

Context Matters: problematising the policy-practice interface in the enactment of gender equality action plans in universities

Abstract

This paper argues for recognition of the constitutive role of context in shaping the dynamics of the policy-practice interface in the field of gender equality in universities. Using a comparative and reflective case-study approach, we draw on our experiences, as action-researchers, of developing and implementing Gender Equality Action Plans (GEAPs) in four universities in four different European countries and we explore the role of national and local context in the mediation and translation of the GEAP model. Drawing on the concepts of gendered organisations, dialogic organisational change and policy mobilities, we argue for the need to be critical of approaches to gender equality in higher education (HE) that presume policy measures and good practice models transfer unproblematically to different HE organisations in different international contexts; instead, we draw attention to the contingent ways in which uneven gender relations articulate and manifest in different contexts, shaping possibilities for, and obstacles to, gender equality intervention. Thus, we argue that context plays a crucial constitutive role in the interpretation, enactment and impact of gender equality policy in HE.

Keywords: Gender equality, policy mobilities, universities, gender equality action plans, organisational change, context.

Introduction

Achieving structural and cultural change for gender equality in academia is both complex and difficult. Many have highlighted the slow pace of change (Benschop & Van Den Brink, 2014; England, 2010; Linehan, Buckley, & Koslowski, 2009). As action-researchers involved in the design and implementation of Gender Equality Action Plans (GEAPs) in four European universities, we have reflected on our own, often frustrating, experiences of seeking to achieve organisational change for gender equality. Some argue that a key explanation for sluggish change lies with difficulties in translating principles or policy into practice (Bagilhole, 2002; De Vries & Van den Brink, 2016; Powell, Ah-King & Hussénus, 2017; Squires, 2005). Another explanation points to the deeply embedded structural and cultural nature of gender inequality in academia which undermines equality policies and interventions in practice (Van den Brink & Benschop, 2012). In this paper, we seek to contribute to these debates by proposing a reconceptualization of the interface between policy and practice in the field of gender equality in academia that helps to shed light on the inconsistent ways in which gender equality policies become enacted in different contexts. Drawing on our own experiences and on the concepts of gendered organisations, dialogic organisational change and policy mobilities, we are critical of approaches to gender equality in higher education (HE) that presume policy measures and good practice models transfer unproblematically to different HE organisations in different international contexts. Instead, we draw attention to the context-specific and contingent ways in which uneven gender relations articulate and manifest in different contexts, thus shaping possibilities for, and obstacles to, gender equality intervention. We propose a reconceptualisation of the policy-practice interface that views context as dynamic and constitutive and we build on this conceptualisation, and on analysis of GEAP implementation in different organisations, to show how context shapes the uneven and inconsistent take-up and enactment of gender policies in HE.

This research was conducted in the context of a growing engagement by the HE and research sectors internationally with the imperative to address persistent gender inequalities in research and academic careers. One manifestation of this imperative is the emergence of measures to encourage universities and research organisations to develop and implement Gender Equality Action Plans (GEAPs). GEAPs are tools that involve organisational gender self-assessment and identification and implementation of actions to bring about change (EIGE 2016). In academic and research contexts, GEAPs tend to incorporate measures to address gender issues in academic careers, working conditions, workplace cultures and constructions of research excellence (Vinogradova, Jänchen & Obexer-Ruff, 2015). A number of national and international schemes for promoting gender equality in research and HE, such as the UK-based Athena SWAN charter, its international spin-offs and the European Commission's strategy on gender equality in research all strongly emphasize the organisational GEAP model (EIGE 2016; Kalpazidou Schmidt, Ovseiko, Henderson, & Kiparoglou, 2019). For example, significant funding has been awarded through the European Commission's H2020 research funding programme to universities that commit to developing and implementing GEAPs. However, universities funded in this way include a wide range of organisational contexts for gender equality policy and practice, from organisations with little historical precedence in relation to gender equality policy to those with well-established equality infrastructures. This raises an interesting question – how are GEAP models adopted, interpreted, mediated and (re)produced in and across different organisational contexts? While GEAPs are expected to be tailored to local contexts, there is little reflection on the process of 'tailoring' and how it works in practice in a policy environment of high demand for off-the-shelf solutions to 'fix' the problem of gender inequality. To address this gap, this paper presents the results of a comparative self-reflection and critical analysis of the GEAP implementation process as experienced in four different universities. Drawing on this

reflection and analysis, we argue for a focus on the context-specific nature of the *processes* through which GEAP models are taken up, interpreted and enacted in organisations. In the next section, we position this argument conceptually. We highlight, firstly, the limited attention to context in literature on gender equality interventions. We then go on to propose a conceptual framework to address this, drawing on the macro-level concept of policy mobilities and the meso-level concepts of organisations as gendered/gendering and organisational change as dialogic.

Addressing gender inequalities in research and academia – problematising the policy-practice interface

It is perhaps self-evident, given differences across national contexts in terms of legislation, employment structures, social protection and welfare measures and not least culture and traditions, that some degree of context-specificity is required when developing gender equality interventions and policies. In this vein, recently, work by some EU-funded gender equality projects has acknowledged the need for context-specificity in the development of toolkits and resources for gender-equality action implementation or evaluation (see for example, GENOVATE, n.d; Mihajlović Trbovc, 2016; Kalpazidou Schmidt et al, 2019).

However, these are the exception rather than the rule and the policy environment in general is saturated with a wealth of models and toolkits that pay little or no attention to the need for context-specificity. Kalpazidou Schmidt et al (2019) highlight the importance of contextual factors such as university rules, procedures, formal and informal norms of behaviour, departmental cultures and wider dynamics of change in influencing the outcomes of gender equality interventions in universities. A number of other studies highlight the need for suitable local conditions to be in place for organisational change interventions to be effective (Benschop, Mills, Mills, & Tienari, 2012; Doherty & Manfredi, 2006)., and recently there

have been calls for more attention to context-specificity in research on gender equality in academic organisations (Powell, Ah-King & Hussénus, 2018; Le Feuvre, 2015). Thus, it is evident that context-specificity is important in the field of gender equality intervention in higher education.

However, a theoretical framework for understanding precisely *how* context matters and how GEAP models become interpreted, translated and embedded in different contexts is needed. Often, when ‘context’ is considered in relation to policy implementation, it is seen as a kind of inert backdrop against which policies move around and ‘touch down’ (Peck, 2011).

However, here we propose a more social constructivist approach that recognises the co-constitutive nature of local/organisational contexts, where policy ideas are interpreted and mediated, and that are therefore integrally bound up with the policy process itself (Dang, 2015; Peck, 2011). Our approach views ‘context’ as the specific settings or socio-institutional milieu, both local and trans-local, in which actors are embedded, and policies are enacted. Thus, an organisation like a university can be viewed as a particular setting and milieu for policy enactment, with its own specific organisational cultures/structures, local and national conditions and trans-local connectedness. However, crucially, these settings and socio-institutional milieu are not static backdrops, but are dynamic and relational spaces through which policy ideas are translated and mediated (McCann & Ward, 2010; Peck & Theodore, 2012). Thus, in contrast to seeing policy as a codified means of ‘solving a problem’ we echo Braun, Ball, Maguire & Hoskins’ (2011, p. 586) perspective of ‘policy as a process, as diversely and repeatedly contested and/or subject to ‘interpretation’ as it is enacted (rather than implemented) in original and creative ways’ within specific socio-institutional and local contexts.

Gendered organisations: Theorisations of gender processes that highlight the deeply embedded nature of gendered and gendering processes in the structures and cultures of organisations provide a crucially important lens through which to view how GEAPs are interpreted and enacted in HE organisations (Acker, 1990; 2006; Calás, Smircich & Holvino, 2014; Savigny, 2019). This approach, stemming from Acker (1990), focuses on gender practices (Ely and Meyerson, 2000; Martin, 2003; Poggio, 2006), as micro-level interactions between individuals, to understand the complex and subtle means through which the gender order is structured in academic institutions. This draws attention to gendered structures and organisational cultures, in the sense of their norms, values, discourses and everyday practices. Van den Brink & Benschop (2012: 87) demonstrate that gendering practices vary by academic field and therefore gender-equality policies should be tailored to specific disciplines or fields (and, we would add, to specific organisational and geographical contexts). In this vein, our analysis recognises the role of gendering processes and practices in the very structuring of HE organisations. Building on this, we propose that an understanding (at the meso level) of organisations as gendered, and organisational change as dialogic (Bushe & Marshak, 2009; Grant & Marshak, 2011), in conjunction with the (macro-level) concept of policy mobilities (Peck, 2011; Temenos & McCann, 2012), together provide a conceptual framework that can be applied in making sense of the policy-practice interface in terms of how gender equality policies become differently translated and enacted in different contexts. In the rest of this review section, we present an overview of theories of dialogic organisational change, before going on to discuss the concept of policy mobilities.

Dialogic organisational change: At the organisational (or meso) level, literature points to the inadequacy of models that view organisational change as an *outcome* resulting from the importation of policy, rather than as an ongoing *process*, involving complex interactions

between policy and practice. In this vein, Barry, Berg, & Chandler (2012) call for a focus on multi-level and complex *processes* of change in organisations, challenging the static top-down rational view of change which tends to see it in terms of a series of ‘before and after’ moments. While organisations implement change in many ways, much contemporary research in the area calls for organisational change processes to be framed as dialogical, emergent and responsive to local specificities (see Bushe & Marshak, 2009; Oswick, 2009; Oswick & Marshak, 2011) and such work critiques the model of ‘best practices’ as decontextualized tools that can be imported without being embedded in institutional structures. For example, Bushe & Marshak (2014) propose that transformational change is only achieved in organisations when the conditions are such that core narratives are disrupted rather than simply layering new ideas onto resistant structures and practices.

Dialogic approaches to understanding the dynamics of organisational change position organisations as meaning-making systems and socially constructed – and argue, therefore, for the importance of understanding stakeholders’ realities as part of achieving transformational change. As Ozbilgin & Tatli (2011: 1233) point out, actors in the equality and diversity field are not ‘indifferent bystanders, but strategic actors who seek to shape equality and diversity agendas, with a view to affect the distribution of political and other forms of power in work settings’. Achieving transformational change in organisations thus requires understanding a multiplicity of perspectives and intervening to challenge embedded core narratives rather than ‘diagnosing’ needs and imposing a unitary set of best practice (Ozbilgin & Tatli, 2011). Framing organisational change as relational, dynamic and contextualised is a useful counterweight to the strong tradition within policy fields of seeking to identify and use best practice in a universalist manner across organisations (Peck, 2011; Pfeffer, 1998). This perspective, therefore, highlights that change processes need to reflect and respond to locally-specific

contexts, needs and circumstances, while being cognisant of political processes and power in organizations.

Policy mobilities: If we view organisations as power-laden meaning-making systems in which policy ideas are interpreted and adopted under locally-specific conditions, it becomes necessary to view context as more than a mere backdrop to policy transfer. The concept of policy mobilities has the potential to deepen our understanding of how policy ideas are enacted, and re-made, rather than simply implemented, in different local contexts (McKenzie, Bieler, & McNeil, 2015; Peck, 2011; Peck & Theodore, 2010; Temenos & McCann, 2013). The recent proliferation of GEAP models in HE and research can be viewed as an example of transnational policy mobility, whereby policy ideas and models travel quickly between and across jurisdictions, exert normative power across long distances and involve complex networks of actors (Peck, 2011). GEAP policy fields can be viewed as comprising networks of *actors* (including policy-makers, funding agencies, experts, practitioners) and *ideas* (in the form of gender equality toolkits, ‘best practices’ and resources) that constantly (re-)make policy regimes. The literature on policy mobilities, located in part in the fields of critical geography and urban studies, and drawing on institutional theory and critical policy studies, draws attention to the emerging global ‘fast-policy’ regime, which reflects the growing demand for pragmatic solutions and ‘best practice’ models to solve social problems (Peck, 2011). The global demand for ‘quick fixes’ or ‘magical solutions’ (Ball, 1998) means that policy ideas become transformed into technical ‘solutions’ by smoothing away the local contingencies of the particular contexts from which they emerged, or by disembedding them (Sahlin-Andersson and Sevón, 2003; Temenos & McCann, 2012). In the global marketplace for policy solutions, organisations engage with, and imitate, fashionable policy ideas, though

in reality these ideas mutate and are transformed as they are adopted (Czarniawska and Sevón, 2005; Sahlin-Andersson and Sevón, 2003).

In challenging assumptions about rational and unilinear transfer of ‘best practices’, the policy mobilities literature highlights the ‘constitutive socio-spatial context of policy-making activities’ and emphasises the power relations that saturate the concrete contexts through which policy ideas are mediated, and mutate in the process (Peck, 2011: 774). Therefore, rather than policy solutions being transferred unproblematically from sites of policy-making to sites of implementation, policy ideas are understood to be re-made in different policy-(re)making sites (or contexts). This perspective draws attention to the ways in which mobile policy ideas become filtered through and embedded in specific contexts in selective and strategic ways, which, crucially, are political, and through which both they, and the actors and contexts involved, become changed in the process. According to Temenos & McCann (2012), mobile policy ideas are particularly powerful because not only do they propose solutions, but in doing so, they discursively frame the nature of the local problem and the possibilities for intervention. Furthermore, they point out, the inherently political nature of these embedding processes is often denied, as policy transfers are represented by strategic actors as technical rather than political processes.

Conceptualising the policy-practice interface: The macro-level concept of policy mobilities, together with an understanding of organisational change at the meso-level as dialogic, emergent and political, provides a framework that can be useful in understanding how gender equality policies are mediated in different organisational contexts. Using this framework, and grounding it in an understanding of organisations as gendered and gendering (Acker, 2006), in this paper we examine how gender equality policy initiatives, measures and models

interact with diverse actors and organisations (universities) that have their own particular histories, cultures and structures. The ‘putting into practice’ of GEAPs in HE organisations is framed as a contingent and political process that is unevenly and inconsistently constituted in different socio-spatial contexts,. Accordingly, we propose that one of the reasons for the persistence of a ‘gap’ between gender equality policy and practice is the inability of universalist policy ideas to adequately account for the role of context and we propose a conceptual understanding of the policy-practice interface that foregrounds the constitutive role of context. We develop this argument with reference to a collaborative action-research gender project, involving four universities (in four different European countries) and the development and implementation of a tailored GEAP in each university. We present here a contextualised and comparative analysis of the experiences of GEAP enactment in the four universities, focusing specifically on the area of academic career transitions, that is, on those GEAP measures focused specifically on staffing processes such as recruitment, promotion, retention, progression and staff development.

Methodology

We draw on the gender project’s documentation, over four years, of the action-research process of GEAP development and enactment, as well as our own reflections on this process. As action-researchers and members of the GEAP teams¹ of the four partner universities collaborating in the gender project, our reflections form a key part of our analysis. We understand action research as an approach to research that is oriented to change, challenges the separation of research from action and is based on a cycle of research, planning, action and reflection (Coghlan and Brannick, 2001). Our position as insiders in this action-research

¹GEAP teams were those working together, as part of the gender project, in each university, to develop, promote and implement the GEAPs.

process provides us with a very particular vantage point; our analysis reflects this positioning as we are inevitably deeply embedded in the very contexts we seek to both change and understand (see also Bendl, Danowitz, & Schmidt, 2014; Parsons & Priola, 2013). We simultaneously occupy positions as GEAP leaders with an interest in promoting sustainable organisational change for gender equality in our own universities, researchers with an interest in understanding how gendering processes work in universities, and staff employed (at various levels from professor to contract researcher) within the universities we seek to change. The reflexive component was a central part of the gender project, in that we, the action-researchers involved in the GEAPs, designed a methodological structure through which we could document and reflect on the *processes* involved in defining and implementing GEAP actions. This processual data capture was an integral part of our action-research approach, which involved overlapping cycles of planning, implementing, reflecting on and revising actions for change (see Coghlan & Brannick, 2001; Doherty & Manfredi, 2006). In fact, a key feature of ‘implementation’ among all partners was the need to constantly revise and adapt GEAPs in response to new organisational knowledge and changing circumstances.

The methodology of data capture involved a number of different elements. Firstly, at the outset of the project, each GEAP team conducted a detailed quantitative and qualitative organisational baseline gender analysis of policy and practice, followed by the development of an action plan for gender equality, in the area of career transitions. At the end of each year of the four-year project, each GEAP team produced a written report of activities-to-date towards achievement of their GEAP goals (an annual progress report). Each year, a consortium workshop was held to share experiences of implementation, the outcomes of which were documented. In the final phase of the project, the work-package coordinator

collected written reflections on the process of implementation from all GEAP teams. This involved the method of ‘guided reflection’ (as outlined by Archibong et al., 2016), whereby the WP coordinator devised a set of questions for each partner to answer in the form of written reflections. The questions asked whether the GEAP team felt that their original GEAP objectives had been achieved, if the plans themselves had changed over the course of the project, what factors they felt had hindered or supported the implementation of actions, and what advice the teams might give to another similar organisation embarking upon a GEAP. In most cases, the written reflections raised further questions for the WP coordinator, so a second round of guided reflection involved specific questions tailored to each partner. In this way, the guided reflections sought to capture, from the perspectives of the GEAP teams themselves, the factors influencing both successes and failures as well as the trajectories of GEAP development in each university. Taken together, these written reflections (WRs²) and other project documents provide a corpus of data which we have subjected to analysis, in light of reflections on our own personal experiences as GEAP team members, with the goal of understanding how organisational and geographical context-specificity shaped GEAP implementation and outcomes in our transnational gender project. In our analysis, we focus in particular on the ways in which gender equality measures that appeared to be universally applicable were received and understood in our different organisational contexts, that is, in four European universities.

Case-Studies in Context

The planned GEAP actions for each partner university were identified by each partner team drawing on their baseline organisational analyses, discussions with other consortium partners and, importantly, from international literature, policy and ‘good practice’ models. The GEAP

² Written Reflections are referred to as WRs throughout the paper.

actions therefore represented concrete attempts to put mobile policy ideas into practice and drew from the emerging body of international and EU policy on gender equality in research. The four universities are referred to here as University A, University B, University C and University D. This section provides some context for each partner institution and an explanation of how each GEAP team identified specific measures appropriate to their organisational context; this information is summarised in tabular form below (Table 1) and is followed in the subsequent sections by a contextualised comparative analysis.

University A, following an in-depth organisational gender analysis of staff composition across the university, which found the transition from PhD to staff researcher was a key career point at which numbers of women decrease, identified a need at organisational level to intervene at the recruitment stage of the academic career ladder by supporting junior female researchers. The University A GEAP team identified that there was little pre-existing equality infrastructure or policy in the university and also, they felt, a lack of gender awareness. Efforts to enhance gender-sensitivity of staffing policies were complicated by the national context for this university where hiring and promotion decisions are coordinated nationally. The GEAP team, comprised of academics, was not positioned within top management in the university. Taking these contextual factors into account, the team planned to develop a university-wide female mentoring programme³, establish a university Gender Observatory (to conduct gender analysis and promote gender equity in academic careers) and to engage at national level to influence policy. They found that the immediate needs were to raise organisational awareness of the issues, build a local support structure for women, influence

³ Mentoring is an internationally recognised mode of career development and has been particularly successful in supporting the career development of female staff in universities and other institutions in which they are significantly under-represented at senior levels (Through the Glass Ceiling, 2012)

the university to collect and publish gender-disaggregated data and involve the university management in the GEAP.

University B, a university with strong links to industry, had a long-established equality infrastructure and a pro-active approach to gender equality. The interdisciplinary GEAP team had strong links across the university. Despite the existence of an equality infrastructure, the initial baseline organisational analysis identified a lack of both support and guidelines to encourage a gender-aware recruitment process in the university, particularly at academic department level. The team identified a need to build on existing gender equality initiatives by focusing on one very male-dominated department as an organisational test-bed for implementation of a gender-aware recruitment strategy through a joint learning process between HR and that academic department. In line with national policy on gender targets, they also participated in developing a model for setting gender targets for senior posts.

University C's GEAP team had recently instigated a career development and mentoring programme for academic women across the university. Through the learning from this programme, together with their baseline organisational analysis, the GEAP team identified a need for extensive structural change initiatives to address gender inequality. There was little pre-existing equality infrastructure in the university, which, the GEAP team felt, took a largely compliance approach to national equality legislation. The university was characterised by a strong managerialist governance ethos though there was, at that time, little space within that for equality work and the interdisciplinary GEAP team was not embedded in senior management. As a result of these contextual factors, the team advocated for a series of structural actions (to enhance gender competence in staffing processes) by appealing to the university's strategic interests and through internal stakeholder engagement.

University D had a long and well-established equality infrastructure and an interdisciplinary GEAP team, involving academics and administrators, which was positioned close to senior management. It could be considered a university with a strong managerialist governance ethos. Although there was a pre-existing institutional commitment to equality at this university, University D's baseline organisational analysis identified specific needs relating to a lack of women in senior research leadership roles as well as more general issues relating to promotion and pay. They developed a series of actions including a pay-gap analysis, academic trajectory analysis, learning partnerships and setting of gender targets.

[Table 1 here]

Context matters – interrogating the policy-practice interface

While each partner university developed its own tailored GEAP, applying universalist ideas to specific local contextual conditions, there was also coordination and shared learning across the consortium. We reflect here on what we learned and we focus in particular on how a comparative analysis of the four cases draws our attention to the constitutive role of context in mediating and translating GEAP models and producing context-specific GEAP trajectories and outcomes. In the rest of the paper, we present a number of empirical examples from our gender project to demonstrate how context shaped the possibilities for, and trajectories of, gender equality action in our universities.

I. National context and policy immobility

Firstly, at an early stage in the gender project, it became clear that national context matters in very apparent ways. While existing research points to the ways in which gendered processes and patterns differ according to macro-level national context (Le Feuvre, 2015; O'Connor, 2011), there is less recognition of the ways in which national differences in policy, practice and legislation impact on where, how, and at what pace, intervention is possible. As we began to develop our plans for addressing gender inequalities in recruitment and promotions processes, it became apparent that different national systems meant that there could be no 'one size fits all' approach. The types of local interventions initially proposed at consortium level (internationally recognised measures such as gender-sensitive recruitment/promotions procedures, gender audits of practice, gender balance on selection committees) were not possible to implement in University A because of the centralised system of recruitment and promotion in their country, in which criteria and selection procedures for new posts and promotions are established at national level.

'Our initial plan of introducing new regulations for recruitment and promotion committees, to modify procedures to elect board and committee members and to modify career advancement procedures [...] had to be redesigned in order to suit national policy-making procedures. [...] We realized that in order to envision and implement any action related to these points we have to intervene in national policy making, which has made the process slower for us' (University A GEAP Team - WR).

Initially, University A's plans were influenced by expectations (at consortium level and internally) that universalist-type measures could be applied in their organisation, an expectation that reflects the power of mobile policy ideas. However, such ideas had to be translated and re-interpreted for this specific context by the GEAP team, which meant working with actors outside the organisation to develop a coherent narrative of change that might be possible. As a result, University A's GEAP was re-designed with the goal of

influencing national policy (influencing ‘up’) and, at the local level, supporting women across the university to maximise opportunities within the existing system. This meant more efforts by the team to involve university management and representatives of wider decision-making bodies in the project, more actions to build a national network of researchers linked to sister projects in other universities, and engaging with national policy-makers. In other words, the process of GEAP implementation for this team, already relatively marginally positioned in the university, involved directing much energy and time to the work of building capacity and advocating for an agenda for change.

In contrast to University A, the analysis reveals that Universities B, C and D, where recruitment and promotion are managed locally, could develop actions to intervene at a level closer to actual practices of recruitment and promotion and to influence them directly. Thus, macro conditions such as national equality legislation and meso-level organisational control of recruitment and promotion processes provided potentially enabling conditions to effect change. Such conditions meant that it was possible to work closely with the *actors* who are directly involved in decision-making and in managing the staffing processes – so intervention could concentrate on implementation within existing structures. For example, in University B, the GEAP team worked closely with the Human Resources Department:

When this project [of gender targets] is initiated by the HR-department, the [GEAP] team at [our university] will take an active part in the process of setting targets
(University B GEAP Team - WR).

The written reflections show that these partners found that a key factor for success was developing good working relationships among internal stakeholders – that is, collaboration between Human Resources departments, GEAP teams, equality units and so on. These GEAP teams were able to work on awareness-raising and equality training to directly influence

recruitment and promotion processes. However, this type of collaboration was much more possible in Universities B and D than in University C (as discussed below in III), because of the pre-existing equality infrastructures and strong interdepartmental working relationships in B and D. In other words, local cultures, structures and narratives shaped the dynamics of the policy-practice interface.

What became evident at an early stage in the gender project was that national legislative and administrative systems shape what policy ideas are relevant, or even possible, in the first place. These realities challenge what Peck (2011) refers to as the model of ‘policy transfer’, which presumes that policies can diffuse sequentially across spaces. Instead, this reality draws attention to the nature of the problems themselves – rather than asking simply ‘what works best?’, it is necessary to ask ‘what is the nature of the problem *here* and what kind of intervention is possible *here*?’

II: Some policies and models adapt or mutate, as they are adopted in different contexts

Beyond national legislative contexts, organisational cultures and climates differ too. This is about working environments, cultures, practices and discourses within organisations (O’Connor, 2011). Every organisation has a particular gender climate, or climates, in terms of their practices around recruitment and promotion, their governance cultures and levels of gender-sensitivity. Our analysis across the baseline organisational data and our shared reflections indicate that Universities B and D had strong and embedded equality policies and infrastructure along with a positive action approach to equality, which contrasted with the more compliance-based approaches of Universities A and C. However, even where similar policy exists, it can be constructed very differently and translated into practice within

institutions in different ways. As McKenzie, Bieler, & McNeil (2015) suggest, it is important to look at what happens on the ground in particular institutions as policies are adopted and interpreted in local contexts, including how policies are combined, modified, resisted and informed by situated actors, places and practices.

Experiences shared via written reflections (WRs) suggest that while in Universities B and D action towards structural change for gender equality was generally culturally acceptable, the climate in Universities A and C was less attuned to such an approach. A key motivating factor for the successful introduction in University B of new measures for gender equality in recruitment and promotion was felt to be the ‘Gender-aware and positive climate of the university management’ (University B GEAP team - WR). In Universities A and C, the GEAP teams felt that a discourse of gender-neutrality was prevalent in their organisations. In University A particularly, they felt that the level of gender awareness was very low:

Prior to the GEAP implementation at [our university], awareness about barriers that women academics have to face in their career path was very low. [...] As a key action of [our] GEAP, our Pilot Mentoring Programme aims to promote diversity and to defy academic practices that may cling to gender-neutral assumptions (University A GEAP Team - WR).

Both University A and C’s GEAP teams assessed that their local gender climates would not be welcoming towards a very radical or transformational change initiative. This assessment was reinforced by awareness of their own relatively marginal positions within their universities. Others have also found greater institutional resistance to structural change projects compared to ‘help-the-women’ projects (Powell, Ah-King and Hussénus, 2018). Where the organisational climate may not be conducive to the introduction of far-reaching structural measures, a more cautious or incremental approach was deemed more sensible and

more likely to be successful. Thus, University A found that measures that directly support women in career progression (often seen as more individual-level – though see O Gráda et al., 2015, for an analysis that challenges this perception) were more culturally acceptable but could also provide a strong basis for future structural change efforts. Their assessment was based on an understanding of local gender politics in which there was a dominant framing of the gender ‘problem’ as one that could be addressed through career development supports – hence, local politics strategically and selectively shaped local engagement with GEAP models.

In developing a mentoring programme in University A, and as part of the collaborative gender project, there was international knowledge exchange with, and learning from, the mentoring model previously developed in University C. However, it was adapted to suit local needs and priorities in University A. For example, it was embedded more formally within a GEAP with the aim of contributing to an integrated transformational plan. While University C had identified the importance of designing the mentoring programme within a gender equality framework, University A formalised this by explicitly connecting their mentoring programme to other gender-awareness activities. In addition, University A extended the potential reach and impact of the programme by focussing on ensuring sustainability and transferability of the mentoring programme. This was achieved by conducting intensive monitoring and a structured evaluation of the programme, with the goal of designing a mentoring model for other universities in that country. In other words, the ‘model’ followed differing trajectories in the two organisations, becoming transformed in the process, reflecting different prevailing local conditions, despite the similarities in their gender climates.

It should also be acknowledged that the original model developed by University C in turn had been built upon learning from academic mentoring models developed elsewhere and adapted to University C's local context, in an example of what Sahlin-Andersson & Sevón (2003) call a chain of translators. As Peck (2011) argues, policy does not simply transfer successfully from sites of innovation to 'lagging' sites but is involved in continuous transformation and mutation. Ideas are taken up and adapted differently in different contexts in ways that reflect local conditions as well as inter-institutional knowledge exchange dynamics. This challenges the idea of innovation as a singular one-way transfer from more to less progressive sites – instead, innovation is constant and contextualised as policies are re-made in different contexts.

III. Organisational cultures and structures can provide different implementation challenges and shape different trajectories of gender equality intervention

In addition to the role of organisational gender climates, GEAP team positionality, in terms of academic/administration composition and position in organisational hierarchies, is important. Thus, GEAP teams can be positioned differently in the power structures of their organisations, with implications for their ability to effect change (see also Parsons & Priola, 2013). Those universities with long histories of active equality work were also those where GEAP teams were positioned close to central management and administration (Universities B and D) and *vice versa* (Universities A and C). This is likely not a coincidence. The data (WRs and WP annual reports) reveal that Universities B and D focussed their GEAP efforts on implementation of concrete actions. Where the GEAP teams were positioned more marginally (Universities A and C), the data show that they had to devote more time to the work of building relationships and legitimacy. This also involved negotiating the actual meanings of gender-equality policy and practice in the organisations, a difficult and

politically sensitive process, which can carry personal risks for those seen to challenge the status quo. Thus, for some, the task involved challenging the organisation's 'core narrative' (Bushe & Marshak, 2014), which cannot be achieved through simple application of technical solutions, but involves efforts to re-frame the discursive construction of the gender problem itself.

Therefore 'GEAP implementation' meant different things in the different organisations, which is reflected in the different types of language used by the GEAP teams in their written reflections. When asked to reflect on key learning from their implementation work, University B and D GEAP teams both emphasised the importance of *motivating, informing* and *encouraging* staff and *ensuring* success:

Regular meetings with each faculty to ensure the projects are being undertaken and setting deadlines is also important to ensure that specific projects are going ahead as planned and not side-lined due to other pressing activities [...]. Showcasing the various projects to other faculties can also promote the development of the project. This will motivate, encourage, and inform staff of the various projects across the university and raise awareness of the significance of gender equality and its value to the institution (University D GEAP Team - WR).

The approach involved *joint* work between GEAP teams and relevant internal stakeholders – in a partnership that had the authority to implement concrete actions.

Since 2014 the [GEAP] team supports the Human Resources Department in its implementation of a gender-aware and sustainable recruitment processes that they started in 2012. HR's implementation of a gender-aware recruitment processes at [this university] strengthens our effort and vice versa (University B GEAP Team - WR).

The GEAPs of both University B and D, prior to commencement of the gender project, had already secured organisational legitimacy and acceptance by management – the challenge was to motivate staff at all levels to engage actively and to prioritise this.

In contrast, Universities A and C had to focus their energies on building legitimacy and securing acceptance by management, and their GEAP team reflections emphasised the need to *persuade* and *convince* institutional actors of the need for organizational change with considerable effort being expended in this discursive struggle:

Work to persuade and convince staff, through inclusive and participatory mechanisms, that there is an issue to be addressed (University C GEAP Team - WR).

Even when institutional actors appeared to have been persuaded of the need for actions to be taken, such actions did not necessarily happen. For example, in University C, the GEAP team found that many of their attempts to introduce specific structural measures were referred ‘up’ within the organisation and then often lost, or, responsibility was referred and re-referred to other individuals and bodies in an endless cycle with little real action, or what could be termed policy *immobility*. Similarly, Ahmed (2018) writes about ‘strategic inefficiency’, or, an institutional inefficiency that ultimately works to sustain existing hierarchical arrangements. The University A GEAP team found that formal statements supporting the organisational GEAP were not followed by actions aimed at structural changes. For example, in spite of formal management support for gender budgeting⁴, following the publication of gender statistics providing clear evidence of vertical and horizontal segregation, the GEAP team reported little organisational interest in formulating a gender-proofed recruitment policy to support a more transparent and equitable recruitment process. Similarly, Powell, Ah-King

⁴ Gender budgeting is understood here as a tool for the assessment of the political-economic and financial decisions of public administration from a gender-sensitive perspective.

& Hussénius (2018) document the ways in which, in their case-study university, initial formal support and stated commitment to gender equality measures were followed by resistance to implementation in practice. This finds resonance in Carr's (2014) analysis of policy immobility in the case of sustainable development policy in Brussels, where a number of local contextual factors, including conflicts of interest and a mismatch of governance structures, resulted in a failure to move beyond the discussion stage and into structural change. Ultimately, for Universities A and C, while the political symbolism of abstract policy proposals to enhance gender equality meant that they were ultimately officially endorsed, implementation of concrete measures was hampered, or blocked, by lack of compatibility between policy proposals and the gendered organisational cultures, practices and power relations existing in each context. This situation can be understood if it is recognised that:

the field of policy transfer is itself socially and institutionally constructed, [...] in the form of shifting landscapes of conjunctural openings and preferred channels; [...]; and, perhaps above all, it is saturated by power relations (Peck, 2011: 791).

In other words, the organisational context, in terms of governance structures, power relations and cultural norms, presents particular conditions that enable or constrain translation of policy ideas into organisational change (even while appearing to endorse it).

The role of organisational cultures and structures also manifests in the different ways in which other external drivers for gender equality actions have been adopted by universities. Universities C and D, though in different countries, have both adopted the same prestigious external gender equality charter (a mobile policy 'model'). The charter and related awards scheme appealed to the managerialist and neoliberal strategic interests of both universities (see Tzanakou and Pearce, 2019). However, an examination of both universities' strategic plans and award documents reveals that in University D, the scheme chimed closely with the

university's long-term strategy in relation to equality and diversity, while in University C it was vital in beginning to challenge the absence of such a strategy. This is a key distinction. In University D, the scheme was mainstreamed through, and connected to, pre-existing university equality structures and initiatives (for example, department-level GeCATs⁵ and a university-level Gender Forum). In University C, the scheme was a novel initiative which required new dedicated staff appointments and new structures and its significance lay in its role in directing managerial attention towards the imperative for change. In contrast, in University D, the scheme integrated with, and added momentum to, a pre-existing change agenda. The GEAP team here recommends:

Integrate the activity [the GEAP] with other external and internal activities, [...], and sell the benefit of this additional accreditation for the university. Stress that mainstreaming such activities will allow for the implementation through efficiently using current resources (University D GEAP Team – WR).

Benschop et al. (2012) point to the 'historicity' of organisational actors in maintaining elements of older gender orders even while change occurs. Thus, GEAP enactment may involve varying degrees of work and variable outcomes in terms of challenging core organisational narratives and cultures and shaping the discursive (re)framing of the gender problem in different organisational contexts .

IV. Despite ostensibly similar goals at organisational level, local actors can resist certain practices

Despite its basis in equality legislation across EU countries, gender equality monitoring of staffing data was not a universal practice among the four partner universities. Gender equality

⁵ GeCATs are staff and student teams facilitating change towards gender equality goals and objectives over a given time period with a view to localising and prompting action towards gender mainstreaming.

monitoring around key career transition points, such as recruitment or promotion, already featured in Universities B and D but not in the others. In fact, those GEAP teams in partner universities that did not have a history of equality monitoring found that attempts to introduce positive actions of any kind were hampered by lack of data. According to the University A GEAP Team (WR):

Provision of empirical data is fundamental to make gender dynamics visible. As stated [...], “No gender data, no gender problem.”

Lack of data means a lack of knowledge about the organisation and the gendered nature of career paths and obstacles to progression, and hence a lack of visibility of gender inequalities.

As Universities A and C found, the issue was not just about data collection but about a culture of transparency in relation to reporting on gender-disaggregated data. These GEAP teams had to focus energies on advocating for transparent reporting of basic staffing data – and, in fact, they faced resistance to this. All GEAP teams agreed that both basic and more fine-grained analyses are crucial in order to ground interventions and actions in an understanding of the organisation, and also, importantly, to make gender patterns visible and hence raise awareness of the need for intervention. This was central to the gender project’s action-research approach. However, for some GEAP teams (A and C), data collection and monitoring became a core GEAP goal in itself.

Data access is a key difficulty to overcome for producing accurate gender analyses. Even in those cases when the institution has already formalized processes of gender-disaggregated data collection, access to data often proves to be challenging for several reasons, among which privacy concerns (University A GEAP team - WR).

Resistance to the introduction of this measure may reflect uneven gender power relations in organisational governance structures. According to Bagilhole (2002: 23), those in relatively

powerful positions are able ‘to confidently offer varying responses to equal opportunities policies including those that reduce their effectiveness, without fear of retribution.’

Resistance as an exercise of power can be expressed informally and in mundane everyday practice in an organisation (Benschop & Van Den Brink, 2014; Powell, Ah-King, & Hussénius, 2018). In University A, the GEAP team found that data privacy concerns were presented as an argument against the introduction of gender equality monitoring. In University C, similarly, gender equality monitoring was considered problematic among some actors due to its perceived intrusiveness. The main justification presented for the failure to introduce it in University C, however, was technical:

We have [...] focused more on equality monitoring than anticipated because it has been more difficult than anticipated. There are technical obstacles to it and also some resistance to it (University C GEAP Team - WR).

For the University C GEAP Team, the work of engaging with management to introduce gender equality monitoring involved a long process of background research, preparation of detailed proposals, consultations, meetings and presentations, ultimately resulting in:

Presentation [...] in April 2015 resulted in agreement with principle of gender equality monitoring and implementation of same, subject to an ‘as is’ information technology upgrade in late 2015 (University C GEAP Team - WR).

Therefore, the work of the GEAP team focused on making the case for gender equality monitoring but ultimate acceptance of this was framed by management as being conditional on a technology upgrade. Despite the university having committed at an organisational level to implementation of gender equality monitoring (as part of its GEAP and equality legislation commitments), some organisational actors were able to resist it and to influence its ‘putting into practice’.

These are situated contextual factors showing how very similar equality legislation, awards schemes and ‘best practices’ (such as monitoring) are interpreted, and put into practice, differently in different contexts. Organisations adopt ‘best practice’ models in selective ways, translating them to suit the local context (Sahlin-Andersson and Sevón, 2003). While policy ideas that are challenging and disruptive tend to be resisted or modified in translation, those that promise quick solutions while leaving intact the status quo are more likely to be accepted (McKenzie, Bieler, & McNeil, 2015; Peck & Theodore, 2010; Temenos & McCann, 2013). This contributes to the tendency in some organisations for equality policies to be accepted at a symbolic level but resisted or weakened in practice (Bagilhole, 2002; Powell, Ah-King & Hussénus, 2018). Bleijenbergh (2017) also finds that gender equality change proposals are resisted by institutional actors when such proposals challenge an organisation’s view of itself as, for example, a fair employer. Bagilhole (2002) suggests that in some universities, equal opportunities policies are accepted only insofar as they do not challenge existing power structures, a response she associates with older universities (in the British context), pointing to the significance of organisational context. Policy measures that require long-term organisational structural change (such as those that would make gender patterns constantly visible), if they do not fit comfortably with existing local structures, cultures or identities, can fail to ‘stick’. As Peck (2011) points out, institutional framings actively support and enable some patterns of policy learning while ignoring or excluding others, thus shaping the uneven field of policy transfer. This filtering process is inherently political and strategic (and not necessarily rational). The introduction of gender equality monitoring became a long and slow process for Universities A and C as organisational factors emerged to resist it. To implement a transparent data collection and reporting process challenges established practice, potentially makes gender issues more visible and thus highlights the power and politics of organisational data (as knowledge). This suggests that the politics of knowledge, ideas and practice must be

considered and problematized in analyses of the policy-practice interface as organisations and their actors respond in strategic ways to policy ideas.

Discussion

To summarise, it became clear to us as GEAP teams, through the GEAP enactment process, that conditions for effective structural change varied significantly across contexts. For example, a distinction emerged between University A and the other three universities relating to the scale (national or local) at which intervention was needed for reform of staffing policies. Secondly, a distinction in terms of GEAP approach and emphasis emerges between Universities A and C on the one hand and Universities B and D on the other, which can be understood in relation to their particular organisational histories, structures and cultures. This has implications for how and where GEAP team energies are directed (for example, to disseminating new practices or building legitimacy) and whether and how measures are taken up. This distinction is particularly evident in the different approaches taken by Universities C and D towards the same gender equality charter scheme. Additionally, our analysis demonstrates that even among organisations that are similar in some ways, for example Universities A and C, local specificities mean that seemingly similar measures (such as mentoring schemes) can mutate and transform as they circulate between different contexts. We argue, therefore, that the role of context is not deterministic or predictable but very much emergent and co-constitutive.

We argue that a complex and dynamic interaction of organisational history, ethos and politics, national/local governance structures and local gender climates has significant implications for how a ‘problem’ like gender inequality is understood, how policy ideas are selectively engaged with, how GEAP teams are positioned organisationally and the nature of

internal support for, or resistance to, change. In other words, context plays a key co-constitutive role in shaping how, when and whether mobile policy ideas are adopted and enacted in different organisations (Peck, 2011; Braun et al, 2011). This has implications for the kinds of actions that are deemed acceptable or possible in different contexts, which actions will stick and which will not, and ultimately, how effective they are in instigating meaningful change.

The field of gender equality in research and HE is marked by continuing concern about the evident gap between policy and practice or outcome. We propose here that a policy-mobilities approach, in conjunction with dialogic and structural understandings of gendered organisational change, can contribute to enhanced understandings of the policy-practice interface in this field. Specifically, a policy mobilities approach draws attention to the macro level of policy landscapes within which organisations are embedded and through which they engage with circulating policy ideas. Concrete contexts provide varying material and political conditions through which abstract policy ideas are interpreted and acted upon (Braun et al, 2011). Our comparative case study demonstrates the influence of national and organisational contextual factors in policy im/mobility and mutation. Thus, clearly, there is a need to move beyond ideas of simple diffusion of best practice or policy and instead towards recognising networks of policy-making sites (for example, networks of universities, policy-makers, scholars, change agents) where bits and pieces of ideas about how to achieve greater gender equality in academic careers get differentially taken up, adapted, modified, ignored, circulated and/or enacted (Peck & Theodore, 2010).

Building on Peck's (2011) and others' arguments about understanding the contextual nature of policy translation we find it useful to frame, at the meso-level, organisational change

processes as dialogic, responsive and emergent – involving actors with different strategic interests engaging in different ways with mobile policy ideas and applying them to local structures. Thus, ongoing organisational learning processes need to take seriously the existence of power relations, multiple realities and diverse experiences in any organisation (Bushe & Marshak, 2014; Zippel & Ferree, 2019). This means that efforts to address gender inequality must incorporate methods of organisational learning about the complexities of context-specific gendered and gendering processes. Such efforts must be built upon reflexive organisational self-analysis that engages in transparent data monitoring and acknowledges local organisational politics, the strategic interests of stakeholders and the specificities of local change enablers and disablers, to facilitate context-sensitive development, translation and enactment of policy ideas and models. An action-research approach can facilitate this along with the use of guided reflections by action-researchers.

Our shared experiences as action-researchers involved in developing and enacting GEAPs in universities in four different European contexts enabled us to reflect critically, and comparatively, on the processes through which policy ideas and models of gender equality circulate and are translated, or not, into concrete practices and outcomes in organisations. We argue here that one of the reasons for persistence of what is seen as a policy-practice gap in gender equality in research and academia may be the inability of universalist or ‘best practice’ models to adequately account for contextual diversity and the constitutive socio-spatial context of policy-making activities. Moreover, the very idea of a policy-practice gap is reliant on a conceptualisation of policy as something that is comprised of fixed or agreed measures that can be transferred intact from sites of innovation to sites of implementation. Drawing on Peck (2011), McCann (2011) and others, and on our own analysis here, we argue instead that policy ideas, in the form of measures for gender equality in career transitions,

may not always be easily transferred between different sites, and when they do travel, they mutate and transform, that is, are re-made, as they are selectively engaged with in different contexts.

Conclusions

Acknowledging the constitutive role of context in processes of policy enactment helps to illuminate how and why policy-practice gaps seem to emerge in the domain of gender equality. In particular a context-sensitive approach to change draws attention to underlying and deep-rooted gendering processes in organisations which have to be addressed in working towards structural change. This requires much more than the application of best practice tools via GEAPs; instead we seek to problematise the dynamics of the policy-practice interface and we argue for a context-sensitive approach to intervention that recognises how mobile policy ideas are mediated and re-made in different concrete settings. Our research demonstrates that the ways in which HE organisations and their actors respond to, and (re)produce, equality policies reflects the particularities of local power structures, organisational cultures and strategic interests, all of which shape in complex ways how the problem of gender inequality is understood, what kind of change is seen to be needed, where, and what kind of intervention is possible. Thus, we argue that the question of gender equality ‘implementation’ in universities and research organisations is not one of ‘*what works best?*’, but a much more complex interaction of: what works best *here and now?*; ‘*who*’ is seeking, implementing or resisting change, which stakeholders are involved in change, and whose interests are served (or not) by change; ‘*how*’ local, organisational and national policies, practices and cultures are to be engaged with or altered by proposed changes; ‘*which*’ contextual factors (again at local, organisational or national level) will work as enablers or barriers to the change; and ‘*where*’ the drivers or agents of change are located in the local, organisational or national

power structures. Overall, our case shows how national, organisational and local contexts interact to produce different possibilities for, and trajectories of, gender equality actions in each university. Our analysis of GEAP enactment in different settings highlights the context-specific nature of local gender power structures, organisational cultures and strategic interests, all of which shape how the problem of gender inequality is understood locally, what kind of change is imagined, and what kind of intervention is possible. Thus, we argue that context plays a crucial constitutive role in the interpretation, enactment and impact of gender equality policy in HE.

Table 1: Summary of key relevant characteristics of the four partner universities

	University A	University B	University C	University D
Pre-existing equality infrastructure	Weak	Strong	Weak	Strong
GEAP team position in the institution	Marginal	Strongly embedded	Marginal	Strongly embedded
Staff recruitment and promotion practices	National-level management of organisational practices	Gender-sensitive policies at organisational level but gaps at department level	Need for more gender-aware policies at organisational level	Gender-sensitive policies at organisational level but unequal outcomes
Wider sectoral initiatives promoting GEAPs	No	No	Yes	Yes

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