

Article

Preparing for Intersectional Perspectives: Challenges in Academic Employment Practice

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Abstract

This paper explores the potential for aligning theoretical approaches and good practices for intersectional approaches to recruitment and career development in academia, focusing on a European university alliance comprising eight institutions. The study applies a participatory approach that includes comparative analysis and stakeholder engagement to assess how institutional practices can become more inclusive. The findings highlight structural barriers, including entrenched notions of meritocracy and inadequate legal and procedural frameworks. Current strategies often juxtapose inequalities rather than addressing their intersections, resulting in approaches remaining siloed. Based on a reflexive case study, the paper identifies critical factors such as the need for formalised procedures, training and financial investment to effectively operationalise intersectional frameworks. It emphasises the need for tailored approaches that take into account the diversity of institutional and legal contexts and enable more inclusive academic policies and services. Together, these efforts aim to address structural inequalities and create sustainable practises that support the professional development and mobility of marginalised groups in academia, responding to the persistent gaps between policy commitments to intersectionality and their practical implementation within higher education institutions.

Keywords: intersectionality; gender equality plan; Horizon Europe; academic employment; equality; diversity and inclusion; European universities initiative



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1. Introduction

Intersectionality in academic employment policy and practice presents a significant challenge, as it requires addressing the complex interplay of various forms of discrimination and privilege, such as those based on gender, ethnicity, class, age, and disability. Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have historically operated within siloed frameworks, focusing on individual inequalities like gender or diversity in isolation [1,2]. This approach risks overlooking how intersecting forms of discrimination shape individuals' experiences of inclusion or exclusion in the workplace. At the same time, a more inclusive and diverse academic workforce has been shown to enrich teaching, research, and institutional cultures, fostering a broader range of perspectives, more innovative knowledge production, and more inclusive learning environments for students, who benefit directly from exposure to diverse role models and epistemic approaches.

The European Union (EU) has sought to mainstream intersectionality, particularly through tools like Gender Equality Plans (GEPs), as part of its Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025 [3,4]. However, implementing intersectional practices remains challenging [5].

The concept of intersectionality refers to the ways in which multiple forms of inequality and systems of power interact and reinforce each other, shaping specific experiences of advantage and disadvantage that cannot be understood in isolation. This concept was introduced without sufficient explanation or training, leaving many in academia without a solid theoretical foundation needed to understand or adopt it [6]. This gap is exacerbated by entrenched norms of academic meritocracy and hierarchical structures that resist progressive change. Thus, there is a risk that efforts to integrate intersectionality into institutional policies adopt a “multiple” approach to inequalities that merely juxtaposes them rather than intersects them [7].

Integrating an intersectional approach into equality policies therefore remains an unresolved challenge that requires examining how formal and informal systems of power are deployed [8], maintained and reinforced in social structures, policies and practices through the axes of analysis of ethnicity/race, class, disability, and gender, to name but a few. While single-issue approaches tend to view multiple discrimination as the cumulative effect of individual factors, intersectionality offers insight into the ways in which gender interacts with other social aspects to shape different individual and collective experiences of discrimination.

While the academic literature on intersectionality and broader Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) frameworks has grown considerably in recent years, their integration into policy-making and institutional practice has been uneven and often superficial. Many HEIs still struggle to understand and operationalise the underlying concepts of these evolving perspectives, particularly in employment-related policies and services [9–11]. For example, although GEPs now formally require an intersectional dimension [12,13], implementing this requirement is often hampered by legal and policy frameworks that do not permit the collection of intersectional data [14].

These challenges can be further exacerbated in transnational university alliances, where differences in national legal frameworks, regulatory requirements, and institutional practices introduce additional layers of complexity, often slowing down decision-making processes and generating resistance to change across partner institutions. This occurs in part because current power structures are clearly exclusionary, hence the need for intersectional approaches [15,16].

If HEIs are required to include an intersectional dimension in their GEPs and other equality-related efforts, the question arises as to whether collective experiences should be specifically addressed through policies and services on gender equality in recruitment and career progression. If this approach is well prepared, it can pave the way for the development of models that adapt services to mitigate individual experiences of discrimination. But the need for a legal and policy framework that promotes and allows for equality-sensitive recruitment in academic institutions often clashes with the concept of merit and the ongoing challenges of obtaining funding in the neoliberal academic environment [17].

In the academic context, there are currently no “institutional pioneers” to emulate when it comes to intersectional strategies. At best, there are a few good practices that aim to tackle individual forms of discrimination [18,19] but do not consider the specific discrimination faced by individuals at the intersection of multiple categories or social groups. Moreover, policies designed to address intersectional discrimination from a collective standpoint remain largely absent [20].

It is still necessary to explore the potential for coordination and harmonisation of theoretical orientations and best practices at the structural level of intersectionality analysis

rather than at the individual level [21]. (In this context, “coordinating” refers to aligning practices or policies to work efficiently toward shared objectives while preserving flexibility and accommodating variations based on specific needs. “Harmonising”, in contrast, entails a more thorough alignment or unification of practices to ensure consistency across different areas, typically by establishing a minimum standard to be followed. However, neither approach seeks to disregard the important contextual differences that may exist.) This is precisely the aim of this paper, which focuses on structural-level approaches to intersectionality in academia. The analysis is conducted using the Ulysseus University Alliance as a case study, where the authors of this paper are contributing to coordinating a taskforce aimed at promoting EDI and intersectionality within the Alliance.

The following sections begin with a presentation of the state of the art underpinning this work, followed by an overview of the context and the qualitative methodology used. An analysis of the work carried out to date is then presented. Finally, reflections and considerations on the medium and long-term outcomes to be expected in the establishment of academic services that adopt intersectional approaches to recruitment and career development are discussed.

2. State of the Art

Although the principles of equality and diversity are increasingly seen as central to academic research and the need for inclusive research communities is recognised [22,23], there is widespread awareness that “knowledge production and research at universities and research-performing institutions are not as inclusive as they could be” [24] (p. 20). When it comes to intersectional discrimination, the risk of “an assumption that disadvantaged groups somehow need to be supported to fit within educational environments, rather than a need to systemically change environmental factors” [2] (p. 32) is real.

The concept of intersectionality was first introduced by Crenshaw [25] to describe how multiple forms of discrimination, such as race and gender, interact and reinforce each other rather than simply adding up. Over time, the concept has developed from a primarily legal and activist framework into an increasingly used analytical tool across disciplines, informing feminist and critical race scholarship as well as institutional policy [26]. Although the EU has recognised intersectionality in its equality and anti-discrimination discourse [7], the institutional implementation of intersectionality remains fragmented and inconsistent [1]. Many higher education institutions continue to address inequalities through a single-axis lens—most often focusing on gender or disability—without adequately considering the compounded nature of disadvantage [10,11]. As scholars such as Christoffersen [21] and Showunmi [9] argue, for intersectionality to be truly transformative, it must be embedded in structural reforms that challenge dominant power hierarchies, rather than serving as a rhetorical add-on.

The acquisition and application of intersectional knowledge in institutional contexts such as higher education is complex and non-linear, as it requires continuous negotiation between theoretical understanding, organisational practices, and context-specific constraints. La Barbera, Espinosa-Fajardo and Caravantes [10] identify five key factors that hinder the implementation of intersectionality-informed policies: (1) the lack of a legal framework and precise guidelines, (2) multiple and conflicting interpretations of intersectionality, (3) lack of training, (4) a compartmentalised work structure and culture, and (5) the unavailability or misuse of data. Although the study refers to a city council, the similarities with the academic context are clear. As several scholars state [27,28], the lack of research on intersectionality in the workplace leads to an underestimation of individual roles and the centrality of the individual during their academic career, as they are subjected to dominant social, cultural, and professional roles that are not open to discussion.

Theory has advanced the understanding of intersectionality, but its practical application in institutional settings like academia remains hindered by entrenched formal and informal rules. As with political institutions, academia is influenced by a gendered logic of appropriateness [29], leading to differential treatment and expectations that are strongly influenced by gender, which in turn affect career advancement and the nature of scholarly discussions. When starting to incorporate an intersectional perspective, this logic becomes further nuanced as the archetype of the ideal academic expands to encompass intersecting identities, including ethnicity/race, age, and sexuality, thereby reshaping the standards for success and acceptance within scholarly circles [30].

Institutions are characterised by a dynamic interplay between formal and informal rules. Formal rules are often represented by codified regulations and policies, such as national legislation and specific institutional guidelines [31]. In contrast, informal norms consist of unspoken, culturally and socially ingrained behaviours and beliefs within an institution [32]. In this framework, merely altering formal rules is not enough to produce substantial changes, as “people in organisations tend to follow the usual practices that prevail rather than the official rules, and official rules about who wields the most influence may be irrelevant because of informal networks that empower some people in organizations rather than others” [33] (p. 198); see also [34,35].

Notwithstanding, institutions themselves are dynamic entities, constantly evolving and adapting, which opens possibilities for reformers. Raymond et al. [33] explore two main strategies for establishing new norms: normative reframing and normative innovation. Normative reframing involves changing the perception of an issue within the context of existing norms to make an alternative norm appear more relevant and appropriate. This strategy does not introduce new norms but rather reinterprets or adjusts the application of existing ones to better address contemporary issues. The aim here is to persuade stakeholders that an existing norm, perhaps slightly modified, more adequately addresses the situation at hand.

Normative innovation, in contrast, involves creating entirely new norms that were either non-existent or not previously relevant to the given context. This strategy is more ambitious than reframing as it seeks to establish new principles or behaviours rather than merely altering the interpretation of existing ones. For example, in academia, normative innovation could significantly redefine the concepts of merit and academic excellence, thereby affecting substantial changes in the criteria for recruitment and promotion. Normative reframing, in turn, could rephrase the perception of impactful research and scholarly contributions to attribute them to issues of social impact. These shifts align with broader reform agendas already underway at the European level, notably through the Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment (CoARA), which calls for a diversified understanding of research merit that explicitly includes social impact and wider contributions to society [36]. In the realm of gender mainstreaming projects, scholars have predominantly favoured normative reframing strategies over normative innovation. This preference underscores an understanding of institutional change as an incremental process, typically unfolding through a series of “small wins” instead of radical transformations [6]. These modest, strategic adjustments facilitate gradual shifts in perceptions and practices, making them more palatable and sustainable within established systems. Yet, with the introduction of a new, critical dimension—i.e., the current emphasis on intersectionality—it is crucial to reassess which strategy best aligns with our evolving objectives in practical interventions, including those related to employment practices. This also highlights a broader risk identified in the literature [22,24], namely that intersectionality may be incorporated in a largely symbolic manner [5,6,17,22] without corresponding structural change, a tendency

reinforced by the persistent difficulties in operationalising and measuring intersectional outcomes in institutional contexts [7,29,32].

3. Context: A European University Alliance as an Ideal Testing Ground

Since 2017, the European Universities Initiative (EUI), within which this article is situated, aims to “enable students to obtain a degree by combining studies in several European countries and [to] contribute to the international standing and competitiveness of [European] universities” [37].

The EU has been encouraging the academic sector to rise to the challenge of globalisation and contribute to the harmonisation of study and work pathways in different countries and academic contexts, which often have structural differences that can only be changed at the ministerial level. European universities do not have a direct research and innovation component, but mainly combine teaching and administrative activities, which is a challenge for the academic staff involved.

One of the objectives of the EUI strategy is to create study and work opportunities that are recognised by the partners in legal, administrative and academic terms at the European level and have a clearly European approach. A central aspect of the European Universities’ long-term common strategies is the use of shared management and governance structures, including both academic and administrative staff at all levels. This approach ensures the involvement of staff working not only in teaching and research but also in university administration, student services, and other non-academic functions. They aim to establish inter-university campuses that offer people the opportunity to study, train, teach, research, work or access services at one or more of the partner institutions, either physically, online or through a combination of both. Compared to previous European top-down initiatives that aimed to symbolically reinforce a common European identity, the EUI is more focused on grassroots approaches and offers greater potential to incorporate everyday processes that can promote institutional change [16].

Currently, more than 560 HEIs of all types form 64 alliances in the EU, which are seen as a springboard for the creation of European Universities. The alliances have a potential duration of nine years and are divided into three phases of three, four, and two years, respectively. The extended collaboration allows for deeper involvement in institutional and policy frameworks and creates opportunities for progressive adaptation and harmonisation between the partner universities, in addition to increasing the alliance’s potential to influence changes also in employment practices, even if these are subject to national regulations and laws.

The Ulyseus Alliance includes universities from eight European countries: Austria, Finland, France, Italy, Slovakia, and Spain (since the first phase, 2020–2023), with Montenegro and Germany joining in the second phase in 2023. Ulyseus’ main activities are co-designed and developed within eight Innovation Hubs, which are innovative shared structures for collaboration. Ulyseus is currently in its fifth year, the second phase of its development. In Phase 1, Ulyseus dedicated a work package (WP5) to supporting partner HEIs in their equality, diversity and social responsibility initiatives by providing ideas and strategies useful for the process towards the Innovation Hubs. In the second phase, this support is extended to EDI and Community Engagement (CE). Work package 6 will provide EDI- and CE-compliant support to partners in their creation of innovation hubs, the adaptation of the academic offer, interdisciplinary training activities, etc.

In parallel to these institutional initiatives that form the core of Ulyseus, the activities described in this article focus on a process that aims to assess the current understanding and application of intersectionality by the partner universities. This analysis examines whether and how intersectionality is considered, especially in relation to collective services

for groups at risk of discrimination. The preliminary results of the activities carried out allow us to anticipate critical aspects that could be related to the future integration of intersectional approaches in employment practices. In addition to these challenges, there is a need to establish arrangements that allow university staff (researchers, lecturers and administrative staff) to move between partner institutions in the future, benefiting from employment support services that are not only bureaucratically harmonised but also “intersectionally harmonised”.

4. Methodology

Three of the authors of this article, since Ulysses’ inception, actively worked to analyse the potential to add an intersectional perspective into the academic sector, in response to the requirements of Horizon Europe. The goals included understanding what models of intervention could be developed to integrate an intersectional approach into the existing partners’ services for marginalised or underrepresented groups, including how these models could address employment-related practices.

Under the leadership of the three authors, a comparative, participatory research design drawing on multiple sources of evidence was therefore adopted by the Taskforce of the WPs 5 and now 6 (Table 1). The Taskforce consists of one member for each partner who acts as a link to the partner institution in terms of the information to be collected and discussed and is responsible for involving other experts as needed. The first stage of data collection involved a literature review on concepts of intersectionality and good practice in equality and inclusion policy in higher education. The aim was to create a theoretical framework to contextualise the analysis of GEPs and institutional services. The Taskforce exchanged information on the partners’ GEPs, either in their full version or, if necessary, in a summarised format adapted to the working language of the project. This analysis aimed to identify common themes, gaps and differences in the gender and diversity strategies of the partner institutions. Attention was paid to analysing whether and how intersectionality is addressed. To explore the role that GEPs can play in promoting intersectional services within universities, including in addressing employment-related practices, the GEPs were reviewed and discussed in webinars in which their innovative aspects as well as potential challenges were critically analysed. To ensure analytical consistency, data collected through document analysis, questionnaires, and stakeholder interactions were examined using a structured thematic approach. A coding framework was developed to identify recurring patterns related to institutional practices, interpretations of intersectionality, and perceived barriers to implementation. Analytical criteria focused on comparability across partner institutions and the identification of common and divergent dynamics. To enhance validity, findings were discussed iteratively within the Taskforce and cross-checked through collective reflection meetings, allowing for triangulation between data sources and researcher perspectives.

In parallel, the Taskforce began to explore how existing services at the eight universities operate in relation to discrimination (disability, LGBTQ+, ethnicity and gender) and to identify the barriers to extending their scope to wider intersectional concerns. The Taskforce presented an overview of other services and initiatives related to EDI in their respective organisations. To this end, a questionnaire was given to each partner university to collect data on the specific services offered to marginalised groups or groups at risk of discrimination. The comparative analysis includes an examination of service availability, accessibility and potential compliance with intersectional frameworks.

Table 1. Comparative overview of data collection phases.

	Phase 1	Phase 2
Timing	Third quarter, Year 1	Months 4–7, Year 4
Partner organisations involved	6	8
Questionnaires collected	6	8
Primary objective	Baseline mapping of GEPs, EDI policies and practices	Update of Phase 1 data; integration of two new partners
Thematic focus	GEP adoption, implementation and monitoring; additional EDI initiatives	As per Phase 1, extended to new partners
Question format	Closed-ended + open-ended	Closed-ended + open-ended
Key output	Comparative baseline across 6 partners	Consolidated comparative dataset across 8 partners; identification of shared needs and collaboration areas

Following these activities, the Taskforce has begun to develop a shared understanding of the partners' different practices and priorities, rarely including intersectionality, if not nominally. In the current phase of activities, the Taskforce members have compiled a list of topics on which training or knowledge-sharing activities would be beneficial. These topics were identified by comparing available information and matching it with the specific needs of each institution. Subsequent activities include webinars, informal bilateral/trilateral meetings aimed at fostering collaboration and addressing the identified gaps through tailored support, and videos (Table 2). The findings from these discussions and activities will be used to refine the comparisons and highlight the key issues around intersectionality, including employment-related ones.

Table 2. Summary of knowledge deepening and sharing activities.

Activity Type	Number Held	Format	Participants	Key Output
Webinars	5	Online, multi-presenter (avg. 4 presentations/event)	Partner organisations + external networks of invited speakers	Feedback questionnaires; edited recordings published on YouTube. For titles, see Note 1.
Bilateral/trilateral meetings	35	Online, informal open conversation	Partner(s) + subject-matter expert(s)	Written minutes; follow-up actions; preparatory input for workshops
Thematic videos	10	Pre-recorded, expert-led	Academic community (open access via YouTube)	Reusable open-access resources on EDI topics. For titles, see Note 2.

Note 1—Webinar titles

1. State of play on Equality, Diversity, Inclusion and Community Engagement in Ulyseus
2. Best practices in adding an EDI dimension to research and teaching
3. Best practices on equality, diversity, and inclusion, and community engagement: feminist institutionalism, inclusive living labs, critical whiteness and gender and physics
4. Advancing inclusion and equality in research: from best practices and global policies to gender budgeting and AI bias
5. Participatory methods, accessibility and inclusion

Note 2—Thematic video titles

1. A 'Proper' Woman? One Woman's story of success and failure in academia with Pat O'Connor. Part 1/2

2. A 'Proper' Woman? One Woman's story of success and failure in academia with Pat O'Connor. Part 2/2
3. Gender, Race and Academia
4. Gender-based violence in universities
5. Participation as a tool for inclusion
6. The future of AI between innovation and equity: preventing bias from becoming systemic
7. Communicating bias in AI to the general public. Inclusive science communication strategies
8. EDI in Teaching Practices
9. Student belonging and well-being in Higher Education
10. The Manosphere and Digital Gender-Based Violence

Not all training activities developed within the project address intersectionality directly or explicitly. The broader EDI training framework includes modules focused on specific dimensions of inequality—such as disability awareness, gender equality, or cultural diversity—which may not themselves constitute intersectional interventions but provide the foundational knowledge and institutional sensitivity necessary for a meaningful intersectional approach. Thus, the relationship between EDI training and intersectionality is both direct and preparatory: some activities engage intersectionality as an explicit analytical framework, while others build the disciplinary and institutional literacy that makes intersectional thinking accessible and actionable for staff whose primary expertise lies elsewhere. This layered understanding of capacity-building reflects the complexity of embedding intersectionality within large, multi-institutional alliances where starting points differ significantly across partner universities.

Throughout the activities, stakeholder engagement has been prioritised through webinars and online discussions, allowing for continuous feedback from academic staff and service providers and ensuring that the research is based on practical needs and leads to actionable outcomes. For example, a tangible outcome of the stakeholder engagement process is the taskforce's decision to consider including a dedicated Work Package in the third phase of the Ulysseus Alliance, aimed at mainstreaming intersectionality across the Alliance's institutional structures and processes in a more systematic and transversal manner. This reflects a collective recognition that the normative and capacity-building work begun in the current phase requires a more structured institutional base to achieve lasting change—one that explicitly includes recruitment and career progression pathways alongside the broader HR reform agenda. Rather than remaining a marginal or project-specific initiative, intersectionality would thus be repositioned as a cross-cutting dimension of the Alliance's overall institutional development. The Taskforce has met monthly since the beginning of Ulysseus, which continues to be an important mechanism for monitoring and supporting the progress of activities. These meetings have consistently provided a platform to enable a deeper understanding of the institutional context and identify common challenges, share best practices and explore innovative solutions in view of the implementation of new practices inspired by intersectionality. This monitoring process not only helps track progress but also allows for refinement of strategies in response to evolving needs.

In preparing this article, the authors draw on the various phases of work previously outlined, combining insights gained through participant observation with a comparative reading of institutional experiences [38]. The authors' direct involvement in Ulysseus made them privileged observers, providing the opportunity for access, trust-building and a deeper understanding of the dynamics of the alliance, which allowed for the collection of data that is likely to reflect the internal context better than an external observer would have done [39].

At this point, it should be noted that as insiders, the authors may be less likely to recognise the self-evident aspects of the day-to-day dynamics within the alliance that an outsider might be able to identify more easily [40]. To mitigate potential biases, the authors conduct regular reflection meetings to critically evaluate the observations and interpretations at different stages of the study, work that will continue in the coming years. In addition, the inclusion of the fourth co-author, who is no longer directly involved in Ulysseus' activities but brings an independent perspective as an external researcher, helps balance the insider perspectives and ensure a more nuanced analysis of the data.

5. Preliminary Results

Although the work undertaken has a broader scope, this article concentrates on aspects most directly related to employment practices and how to progress toward an intersectional approach to them.

The partners' GEPs include actions related to the mandatory area of intervention focused on "gender equality in recruitment and career progression", which are currently not addressing intersectional aspects. Employment-related services and practices are not the exclusive responsibility of a single category of employees. Depending on the circumstances, faculty members, researchers, and administrative staff may be involved in different aspects of these processes. Although teaching, research, and administration are usually separate, there may be intersections and overlaps, especially for academic leaders such as deans or department heads who have both academic and administrative responsibilities. For example, the selection of new faculty members is predominantly made by academic staff. In some cases, the Principal Investigators of European projects are responsible for the selection of staff for project roles. These decisions are made within the framework of the formal legislation of the respective country. However, the process often lacks formal training to avoid bias and other relevant gender equality practices. The EU requests that a GEP should include awareness-raising and training on gender equality for the entire organisation, as well as training on unconscious gender bias for staff and decision-makers, initiatives that the partners are implementing at different paces, depending on how urgent and necessary they perceive them to be. At present, none of them include references to intersectionality in the training embedded in the GEPs. Consequently, adding an intersectional perspective would imply that those involved in these activities or in organising the training, academic and administrative staff, deal with concepts that are unfamiliar in the context of traditional professional skills, even more so for those in STEM departments. Although they are often in favour of and supportive of the concept of gender equality, they still lack solid specific training beyond a binary vision linked to ensuring a possible balance in the working environment and in participation in EU-funded projects, which is still the current focus. A first result in the Ulysseus alliance is represented by the experiences within Ulysseus to prepare academics, from Early-Stage Researchers (ESRs) to Associate or Full Professors, for an intersectional perspective not only in research and teaching but also in employment-related practices.

To explore the concept of intersectionality, the approach so far has been to analyse contexts in which groups at risk of discrimination for various reasons receive services that are present in almost all universities. These services relate to gender equality, LGBTQI+ students and staff, people with disabilities, and anti-violence and anti-harassment services, each present in different modalities and with different services on the campuses of almost all partners. These services currently work in parallel or, when exchanges occur to address specific issues, they do not take an intersectional approach, but, at best, consider multiple forms of discrimination.

After acquiring knowledge about the services offered by each Partner, the second phase involves applying this knowledge and experience to activities focused on academic employment practices. The main challenge in moving this preparatory work to an intersectional dimension in academic career pathways is that the work of comparing, analysing, and promoting change and innovation takes place in eight different national systems. Therefore, it is impossible to work directly at an institutional level in relation to hiring processes and career development. Instead, the focus will be on developing and providing recommendations aimed at harmonising strategies and activities from an intersectional perspective. These recommendations will then be adapted by each partner to fit their own context, respecting national legislation and regulations applied to the academic sector, as is already the case with services for disadvantaged or discriminated groups. The aim is to establish integrated services that effectively tackle the different forms of inequality, focusing on identifying those that are most relevant to each context in terms of social, geographical or cultural factors, which differ in some cases across the partnership.

Ulysseus' partners believe that it is necessary to go beyond coordination and counselling models that address inequalities separately or are limited to inequalities that have already been identified. Several initiatives highlight concrete efforts to advance the practical application of the strategies discussed. For instance, the Italian partner has extended its "Alias Career" initiative—a programme designed to support transgender individuals by allowing them to use an alias different from their legal name within the university environment—initially aimed at students, to include staff. The Spanish partner has focused on promoting mobility for work and study for people with disabilities, while the Slovak partner is supporting Ukrainian refugees and researchers. Though these initiatives currently do not fully integrate an intersectional approach, they serve as foundational steps, with plans to incorporate intersectionality through ongoing discussions and collaborative knowledge exchange among the partners. This process will be supported by training and knowledge-sharing activities aimed at harmonising strategies across the alliance to ultimately foster a more inclusive environment for academic employment practices.

6. Critical Aspects in View of Mainstreaming Intersectionality in Academic Employment Services

While several partners have implemented inclusive initiatives (such as the Alias Career policy, disability-focused mobility programmes, support services for gender-based violence, and others), these remain within existing structures and do not challenge formal definitions of merit or institutional norms regarding career evaluation, which is still an unexplored field within the alliance at the moment. Nevertheless, our observations of recruitment and career evaluation processes indicate that true transformation would require new norms and rules, such as institutionalising intersectionality training for all hiring panels or developing recruitment guidelines that consider multiple axes of disadvantage.

These ideas are not yet formalised, but their recurring appearance in partner meetings suggests a growing consensus on the need for deeper change. The measures presented were implemented without compromising academic performance or quality metrics. These initial successes confirm the potential of adaptive strategies in addressing exclusionary practices. However, the results also highlight structural limitations—such as reliance on outdated performance metrics and informal gatekeeping—that cannot be overcome through adaptation alone. Drawing on the experience of the case study analysed, the authors argue that, to fully realise intersectionality in academic employment, the Alliance should more consistently engage in normative innovation, understood as the co-creation of new standards and practices aimed at reshaping the underlying norms of evaluation, hiring, and promotion. At the very least, action has been taken where possible without

disregarding national legislation. Despite considerable resistance rooted in entrenched institutional norms, existing evaluation practices, and divergent national regulations, these programmatic initiatives have been included in the Alliance's work plan since the proposal for the renewal of the Alliance itself (2023–2027) was drafted, both in a dedicated work package and throughout the proposal.

Based on the data and stakeholder feedback, our analysis indicates that such an innovative approach could include participatory policy-making workshops involving academic staff at all levels, formal integration of intersectional audits into annual performance appraisals, and trialling inclusive assessment criteria that capture collaborative, interdisciplinary, and community-engaged scholarship, as well as educational pathways that incorporate EDI principles. These measures would not only challenge entrenched assumptions embedded in current systems but also establish alternative norms that better reflect the diverse contributions required in a modern, inclusive research environment.

The considerations and recommendations in this section result directly from a collaborative, iterative process within the Ulysseus Alliance, involving a series of comparative analyses, structured questionnaires, and thematic workshops conducted among administrative officers, HR managers, and academic staff across the eight partner universities. These exchanges enabled the identification of shared challenges and the mapping of diverse institutional contexts. The process combined document analysis (review of GEPs, equality charters, recruitment guidelines, and others) with validation meetings at the alliance level. The criticalities discussed below emerged as common denominators from this collective analysis, reflecting both convergences and divergences in how intersectionality is understood and operationalised within the alliance. By observing the process of Ulysseus and analysing possible future ways to effectively introduce intersectional practices in academic employment, three critical aspects have been identified, while acknowledging that there may be others, as follows:

6.1. *Juxtapose or Intersect*

First and foremost, there is a danger that institutional change leads to a “multiple” approach to inequalities that merely juxtaposes rather than intersects them [7] and does not give equal importance to different inequalities. The call to consider or rethink previously overlooked inequalities also accelerates the difficult process of changing the established “equality hierarchy” [41] that privileges gender. Paradoxically, it was sometimes observed that this hierarchy hinders gender-specific interventions that are perceived as no longer necessary or even less relevant and urgent compared to groups that have historically been considered secondary or marginalized or that have never been considered in their intersections with gender, as if diversity would prevail over gender, to make the most common hierarchy declared during the activities.

Indeed, strategies to address one inequality are not neutral to others, and inequalities are often interdependent, as Crenshaw noted as early as 1989. For years, the “add the women and stir” approach has been criticised as ineffective [42–44], and today there is a risk of adopting an equally reductive “add a new target group and stir” approach.

Addressing what [45] defines as “white ignorance” is essential—this concept normalises and maintains the power and privilege of some while marginalising the “other.” When other factors relevant to the analysis are considered, “white” can be replaced with “belonging to an upper middle class,” “being a native speaker in the institution where one works,” “being of an age that confers power,” among others.

Rather than asserting empirical equivalence across dimensions of inequality, the framework proposed here adopts a normative intersectional stance, following Crenshaw [26] and Hill Collins [46], which holds that no single axis of marginalisation should be treated as

structurally prior to others. The relative salience of each dimension will necessarily vary across institutional and national contexts.

Current institutional approaches typically address inequalities as separate and additive factors, leading to fragmented interventions that treat categories such as gender, disability, or ethnicity in isolation. In contrast, an intersectional approach examines how these dimensions interact to produce specific and often compounded forms of disadvantage, requiring coordinated and context-sensitive responses. In practice, this would imply moving from parallel services and policies towards integrated frameworks—for example, recruitment processes, support services, and evaluation criteria that explicitly consider overlapping identities and their effects on access, progression, and recognition.

6.2. Lack of Formal and Common Procedures

The second critical aspect concerns the lack of formal and common procedures for considering intersectionality in working groups dealing with gender and inequalities. This is particularly evident when there is a need for coordination between existing groups and initiatives dealing with a particular type of inequality (a very common example is services for people with disabilities). There is a risk that “intersectional strategies” fail to recognise the structural causes of gender inequality or fail to include a specific goal of gender equality as an overarching concern.

Some studies show that many of these strategies focus on institutional cultures that promote respect, co-operation, equality, social justice, well-being, and human rights. However, it is unclear how this culture should be embedded within organisations [47,48]. Setting targets and key performance indicators (KPIs) that target intersectionality and are aligned with overarching factors is crucial. It is important to include such targets and KPIs in institutional strategies and not limit them to documents that are unfortunately still marginal, such as the GEPs.

In this sense, an Alliance has an advantage, as it utilises targets and KPIs common to all the partners, which can be periodically updated if necessary. Moreover, numerous alliances, including Ulysseus, are exploring legal frameworks to strengthen their institutional cohesion, aiming for a supranational identity that supports long-term sustainability and innovation. These supranational identities could have more freedom in harmonising practices related to the employment of those who will work in the future, not for one of the eight Universities but for the “new” legal entity.

The development of such policies should involve a broad range of institutional actors, including academic staff, administrative personnel, human resources departments, and, where possible, representatives of underrepresented groups and external stakeholders. This participatory approach is essential not only for identifying relevant issues across different institutional contexts but also for ensuring the legitimacy and credibility of the resulting policies and strategies. In this respect, the process through which intersectional approaches are defined and implemented becomes as important as their content, as it directly influences institutional ownership, acceptance, and long-term effectiveness.

6.3. Financial Investment

The third critical aspect concerns the need for financial investment to acquire the analytical capacity and human resources required to collect and analyse data and to design and implement targeted interventions [49]. The financial dimension emerged as a structural constraint across nearly all institutions. In this regard, the GEPs serve as an important reference point, particularly due to the formal requirement of the EU to allocate specific funds and personnel for this purpose [50–52].

In several of the universities composing the alliance, no budget has been allocated to the GEP implementation, and therefore the significance of the impact that the GEP could have had on the dominating culture and consolidated behaviour is meaningfully limited. Indeed, in some of the analysed cases, a regression even in the gender mainstreaming and the linked policy at the institutional level is observed. Currently, the EU does not impose a formal requirement for allocating specific funds or personnel to promote intersectionality in academia, including employment-related practices. However, the EU encourages intersectional approaches through broader frameworks such as gender equality strategies and anti-discrimination laws [50,51,53]. These policies often incorporate aspects of intersectionality but do not consistently mandate its integration into academic or employment practices. As long as Ulysseus is funded by the EU programme, the necessary resources for the information and training process (webinars, courses, visits, exchanges) are guaranteed, enabling progress in the reflection on intersectionality in services related to academic staff employment. However, the financial sustainability of these actions, given the academic scale that involves training and updating hundreds of individuals, cannot currently be predicted without continued reliance on European funding.

As is common with European-funded collaborative projects, as a matter of fact, the sustainability of intersectional initiatives beyond the funding period presents a structural challenge. However, as this study suggests, a substantial component of the proposed reforms, particularly those concerning HR procedures, awareness training, and monitoring frameworks, does not require dedicated project funding to be maintained but can be absorbed into the ordinary institutional and administrative routines of the participating universities.

Overall, these examples demonstrate that the reflections and recommendations presented in this paper are not purely theoretical but are grounded in an evolving, evidence-based process of transnational collaboration. They represent the initial phase of a long-term effort to harmonise intersectional policies and practices within the Ulysseus Alliance, overcoming contextual barriers and institutional resistance through shared analysis, experimentation, and mutual learning.

7. Discussion

The approach adopted in Ulysseus described above has been a fundamental prerequisite for understanding how intersectional approaches can also be applied to the employment of academic services, with strategies that are applicable in countries where selection and recruitment formal mechanisms cannot be changed by individual universities.

Like other initiatives aiming to mainstream intersectionality into equality and diversity frameworks, Ulysseus can be understood as operating at the intersection between normative reframing and normative innovation. Drawing on the concepts of normative reframing and normative innovation [54], the work undertaken within Ulysseus has thus far primarily relied on reframing strategies. Initiatives such as the “Alias Career” programme and disability mobility schemes exemplify efforts to reinterpret existing institutional norms in order to respond to emerging challenges. These approaches have been instrumental in initiating change within established structures. However, as our findings indicate, such efforts remain largely incremental, tending to address inequalities separately rather than through a fully integrated intersectional perspective.

The introduction of intersectionality across these initiatives marks a critical juncture, where it must be decided whether to continue with reframing or pursue the more ambitious path of normative innovation. The hesitancy to embrace innovation may stem from the complexities of navigating diverse national systems, each with its own legal frameworks and institutional norms. However, normative innovation does not necessitate

a complete restructuring of these systems. It can begin by embedding intersectionality as a foundational element in GEPs, ensuring that diverse equality and diversity services are integrated from the outset. Such integration represents a central objective of the approach outlined in this study; however, it is not the only one. Equally important are broader goals, including fostering institutional reflexivity, strengthening the capacity of actors to engage with complexity, and promoting more inclusive cultures and practices across academic environments. This approach would require greater financial investment, extended time-lines, and comprehensive training to equip the actors involved with the tools necessary for implementing these changes effectively.

Our analysis suggests that the initial successes of reframing strategies demonstrated the power of adapting existing frameworks to new challenges. However, for intersectionality to be fully realised in academic employment practices, the alliance must also embrace normative innovation, creating new standards and practices that challenge the entrenched power structures and assumptions inherent in current systems. By striking a balance between these two strategies, Ulysseus can act as a model for other academic institutions seeking to move from incremental changes to more transformative, intersectional outcomes.

The work carried out within the Ulysseus WP5/6 and the Taskforce effectively serves as a form of training, engaging both administrative and academic staff involved in processes such as selection, career development, performance evaluation, and the assessment of excellence. In practical terms, participation in these activities enables partners to develop knowledge and skills related to intersectional concepts while also contributing to a collective reflection on how to adapt and integrate academic services for underrepresented or at-risk groups. This process can subsequently be extended to recruitment and career advancement mechanisms, which, although compliant with national non-discrimination frameworks, often fail to account for the specific and compounded situations arising from the intersection of multiple social characteristics.

It should be noted that currently, in most partner universities, people without specific training in unconscious bias, strategies to promote unbiased selection or consideration of characteristics related to potential disabilities (visible or not, congenital or acquired, motor, sensory or learning disabilities, neurodivergence) are involved in the selection process for academic staff (through selection procedures or other modalities authorised by the respective ministries). Furthermore, they are often not in a position to reflect on the possible overlap of these characteristics in an informed manner. This is particularly true for STEM disciplines.

Therefore, we recommend a multi-stage process aimed at promoting the acquisition of skills useful to minimise resistance to change, and to adopt new mindsets and strategies that can influence formal processes that are currently unchangeable in their structure and formal organisation. This recommendation is grounded in the empirical insights generated through the Ulysseus activities, including stakeholder discussions, comparative analysis, and participant observation, which consistently highlighted the central role of institutional culture and individual practices in shaping recruitment processes. For example, in Italian universities, despite numerous legal obligations, little is said about the composition of selection committees, apart from the requirement of gender balance (1/3–2/3). If the academic culture is sensitised to EDI and intersectionality, the selection committees will also be composed of staff sensitised to these aspects, thus contributing to change, even if there are no formal innovations, which can only be introduced at the ministerial level. It is therefore a question of changing mentalities and strategies that can influence the process, and in this respect, the actions implemented through the GEPs prove to be useful.

It is clear from the discussions between the partners that the changes in European policy on gender and diversity are a challenge precisely because what intersectionality means

in practice is not yet fully understood, and this is not just in recruitment and promotion, but across the broader spectrum of academic services, from training and performance evaluation to the design of support mechanisms for marginalised groups. This conceptual gap reflected a broader tension between Ulysseus partners: institutions are encouraged, even required, to integrate intersectionality into their GEPs, yet they often lack the theoretical grounding, operational tools, and institutional culture needed to do so effectively.

The collaborative work of the Taskforce enables participants to ask questions with a view to moving towards intersectional approaches in services for LGBTQI+ students and staff, people with recognised disabilities, people of different ethnicities, migrants, and refugees who are in the country for study or work reasons. The very collection of data on teaching, research and administrative staff, which is necessary for the development of equality plans, leads to reflections on the homogeneity of staff, which in many cases is locally homogeneous and strikingly skewed in terms of gender, with a majority of men in senior positions and a majority of women in administrative positions and lower rungs of the academic career ladder. Recruitment practices almost always penalise discrimination based on gender, sometimes on ethnicity and other characteristics, but the pool of applicants is generally very homogeneous.

Studies have shown that more data and legal mechanisms are needed to tackle intersectional discrimination at the European level [54], especially in academia, as existing regulatory frameworks often address inequalities along single axes and impose constraints on the collection and use of sensitive data, thereby limiting institutions' ability to capture and respond to complex, overlapping forms of disadvantage. However, this process goes beyond the intervention possibilities of HEIs. The Taskforce is working to create the possibility that strategies aimed at greater inclusivity in the activities of Ulysseus can be adopted over time in more formal processes related to career pathways. This is being pursued through the development of shared guidelines, training modules for staff involved in recruitment and evaluation, and the formulation of policy-oriented recommendations that partners can adapt within their respective legal frameworks. In addition, pilot actions and knowledge-sharing activities are used to test and refine such approaches before their broader institutional uptake. These efforts are oriented towards enhancing recruitment, promotion, and retention practices in order to foster a more diverse workforce. The challenging process of changing the established "equality hierarchy" [41], already mentioned, and other critical issues already identified in the EU's work could, if not carefully addressed, undermine interest in intersectionality.

Our analysis suggests that creating new standards and practices through normative innovation requires embedding EDI principles into the formal structures that govern academic employment. This does not mean changing the laws but rather shifting the cultural approach from the ground up. This can be achieved through three interlinked strategies: (1) participatory approach: engaging diverse stakeholders, including underrepresented groups, in jointly and critically analysing criteria for recruitment, promotion, and research evaluation; (2) intersectional performance metrics: developing and adapting indicators that account for structural barriers and assess contributions beyond traditional bibliometric outcomes, such as mentorship, community engagement, and interdisciplinary collaboration; and (3) mechanisms of institutional reflexivity: establishing recurring review processes, such as audits and policy impact assessments, to identify and dismantle practices that reinforce power asymmetries.

By institutionalising these elements, normative innovation is transformed from an abstract goal into a sustainable organisational standard capable of changing entrenched systems.

8. Conclusions

The reflexive case study presented here suggests that discussion of the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, privilege, the dynamics of competition and co-operation, and the role of HEIs in these processes of change towards intersectionality is necessary. Initiatives for change are often entrusted to those in positions of power. In this context, there is always a risk that power dynamics aimed at preserving the power and privileges of some may interfere with the effective formulation and implementation of such measures, given situations of disadvantage and the privileges and favours often associated with them [11].

This paper presents the initial steps towards a more coherent and integrated approach among the eight universities, laying the groundwork for aligning their diverse institutional characteristics within a shared intersectional framework in the near future as an alliance. This preliminary phase is essential to ensure that future actions and harmonisation efforts are grounded in the realities, capacities, and specific contexts of each institution. As initial objectives to initiate pathways of change to promote intersectionality in academic work, Ulysseus can be considered a privileged space, as it offers freedom of action and serves as a laboratory for experimenting with innovations and pathways of change with relative institutional autonomy. The findings from the document analysis, questionnaires, and stakeholder meetings form the empirical foundation for the next stage of the alliance's work on intersectionality. Together, these sources enable a comparative mapping of institutional practices, identifying areas of convergence and divergence across the eight universities. This evidence base will inform the harmonisation of services and the definition of shared priorities in recruitment and career development, ensuring that future actions are context-sensitive and aligned with intersectional principles. The insights gathered through participatory meetings provide qualitative depth to this process, highlighting the institutional and cultural factors that facilitate or hinder inclusive change, such as differences in the interpretation of intersectionality across partner institutions, the persistence of siloed service structures, and the varying levels of organisational readiness and resource allocation identified through questionnaires, document analysis, and stakeholder exchanges. Specifically, they will identify the areas where awareness-raising, procedural standardisation, or targeted capacity building are most needed. The results will also be used to co-design practical resources—such as checklists, self-assessment tools, and model procedures—aimed at supporting staff exchanges and ensuring a consistent understanding of intersectionality across the Alliance. These resources will be developed within the Ulysseus Alliance by a dedicated group of representatives from partner institutions, including members of the Taskforce, HR professionals, and academic staff with expertise or demonstrated engagement in EDI-related activities, identified through their participation in the project and institutional roles.

By identifying convergences and divergences among the eight partner universities, these findings will inform the definition of common priorities and shared operational standards for recruitment, career development, and training. Building on these results, the consortium will co-develop training materials, methodological guidelines, and best-practice toolkits to support staff exchanges and strengthen a unified yet flexible approach to EDI.

It is hoped that institutional changes in employment practices will mainstream intersectionality and move beyond the existing silos of gender equality and diversity. A critical tension that any intersectional approach to academic recruitment must address concerns its relationship with merit-based assessment. This study does not suggest that intersectionality should override or replace the criteria of academic excellence; rather, it argues that what is considered excellence is itself a socially constructed and institutionally mediated category [46,52,55,56]. Recognising structural barriers faced by underrepresented groups is not the same as lowering standards, but involves interrogating which standards

are applied, by whom, and with what implicit assumptions. This distinction is essential for any credible institutional reform agenda [55,56]. Whether normative reframing, normative innovation, or another approach prevails will depend on the organisational and economic considerations mentioned above. In conclusion, the outcomes of this process will have a dual impact: they will generate actionable resources, ranging from training modules to shared best practices, and simultaneously promote the alignment of EDI policies across eight diverse institutional environments. This alignment is essential for addressing entrenched resistance and strengthening recognition of the transformative potential of intersectional strategies within the Alliance and beyond.

Despite its growing normative appeal, the practical implementation of intersectionality in academic contexts remains fraught with significant challenges. Institutional resistance persists, often rooted in entrenched organisational cultures and informal power structures that favour stability over transformative change. Moreover, the attempt to integrate intersectionality into recruitment and career evaluation raises enduring ambiguities around the definition and assessment of merit, a concept widely recognised as socially constructed and embedded in existing hierarchies of recognition and excellence. Critical scholars have also warned against the risk of tokenistic inclusion, whereby intersectionality is adopted rhetorically without producing substantive structural change [7,8].

The findings presented in this study, although rooted in the specific context of the Ulyseus European University Alliance, prompt broader reflection on the structural and relational dynamics that characterise higher education (HE) collaborative frameworks more generally. However, it would be misleading to assume that the normative and institutional processes described here are directly transferable to other collaborative contexts—particularly those operating across sharper geopolitical, cultural, or regulatory divides, where interinstitutional interaction is more often governed by minimal shared agreements rather than deeply integrated normative architectures. In such settings, the negotiation of difference becomes even more pronounced, shaped by asymmetries that formal collaboration agreements rarely fully capture.

In this light, a key implication of this work concerns the space between normative reframing and normative innovation. This space is not a gap to be closed, but rather the site of a complex and ongoing institutional learning process—one in which academics, administrators, and university leadership each participate according to their own positionality, professional trajectories, and the lived experiences that have shaped their cultural and institutional formation. As this article has argued, the university environment, despite—or perhaps because of—its relative epistemic privilege, is not immune to the reproduction of exclusionary logics. Advancing intersectionality within HE collaboration therefore requires sustained attention not only to formal policy and regulatory alignment, but also to the subtler, often hidden, dynamics through which institutional actors negotiate meaning, authority, and belonging in everyday academic life.

Finally, persistent difficulties in measuring intersectional inequalities—due to legal constraints on data collection, methodological complexity, and the multidimensional nature of disadvantage—limit the capacity of institutions to design, monitor, and evaluate effective interventions [10,20]. Taken together, these factors highlight the tension between the transformative ambitions of intersectionality and the structural and epistemic constraints that shape its operationalisation in higher education within comparable European collaborative settings.

As the present study focuses on the normative and preparatory dimensions of integrating intersectionality, future research will build on these findings by examining the concrete actions implemented and their effects, providing a more operational account of intersectional practices in academic employment.

Building on these findings, the study points towards a structured process for advancing intersectional approaches in academic employment. At an initial stage, institutional leadership and equality bodies should take responsibility for embedding intersectionality as a transversal objective within existing frameworks such as GEPs, supported by dedicated resources and clear mandates. In parallel, academic and administrative staff involved in recruitment, evaluation, and career development should be engaged through targeted training and participatory workshops aimed at developing a shared understanding and practical tools. In a second phase, pilot actions—such as revised recruitment guidelines, intersectionally informed evaluation criteria, or integrated support services—should be tested within institutional contexts and iteratively refined. Finally, the process should be consolidated through the formalisation of procedures and monitoring mechanisms, enabling progressive alignment across partner institutions while remaining adaptable to national regulatory constraints. The direction and pace of this process should be determined through continuous feedback loops, combining institutional learning, stakeholder engagement, and comparative analysis across the alliance.

The present study presents the following limitations: It has focused primarily on the normative and institutional conditions that enable intersectional approaches, rather than the operational mechanics of their implementation in recruitment procedures. In addition, the empirical scope of the analysis remains limited to an initial reflexive case study based on the training and institutional activities developed within the Ulysseus Alliance, which may not be fully representative of broader higher education contexts. This is a limitation of the current work and a priority for future research, which should examine concrete procedural tools, such as structured interview protocols, blind review mechanisms, or diversity-weighted shortlisting criteria, and their applicability within different national and institutional frameworks.

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partner universities was entirely voluntary and foreseen in the alliance programme. The purpose of the data collection was communicated transparently, and the information has been reported only in aggregated form, ensuring that neither individuals nor institutions can be placed at risk. The authors hope that this clarification adequately addresses the concern raised and remain available to provide any further information if needed.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

CE	Community Engagement
EDI	Equality, Diversity and Inclusion
ESR	Early-Stage Researcher
EU	European Union
EUI	European Universities Initiative
GEP	Gender Equality Plan
HEI	Higher Education Institution
KPI	Key Performance Indicator

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