resources and quality systems.

Scoring Protocol and Management of Judgment

The university GEP-period was the unit of assessment and each dimension was a separate coding unit. For each dimension, the authors recorded the relevant GEP provision, designated responsible actor, resource or staffing commitment, monitoring or recurrence rule, and evidence of integration with routine systems. The ordinal anchors were applied as follows: 0 = no relevant provision or evidence; 1 = an isolated, proposed, or discretionary activity without stable responsibility; 2 = a formally documented measure with assigned responsibility or procedure but without evidence of recurring integration; and 3 = a recurring and accountable provision embedded in organizational systems and supported by documented monitoring, resources, or repeated practice. The highest level was assigned only when the available documents met the corresponding anchor; incomplete or ambiguous evidence was coded at the lower level.

Dimension scores are summed to a total from 0 to 18 and divided by 18 to produce a normalized 0–1 score. Equal weighting was chosen because the index is intended for

transparent descriptive comparison rather than prediction and no validated empirical basis exists for differential weights in this case.

Provisional scores were produced through repeated reading of both GEPs and reviewed and resolved through discussion within the core group team. Focus-group material and organizational indicators were used only as contextual triangulation for borderline judgments; they did not automatically raise a documentary score. The study did not use independent blinded coders, and no inter-rater statistic was calculated. Subjective judgment was managed through explicit anchors, links between each score and the observable indicators reported in Section 4.3, conservative coding of ambiguous evidence, and joint re-examination of the source documents. The resulting scores are reported in Section 4.3.

The index is informed by the Yellow Window impact-driver and capacity-assessment approaches (Mergaert et al., 2022, 2024), the assessment context documented by AGRIGEP (2023), and broader maturity-model design principles (Mettler, 2011; Wendler, 2012). Its evidence base is deliberately limited to publicly documented GEP design and triangulated implementation context. Replicability and external validity remain to be established. Future validation should use a published codebook and at least two independent coders, report agreement for ordinal dimension scores (for example, weighted kappa) and total scores, test sensitivity to alternative weights and anchor interpretations, and assess convergent validity against longitudinal evidence of implemented measures and outcomes across several universities. Until such validation is completed, GEP-MI scores should be used for transparent within-case comparison and hypothesis generation, not cross-institutional ranking or population-level inference.

For the embedded comparison, UP, UL, and UM are examined within the same national regulatory and funding setting but across different scales and administrative arrangements. We compare governance mode, data practices, and resourcing in their public plans (University of Ljubljana, 2022; University of Maribor, 2021; University of Primorska, 2021, 2025). This documentary most-similar comparison supports analytical contrast; it does not establish comparative implementation effectiveness.

3.3. Quantitative and Survey Evidence

The quantitative component compares selected indicators in the two public UP plans: vertical segregation across academic ranks, horizontal segregation by field, and work-care reconciliation. End-of-2024 human resources (HR) data cover 782 employees, 59.8% of whom were women. Women accounted for 13% of employees in information and communication technology (ICT) and 5% of staff in the three highest academic ranks in computer science and informatics. We describe vertical segregation as the change in women's representation across ranks: 55% among assistant professors and 41% among full professors. These descriptive indicators characterize the institutional case; they do not by themselves identify causal mechanisms.

We also use aggregated results from the annual staff-satisfaction survey for 2024 and 2025, including items on perceived unequal treatment. Respondent-level data were unavailable, and respondent composition differed between years. Consequently, the available data do not permit subgroup comparisons, adjustment for changes in who responded, estimation of within-group variation, or valid statistical tests of year-to-year differences. An apparent change may therefore reflect a change in respondent composition rather than a change in staff perceptions. The survey results are treated only as descriptive indicators of perceived risks and priorities and are triangulated with documentary and focus-group evidence.

3.4. Focus Groups and Thematic Analysis

Qualitative evidence comprises three focus groups conducted in April 2024 with academic staff, middle managers, and students ($n = 24$; Table 1). The academic-staff, middle-management, and student sessions lasted 90, 85, and 75 min, respectively. The three-group design was specified a priori to represent these stakeholder categories rather than extended iteratively through theoretical sampling. Theoretical saturation was therefore not formally assessed, used as a stopping criterion, or claimed. The groups were organized within the AGRIGEP project, a Horizon Europe Coordination and Support Action supporting first-generation GEP assessment and implementation in Widening-country higher education and research institutions (AGRIGEP, 2023), under the mentorship and coordination of the Association of Hungarian Women in Science (NaTE; Paksi et al., 2025). The AGRIGEP project setting is analytically relevant because participants reflected on equality policies while UP was receiving institutional assessment, capacity-building, and mentoring support. Within this bounded case design, the focus-group material is treated as analytically informative rather than exhaustive.

Table 1. Basic demographic and substantive information on focus groups (April 2024).

Focus Group	Organizational Role	Number of Participants	Gender Composition (F/M)	Participant Structure/Fields	Duration	Key Discussion Topics
Academic staff	Researchers and higher-education teachers	8	4 F/4 M	Balanced: 4× STEM (natural sciences/engineering), 4× SSH (social sciences/humanities). Included different ranks (assistant professor to full professor).	90 min	Experiences of inequality, career transitions, legitimacy of measures, resistance
Middle management	Heads of services/units, support functions	8	5 F/3 M	Heads of faculty administration offices, heads of HR services, project coordinators.	85 min	Feasibility of measures, bureaucratic barriers, “who is responsible”, data and reporting
Students	Students from different fields	8	4 F/4 M	Student council and student representatives; mixed (teacher education, ICT, management).	75 min	Stereotypes in study programs, sense of fairness, visibility/devaluation of equality
Total		24	13 F/11 M			

Sessions were audio-recorded, transcribed, and anonymized. The study protocol was approved by the Commission of the University of Primorska for Ethics in Human Subjects Research (KER UP; approval No. 4264-49-3/24; 21 March 2024), and all focus-group participants provided written informed consent before participation. Purposive recruitment sought disciplinary heterogeneity and approximate gender balance. The academic-staff group had an ex-ante target of four women and four men to capture potentially divergent framings of equality.

Analysis followed reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019). Initial codes were organized into thematic clusters and interpreted through institutional and organizational-change concepts, with particular attention to denial, naturalization, deval-

uation, and structural constraints. Interpretations were triangulated across documents, indicators, and quotations. Quotations were lightly edited for readability and checked through a forward-and-back translation procedure intended to preserve meaning. Empirical findings were kept distinct from normative recommendations.

3.5. Use of Generative AI in Manuscript

The original manuscript was written in Slovenian. ChatGPT (GPT-5, OpenAI) and Google Gemini (continuously updated web version, Google) were used primarily to translate it into academic English and improve grammar, phrasing, and readability. During peer-review revision, ChatGPT supported language and structural editing, reference-format checks, and preparation or revision of the manuscript's schematic figures. The tools were not used to generate research data, conduct analyses, or determine the study's findings and conclusions. All AI-assisted outputs were verified, substantively edited, and approved by the authors.

4. Results

4.1. Gender Equality Indicators Improve Amid Persistent Inequalities

UP employed 782 people at the end of 2024, 59.8% of whom were women. Women's high representation in professional services alongside their lower representation at the highest academic ranks illustrates both occupational and vertical segregation. The pattern also matters for implementation capacity because responsibility for GEP-related administration may fall to already burdened professional functions, although the available data do not permit direct measurement of that workload (University of Primorska, 2025).

Between 2020 and 2024, the share of women among full professors increased from 35% to 41% (Figure 1). A rank gradient nevertheless remained: women represented 55% of assistant professors but 41% of full professors. This pattern is consistent with a glass-ceiling problem. Unequal care interruptions, invisible work, access to networks, and leadership support are plausible mechanisms identified in the qualitative material and prior research, but the descriptive rank data do not establish their individual causal effects.

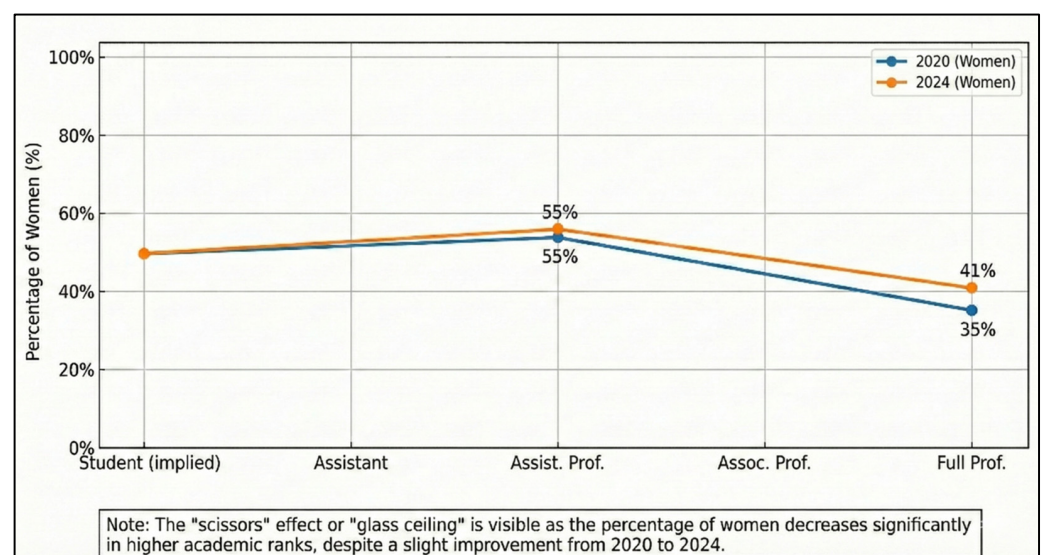


Figure 1. Vertical segregation (“glass ceiling”) at UP: Comparison of the share of women across academic ranks between 2020 and 2024. The chart shows a characteristic drop in the share of women at the highest positions, despite a slight improvement in 2024.

Horizontal segregation remained pronounced among both students and employees in ICT and, to a lesser extent, mathematics, where men predominated; women predominated

in the other fields of study. Women represented 21% of ICT students in 2020/2021, 28% in 2022/2023, and 30% in 2024/2025, whereas they represented 93% of students in education sciences in 2020/2021. Among employees in 2024, women accounted for 13% in ICT and only 5% in the three highest academic ranks in computer science and informatics (University of Primorska, 2021, 2025). The direction of change among students is positive, but the imbalance remains substantial.

Student participants connected these statistics to the study environment. One stated, “In computer science it’s 90% boys, and I think many girls don’t enroll because they don’t feel comfortable being in a group where it’s 90% boys.” Another identified stereotypes as a possible influence: “When you think of computer science, you imagine computer games and the like—and that is usually associated with men.” These accounts are consistent with the possibility that statistical imbalance and field-specific stereotypes may shape belonging; they do not establish their causal effect on enrolment.

Work-care indicators also show a marked asymmetry. In 2024, women’s recorded use of parental leave was 50.5 times men’s use, and childcare-related absences were 7.8 times more frequent among women. Because the denominators for men were very small, these ratios are treated as descriptive indicators of direction and magnitude within UP, not as stable population estimates. An academic participant described the career cost of an extended care-related absence: “If you’re absent for three years because you’re on maternity leave, that’s a problem for the mother—you fall behind in all areas, especially publications.” UP has recently introduced practical measures to encourage a more gender-balanced use of parental leave, including awareness-raising activities and institutional support.

4.2. *Passive Resistance, Active Ideological Resistance, and Structural Constraints*

Accounts categorized as active ideological resistance appeared through naturalization and denial. An academic participant stated, “Apart from biological differences there are no other differences . . . in promotion . . .”, locating difference outside organizational responsibility. A middle-management participant similarly attributed task allocation to “physiognomy” and described maintenance work as more appropriate to men. Among students, the statement “There is no sexism here; I have never experienced it” equated a lack of personal experience with the absence of a structural problem. These accounts were not necessarily overtly hostile, but they may discourage targeted action by presenting existing arrangements as natural, individual, or already resolved.

Accounts categorized as passive resistance involved skeptical or minimal engagement with audit and training procedures. Academic staff described equality requirements as “ticking boxes”—“In applications (for projects) everything is ticked off, but nobody actually does it”—and reported colleagues mocking training as meaningless. This pattern does not explicitly reject GE; it is consistent with formal completion or low-engagement participation. One plausible interpretation is weak legitimacy when a GEP is experienced chiefly as a funding condition and an additional administrative demand. The evidence supports this interpretation for the quoted participants, not for all staff.

Staff-survey results suggest that unequal treatment remained visible in everyday experience. In 2024, 27% of respondents ($n = 323$) reported at least occasional unequal treatment based on gender; in 2025, the corresponding descriptive share was about 22% ($n = 260$). In 2025, 28% of women and 8% of men reported such experiences. Respondents also identified education, age, and physical appearance, indicating intersecting grounds of unequal treatment. The apparent year-to-year decline should not be interpreted as statistically established because only aggregate data are available and sample composition may differ.

Structural implementation constraints were embedded in resources and rules rather than deliberate individual opposition. Participants cited childcare support for travel and events: when project or internal financial rules make childcare an ineligible cost, a formally attractive measure may not be executable. One academic participant asked, “Childcare costs are not an eligible cost; how is that possible?” Such constraints may turn equality measures into additional administrative work, weaken their perceived usefulness, and reinforce passive skepticism.

The subsequent plan incorporates recommendations from the focus groups, surveys, and self-evaluation into measures intended to strengthen inclusiveness and equality at both the central university level and the decentralized level of faculties and institutes ([University of Primorska, 2025](#)).

The categories in Table 2 are analytical and overlapping. Structural constraints are not attributed to a resisting individual: they describe institutional conditions that may constrain implementation and interact with passive or ideological responses. The focus-group evidence supports these interpretive categories and indicates where they appeared in the sampled discussions, but it does not establish causal effects or estimate their prevalence across the university; those questions remain for future research.

Table 2. Analytical typology of resistance and structural implementation constraints identified in the UP case.

Analytical Category	Primary Sites in the Evidence	How It Appears	Interpretive Implication/Plausible Organizational Effect
Passive resistance	Academic staff reactions to audit and training procedures	Skepticism, mockery, box-ticking, and minimal engagement	May indicate weak legitimacy when the GEP is experienced mainly as a funding condition or administrative burden; may reduce substantive uptake
Active ideological resistance	Academic staff, middle management, and student accounts	Denial of structural inequality, naturalization of differences, and delegitimation of targeted measures	May shift responsibility from the organization to individuals or biology and present existing arrangements as natural or already fair
Structural implementation constraints	Funding rules, internal procedures, and limited support capacity; not a deliberate individual actor	Ineligible childcare costs, rigid procedures, limited staff time, and project dependence	May constrain feasible implementation, add administrative work, and reinforce passive skepticism

4.3. Maturity Across Planning Periods

Having identified candidate processes associated with incomplete enactment, we next assess whether UP’s organizational capacity changed across planning periods. Applying the GEP-MI, we observed a shift from a predominantly ad hoc or formalized design in the first observation period toward a more formalized and partly institutionalized design in GEP 2.0. Scores were based on documentary evidence and author judgment, with focus-group and organizational evidence used only for contextual triangulation (Table 3).

The total score rose from 7/18 (0.39) for the first observation period to 15/18 (0.83) for GEP 2.0. The largest changes concern governance and accountability and data infrastructure, including a working group, faculty-level coordinators, and routine monitoring of gender-disaggregated indicators. Resources, organizational integration, and cultural work remain at level 2, indicating that institutionalization is progressing, but remains incomplete. The asymmetry between level-3 governance and data infrastructure and level-2 cultural work also suggests that formal capacity and cultural legitimacy need not develop

at the same pace. Because GEP 2.0 was adopted in December 2025, its score documents stronger plan design and early capacity, not proof that all measures have produced durable outcomes or closed the paper–practice gap.

Table 3. GEP-MI scores at UP: comparison of the first analytical observation period with GEP 2.0.

Dimension (GEP-MI)	Observable Indicators	First Observation Period (2021–2025)	GEP 2.0 (Plan Adopted 2025)
Formal commitment and public accountability	Public publication of the plan; formal adoption; annual reporting on implementation	2	3
Governance and accountability	Working group; faculty-level coordinators; clearly defined measure owners	1	3
Data infrastructure	Gender-disaggregated HR and study indicators; routinized monitoring; public presentation of data	1	3
Implementation capacity and resources	Dedicated staff time; stable funding for activities; administrative support for implementation	1	2
Integration into organizational systems	Links with integrity, HR policies, and quality; embeddedness in development strategies	1	2
Cultural work and participation	Training; communication activities; involvement of staff and students; addressing resistance	1	2
Total		7	15

Note: Each dimension is scored on a 0–3 ordinal scale (0 = absent; 1 = ad hoc; 2 = formalized; 3 = institutionalized). The unweighted total ranges from 0 to 18 and is also normalized to 0–1. A level-3 score denotes a documented recurring and accountable provision under the stated anchor; it is not evidence of a realized long-term outcome. Scores summarize document-based design and triangulated early capacity and are not a validated external benchmark.

The documentary audit trail for the scores is as follows. In GEP 2.0, level-3 scores reflect recurring public reporting, distributed coordination with assigned owners, and recurring monitoring supported by a dashboard; level-2 scores reflect documented resourcing, links to organizational systems, and participation or training measures without established fully recurring outcome evidence. In the first observation period, formal plan adoption warranted level 2 for commitment; the other five dimensions were coded at level 1 because relevant activities or data were present but lacked the responsibility, recurrence, resources, or system integration required for level 2 (University of Primorska, 2021, 2025).

Beyond the aggregate score, GEP 2.0 converts several general commitments into more specific instruments. It specifies a key performance indicator (KPI) dashboard, regular monitoring and at least annual reporting, a planned pay audit, clearer governance roles, a dedicated annual budget, reintegration grants after extended absence, and event-based care support. It also adapts measures that encountered legal constraints, replacing a proposed multilingual childcare facility with more feasible support options. These provisions indicate stronger formalization, specificity, and administrative fit; whether they become durable practice requires subsequent evaluation.

5. Discussion

5.1. From Compliance to Institutionalization

In this study, a constrained or under-resourced institutional setting is one in which equality work is layered onto existing HR, legal, and quality-assurance functions without dedicated staff lines, data capacity is limited, and implementation depends substantially on project-based rather than permanent institutional support. This definition specifies the scope condition of the proposed mechanism rather than treating all Widening institutions as uniformly under-resourced.

The proposed mechanism is most plausible where four conditions coincide: externally verified requirements; limited or project-dependent administrative capacity; compliance outputs that are easier to audit than cultural or resource change; and insufficiently stable authority or resources for implementation. These conditions may also occur outside Widening countries and need not characterize every institution within them. The UP case demonstrates the analytical plausibility of the mechanism under these conditions, not its prevalence, universality, or causal effect across higher education.

In the UP case, the higher GEP-MI score for GEP 2.0 documents a stronger formal design, while focus-group accounts of box-ticking, naturalization, and implementation obstacles are consistent with incomplete routinization. This pattern is compatible with policy–practice decoupling (Bromley & Powell, 2012; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). It does not establish means–ends decoupling, because GEP 2.0 was adopted recently and post-adoption outcomes cannot yet be assessed.

Under Horizon Europe, a GEP is both an eligibility condition and an object of formal verification (European Commission, Directorate-General for Research and Innovation, 2021). In a setting meeting the scope conditions above, audit-culture research suggests that visible indicators and reporting demands may take priority over less visible cultural work (Shore, 2008; Strathern, 2000). The present case supports this as a plausible interpretation of the observed accounts; it does not estimate the frequency or causal effect of this mechanism at UP or in institutions in other Widening countries.

Feminist-institutional and political-economy perspectives provide complementary interpretive lenses. They direct attention to gendered inequality regimes (Acker, 2006; Benschop & Verloo, 2011; Mackay et al., 2010; O'Connor, 2020), competition for funding, managerial measurement, and the possible depoliticization of equality goals (Deem, 2001; Tzanakou & Pearce, 2019; Vida, 2021). In this analysis, these theories identify where resources, authority, accountability, and participation may matter; they are not tested as causal models.

Figure 2 clarifies that GEP maturity is assessed across six dimensions using a common 0–3 rubric rather than assumed to follow a universal linear sequence. Existing impact-driver and capacity-assessment approaches diagnose broad preconditions for institutional change (Mergaert et al., 2022, 2024). The GEP-MI instead aggregates document-observable evidence for transparent comparison across two planning periods.

The 7/18 and 15/18 totals summarize uneven movement across dimensions: formal governance and data may advance faster than resources, system integration, or cultural legitimacy. Monitoring may support reflexive policy learning (Wroblewski & Leitner, 2022), but technical formalization alone may not displace normalized gendered structures and cultures (O'Connor, 2020). The model therefore treats resistance, constrained resources, and feedback as factors that may stall or reverse movement (Bleijenbergh, 2018; Kalpazidou Schmidt & Cacace, 2019; Palmén & Kalpazidou Schmidt, 2019).

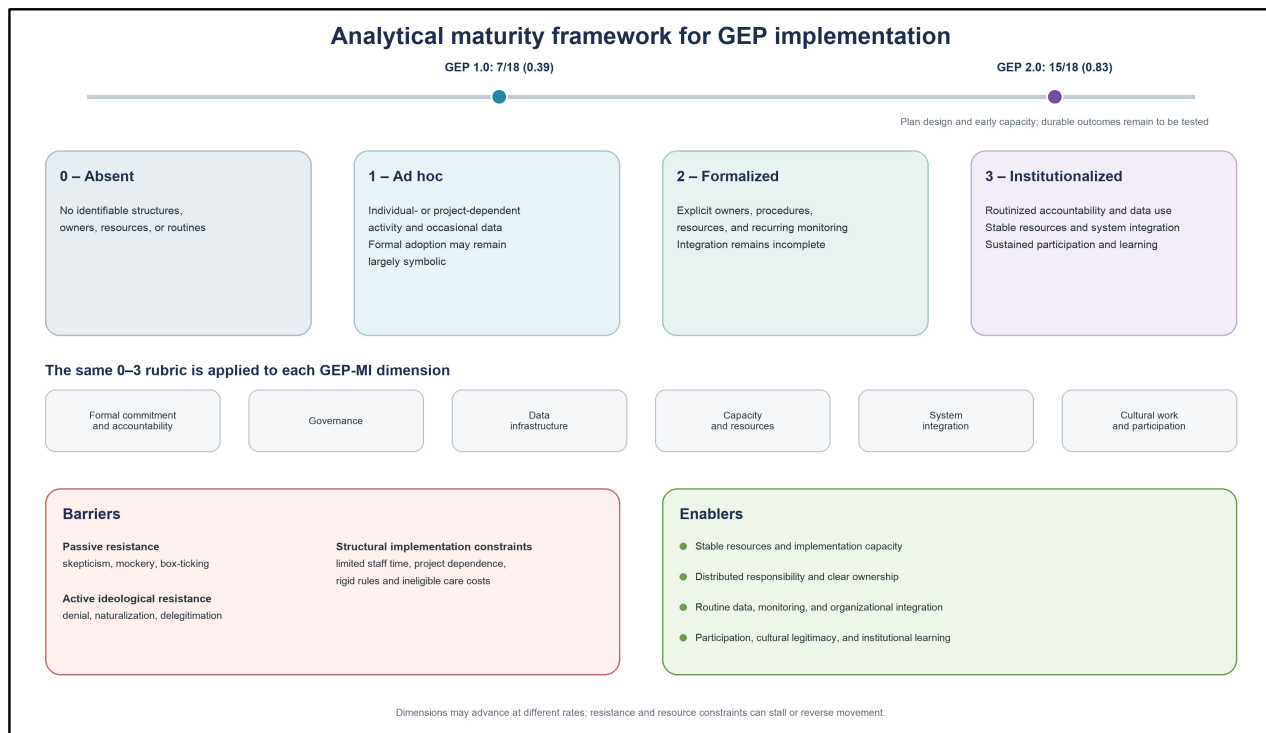


Figure 2. Analytical maturity framework for GEP implementation. The same 0–3 rubric is applied across six dimensions rather than treated as a fixed universal sequence. The markers show the document-based GEP-MI totals for the first observation period and GEP 2.0. Movement toward institutionalization requires formal commitment, distributed accountability, routine data use, stable resources, organizational integration, and participatory cultural work. Resistance and resource constraints can stall or reverse progress; the GEP 2.0 score reflects plan design and early capacity, not yet durable outcomes.

5.2. Resistance and Implementation Constraints Across Organizational Levels

The qualitative material supports three overlapping interpretive categories rather than tested causal mechanisms. Naturalization and denial may make existing arrangements appear normal or remove them from organizational responsibility; mockery and box-ticking are consistent with limited legitimacy; and administrative obstacles may make low-trust interpretations more credible. Prior research documents related meritocratic framings (Nielsen, 2016), resistance to equality projects (Powell et al., 2018), and the naturalization of gendered academic arrangements (Amâncio, 2005).

Broader research identifies ideological and organizational opposition during policy implementation (Hodgins et al., 2022; Tildesley et al., 2022; Verloo, 2018). In the UP case, the coexistence of the three categories may help explain why cultural work and participation remained at level 2 while governance and data infrastructure advanced. This interpretation is consistent with feminist-institutional accounts in which formal change is mediated by informal norms, organizational routines, and power relations (Acker, 2006; Benschop & Verloo, 2011; Mackay et al., 2010; O'Connor, 2020), but the focus groups neither establish causal effects nor estimate prevalence across UP.

Figure 3 summarizes the three categories and their proposed, non-causal links to incomplete enactment in transition from GEP 1.0 to GEP 2.0.

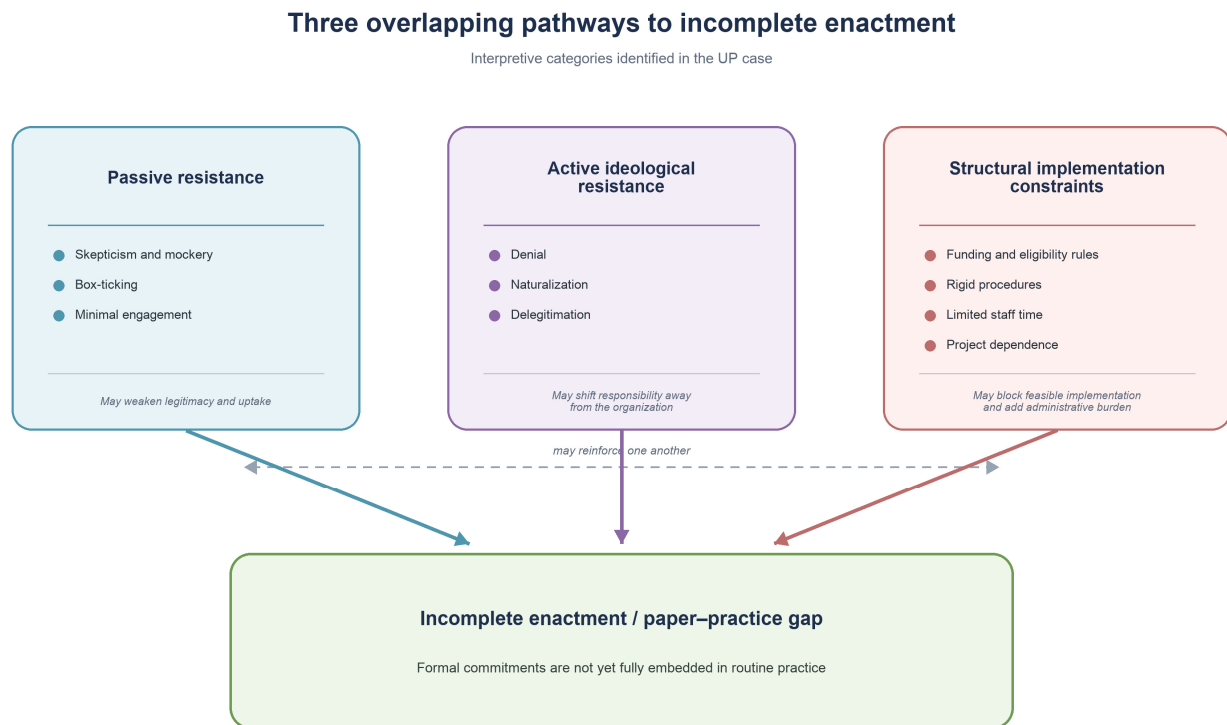


Figure 3. Schematic summary of the three overlapping resistance and implementation-constraint categories identified in the UP case in transition from GEP 1.0 to adoption of GEP 2.0. Solid arrows denote plausible links between each category and incomplete enactment; the dashed bidirectional arrow denotes possible mutual reinforcement among the categories. These arrows do not represent tested causal effects or prevalence estimates.

5.3. Audit-Induced Decoupling and European Conditionality

Evidence from UP is consistent with conditions under which audit-induced decoupling may arise. When under-resourced support structures face additional reporting demands, scarce capacity may be redirected toward proof of compliance (Kalpazidou Schmidt & Cacace, 2019; Mergaert & Lombardo, 2014). This interpretation describes a risk, not an established causal effect or inevitable outcome. UP’s spring 2024 focus groups captured skepticism, administrative burden, and box-ticking, while the 2026–2030 plan introduced more explicit budgeting, monitoring, and distributed responsibility. This temporal contrast suggests that organizational learning may reduce decoupling; however, the plan’s recent adoption provides no basis for claiming that the paper–practice gap has been closed.

The findings also raise a political-economy question about European governance. A uniform funding-eligibility condition may distribute implementation costs unevenly because institutions enter the regime with different administrative capacities (European Commission, 2022; Mergaert & Lombardo, 2014; Vida, 2021). The proportionality principle proposed here concerns the means, not the substantive GE objective: common equality goals may require differentiated reporting pathways and targeted capacity support if smaller institutions are to undertake cultural and organizational change alongside formal compliance.

External networks and project support may support organizational learning, but sustainability depends on whether temporary capacity becomes embedded in stable roles, budgets, and routines (Clavero & Galligan, 2021; Kalpazidou Schmidt & Cacace, 2019; Palmén & Kalpazidou Schmidt, 2019). GEP 2.0 addresses this risk in its formal design through a dedicated budget, distributed coordination, and recurring monitoring. These provisions are enabling conditions whose implementation should be evaluated after sufficient time has elapsed.

5.4. Comparative Implications

The embedded documentary comparison reveals a shared formal response but different modes of formal operationalization (Table 4). Because it is based on public plans, the comparison identifies differences in formal design and planned governance rather than implementation effectiveness.

Table 4. Documentary comparison of formal GEP design at the three Slovenian public universities.

Dimension	UP	UL	UM
Documents and period	GEP 2021–2027 and GEP 2026–2030 (focal longitudinal case)	University-wide GEP 2022–2027 and separate Action Plan for 2023	Gender Equality Action Plan 2021–2025
Governance specified in the documents	GEP 2.0 specifies central coordination, faculty-level coordinators, and measure owners	Responsible persons at constituent-member and rectorate levels; university-level monitoring group	Rector-appointed working group prepared the plan; responsible actors are assigned by measure
Data and monitoring provisions	Gender-disaggregated indicators, a KPI dashboard, recurring monitoring, and at least annual reporting	Collection and publication of gender-related data; progress monitoring; timelines and indicators in the 2023 Action Plan	Baseline statistics; indicators, target values, deadlines, and responsible actors; annual monitoring and reporting
Operational form	GEP 2.0 links measures to distributed responsibility, a dedicated annual budget, and monitoring	Broad university framework translated into a time-bound action plan	Integrated action matrix linking objectives, measures, indicators, deadlines, and responsibility
Cultural-change provisions	Training, participation, work-care support, and reintegration measures	Inclusive language, training, communication, work-care reconciliation, and prevention of violence and harassment	Awareness-raising, leadership training, inclusive language, work-life balance, and anti-discrimination measures

Note: Entries summarize formal provisions in publicly available plans ([University of Ljubljana, 2022, 2023](#); [University of Maribor, 2021](#); [University of Primorska, 2021, 2025](#)). They do not assess implementation, outcomes, or institutional performance.

The principal difference is organizational design: UL combines a university-wide framework with a separate action plan, UM uses an integrated action matrix, and UP's second plan emphasizes distributed coordination and recurring monitoring. Evidence from UL further shows that formal adoption can coexist with rigid work-care and career structures ([Švab et al., 2025](#)). These differences contextualize the UP case but do not support ranking the universities.

5.5. Theoretical Significance and Broader Practical Relevance

The study uses institutional theory as its foundational explanation for the gap between formal policy and routine practice. Feminist-institutional and audit-culture scholarship add complementary lenses on gendered informal rules, visible compliance, and resource allocation. Together, these perspectives distinguish compliance, implementation, and institutionalization as processes that may coexist in tension rather than as equivalent or automatically sequential stages.

The GEP-MI translates institutionalization into six document-observable dimensions for within-case comparison over time. As a formative heuristic, it makes visible an asym-

metry between stronger formal design and slower cultural or resource-based embedding. Its scores do not identify a cause, rank institutions, or predict outcomes. Audit-induced decoupling under constrained resources is therefore offered as a scope-bounded proposition for further testing: external conditionality may redirect attention toward demonstrable compliance where administrative capacity, stable resourcing, and participatory cultural work are insufficient.

The UP case may also be relevant to Slovenian and regional higher-education institutions operating under similar European requirements and resource constraints. It illustrates one way a smaller university can redesign a first-generation plan around distributed responsibility, monitoring routines, and targeted support measures. The case is not a model of completed transformation, and the durability of outcomes remains open to evaluation. Wider GEP research likewise supports vigilant optimism about transformative potential rather than assumptions of automatic change (Lopes et al., 2024).

6. Conclusions, Limitations, and Future Research

The UP case indicates that GEP 2.0 contains a stronger formal design than the first observation period, including distributed governance, monitoring, clearer responsibility, and specified resourcing. Evidence from the recently adopted GEP 2.0 and previously conducted focus groups is consistent with an incomplete transition from formal compliance in GEP 1.0 to routinized practice envisaged in GEP 2.0; it does not demonstrate durable outcomes or causal effects. Within this single case, the transition paper–practice gap is analytically associated with three overlapping categories: passive resistance, active ideological resistance, and structural implementation constraints.

Two propositions warrant testing beyond UP: institutionalization is more likely when data routines, responsibility, resources, organizational integration, and cultural work develop together; and a well-designed GEP may remain decoupled without participation and engagement with gendered informal norms. These propositions are hypotheses for future comparative research, not generalizations established by the present case. For European policy, the risk of audit-induced decoupling under constrained resources suggests that common GE goals may need stable HR and monitoring capacity, simpler reporting pathways for smaller institutions, and, where legally feasible, recognition of care-related costs.

This study supports analytical rather than statistical generalization. It examines one university, uses a documentary rather than outcome-based comparison with UL and UM, and includes three purposively sampled focus groups whose number was fixed a priori rather than by theoretical saturation. The author-scored GEP-MI was not assessed by independent blinded coders; no inter-rater statistic was calculated, and its external validity has not been tested. It should therefore be read as transparent structured judgment, not a validated measurement instrument. The survey evidence is available only in aggregate, and respondent composition differs between 2024 and 2025. The data cannot identify subgroup differences, adjust for changes in who responded, estimate within-group variation, or validly test year-to-year differences; an apparent change may reflect respondent composition rather than changing perceptions. Author involvement and the recent adoption of GEP 2.0 further constrain independent assessment and any claim about lasting effects.

Future research should follow implementation longitudinally at UP using disaggregated survey data, observation, outcome indicators, independent scoring, and verified staff time and financial inputs. This could show which groups experience unequal treatment, whether formal measures alter routines and outcomes, and which maturity dimensions are associated with sustained change. GEP-MI validation should use a published codebook, at least two independent coders, ordinal agreement statistics, sensitivity tests for anchors and weights, and convergent checks against implemented measures and longitudinal out-

comes. Replication in another Widening context—ideally across institutions of different size and administrative capacity—could distinguish UP- or Slovenia-specific processes from transferable patterns, test whether audit-induced decoupling and the proportionality principle remain plausible under other governance and funding arrangements, and refine the framework for context-sensitive comparative use.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, P.B.; methodology, P.B.; formal analysis, P.B. and Š.B.; writing—original draft preparation, P.B.; writing—review and editing, P.B. and Š.B. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research was funded by the European Union’s Horizon Europe research and innovation programme through the AGRIGEP project, Grant Agreement No. 101094158.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Commission of the University of Primorska for Ethics in Human Subjects Research (KER UP) (protocol code 4264-49-3/24 and 21 March 2024).

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

Data Availability Statement: Due to personal data protection, focus group transcripts and survey micro-data are not publicly available; aggregated extracts are available from the first author upon a reasonable, justified request.

Acknowledgments: The authors thank the focus group participants and the staff who participated in the satisfaction survey, as well as colleagues who contributed to the preparation of and access to aggregated administrative data. Special thanks go to the AGRIGEP project for training and mentoring supporting capacity development and the exchange of good practices. The original manuscript was written in Slovenian. During its preparation and revision, the authors used ChatGPT (GPT-5, OpenAI; accessed 25 July 2026) and Google Gemini (continuously updated web version, Google; accessed 25 July 2026) for translation, language editing, reference-format checks, and preparation or revision of the manuscript’s schematic figures. The tools did not generate or alter the underlying research data, qualitative coding, or empirical analysis. The authors take full responsibility for the originality, validity, integrity, and final content of this publication.

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

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