



The Perceptions of Students Regarding Gender Equality Policies in Universities

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Abstract

The study is about students' perceptions of the University of Korca regarding the university's commitment to gender equality. Albanian universities have made significant efforts in gender mainstreaming. As part of a higher education institution, we must offer new generations a different path, free from prejudice and stereotypes, embracing people's freedom and appreciating their individuality and originality. There is a significant commitment from the University of Korca (UNIKO) toward gender equality policies. The paper aims to point out the perceptions of students on gender equality policies followed by UNIKO and the commitment of the university to build an honest and communicative learning and work environment where people are treated equally and there is no discrimination, as well as a community which conveys trust, a sense of belonging and shared goals. A quantitative approach was used for this study. A questionnaire with students was conducted to measure the students' perception of gender equality policies in the university. There were 250 participants in the survey, 66% were girls and 34% were boys. The students were recruited in the four faculties of UNIKO. The study was carried out in the academic year 2023-2024. Special care was taken to meet the standardisation criteria of the data collection instrument. The study focused on students' knowledge of gender mainstreaming; their participation in trainings and activities focused on gender issues; equal representation in the decision-making units and awareness of gender equality and unconscious gender biases. The study findings showed a lack of knowledge of students about UNIKO's gender equality plan, low participation of students in gender-focused activities and the presence of gender bias and gender discrimination among students. Although the study showed a high interest of students in the gender policies of the institution, a more visible involvement of students in informative activities and greater awareness to address gender issues is suggested.

Keywords: capacity building; gender mainstreaming; decision- making bodies; gender- based violence; training

1. Introduction

Gender mainstreaming has been globally a priority and the focus of education policies. Gender mainstreaming is a strategy to improve social justice and equality in education. First, the term emerged in the European Union in 1991 and was soon established as a global approach to promoting gender equality. Gender mainstreaming has been reaffirmed in the 2030 United Nations Agenda for Sustainable Development. Sustainable development can not be achieved without gender equality and empowering women. Also since 2022 in the framework of Horizon Europe, a Gender Equality Plan constitutes a necessary eligibility criterion for research and academic institutions to obtain funds and financing from the EU, specifically from the new Horizon Europe program for Research and Innovation 2021-2027.

Gender mainstreaming in tertiary education is a strategy to overcome the gender gap in various aspects of university life. Gender equality education fosters inclusive societies in which everyone has equal involvement and representation. It encourages students to recognise and combat gender prejudices, ensuring everyone's voice is heard. Incorporating equality in the university environment promotes academic excellence and contributes to a more equitable society (Rosa & Clavero 2022; Guerrero-Azpeitia 2023; Claeys-Kulik et. al 2019).

Addressing gender inequalities in higher education requires collaboration from various institutions and partners, including authorities, oversight and funding bodies, academics and civil society organisations, and higher education institutions (Alsina et al, 2019). Universities are important centres to educate and raise awareness about gender disparity among students. Since education is so important to social development, universities and research institutions have redefined their mission and values to promote sustainable development, including the objective of achieving gender equality through gender mainstreaming. Albanian universities have made significant efforts in gender mainstreaming. There is a commitment by the University of Korca (UNIKO) toward gender equality policies.

UNIKO is the most important centre of academic and scientific life in the South-Easter Region of Albania. Therefore, it contributes not only to the educational, economic, and sustainable development of local, regional and wider communities but also highlights the role of the University in transmitting values of tolerance, equality and diversity. UNIKO consists of four faculties. It offers 54 study programmes in the three cycles of study. The Development Strategy of "Fan S. Noli" University 2022- 2027 is based on the Statute of "Fan S. Noli", on the National Strategy for Education 2021-2026, which reflects issues of gender equality and inclusiveness in education following the National Strategy of Gender Equality 2021-2030 and changes in the Labour Code that are in line with EU legislation to support gender equality in the labour market. The gender equality plan (GEP) of UNIKO 2023- 2025 contains a series of measures to strengthen the value of equality and inclusiveness within the institution. Despite these policies already being pursued by UNIKO regarding gender equality it is important to explore the students' perception regarding gender equality. Several studies show that although there are positive dispositions towards equality, gender stereotypes and discrimination persist and actions should be taken to raise awareness and prevent gender bias in universities (Calero & Morina, 2013; Merma et. al 2017; Guerrero-Azpeitia, 2023).

The paper aims to point out the perception of students on gender equality policies followed by UNIKO and the commitment of the university to shift to a more balanced value system in university life. The aim is to understand the impact of the institution's policies in developing gender equality to identify the weaknesses and recommend improvements for the future gender equality plan of UNIKO. The study focused on students' knowledge of gender mainstreaming; their participation in trainings and activities focused on gender issues; equal representation in the decision-making units and awareness of gender equality and unconscious gender biases.

2. Methodology

To measure the perceptions of students regarding gender equality policies in universities a questionnaire was conducted. The questionnaire was administered to the University of Korça (UNIKO). UNIKO is the most important centre of academic and scientific life in the South-Easter Region of Albania. This study continues a research project carried out with the university academic and administrative staff about gender integration in tertiary education, during the academic year 2022-2023. The study was carried out in the academic year 2023-2024 with the students of the University of Korca to measure their perceptions about the gender policies undertaken by the institution. The survey respondents were the UNIKO students, belonging to the four faculties of this university. There were 250 participants in the survey, 66% were girls and 34% were boys. During the academic year 2023-2024, the number of students at the University of Korca is 2336 (1324 female/ 1012 males). 57% of students of UNIKO in the 2023- 2024 academic year are girls. With minor variations, the survey replicated the same research instrument used in a similar study carried out during March- April 2021 with students of the University of Tirana. Both students of bachelor and master study programmes were included in the survey. The survey's main objective was to measure the level of student's knowledge and perceptions about gender equality policies in university. The authors used descriptive analysis to explore students' perceptions of gender equality. Descriptive statistics, graphics and cross-tabulation were used for data analysis and presentation.

3. Findings and discussions

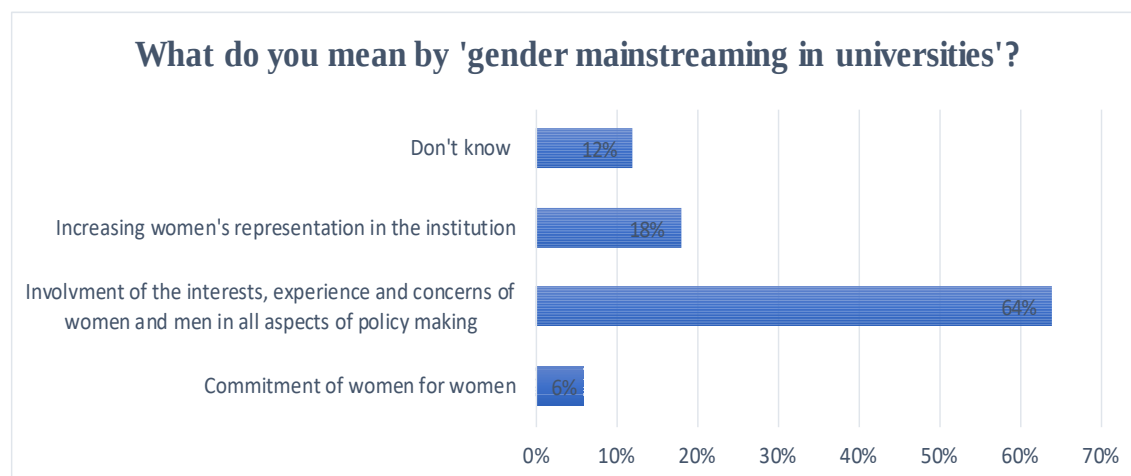
Gender mainstreaming in institutions often takes the form of ensuring that all relevant information, such as gender statistics, regulatory framework, and gender equality analyses are considered when decisions are made at all levels of an institution's organisation. To highlight this aspect, data was collected from the students regarding their understanding of 'gender mainstreaming' and the importance of a gender equality plan for the university. The right definition and meaning of the 'gender mainstreaming' concept is important because there is often a misinterpretation of the term limiting it only to efforts to women's empowerment. Gender mainstreaming is a strategy to achieve gender equality and is a prerequisite and measure for sustainable development in a society (Lamptey et al., 2015; UNICEF, 2017).

The Council of Europe defines gender mainstreaming as:

“the (re)organisation, improvement, development and evaluation of policy processes so that a gender equality perspective is incorporated in all policies at all levels and all stages, by the actors normally involved in policy-making” (The Council of Europe 1998).

Gender mainstreaming is not simply a point to get to, it is a process for ensuring equity, equality, and gender justice in all of the critical areas of the lives of girls and boys, women and men (Sivakumar 2016). This requires a commitment of all social actors, women and men, institutions and stakeholders. Regarding this, the results from the survey showed that 64% of students included in the study understood gender mainstreaming as the involvement of the needs and experiences of both women and men in the preparation, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of all institutional policies (Figure 1).

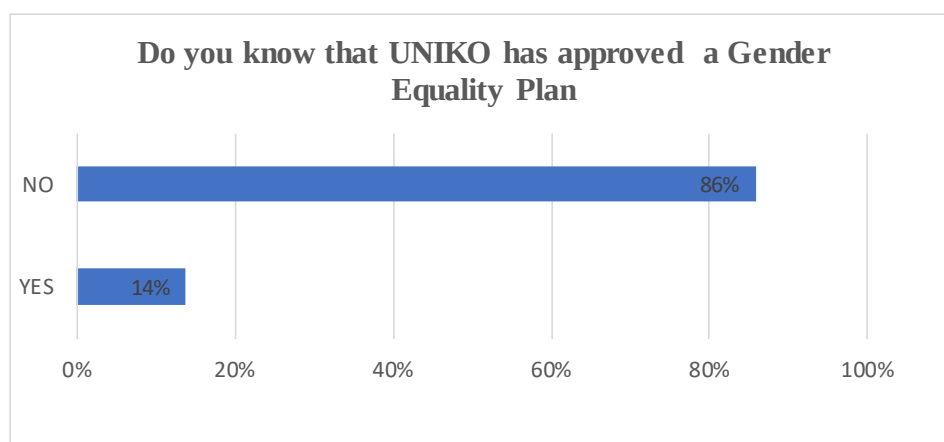
Figure 1: The responses regarding the meaning of 'gender mainstreaming' (%)



Source: The authors

Regarding the question "Is it important for the university to have a Gender Equality Plan?" data from respondents show that 88% of the students answered 'yes' and only 12% of them answered 'no'. Despite the importance that the respondents give to the Gender Equality Plan for the institution, it is worth mentioning the fact that only 14% of the surveyed students are aware that UNIKO has already designed and approved a Gender Equality Plan based on gender analysis. Figure 2 introduces the survey results regarding students' knowledge of UNIKO's gender equality plan.

Figure 2: Students' information on approving the Gender Equality Plan of UNIKO (%)



Source: The authors

As shown in the above figures, students know the right meaning of 'gender mainstreaming' and the importance of a GEP in enforcing gender equality within the university. Still, they are not aware of having approved it. This is a significant indicator and points out the need for better information and promotion of UNIKO's commitment to strengthening gender equality. Better informing the students about the gender equality plan of the university is crucial to ensure their greater commitment to gender equality which may lead to further improvement of the GEP in the future.

3.1. Participation in trainings and activities focused on gender issues

Participation in training, conferences, sessions and activities focused on gender issues remains important in raising awareness and capacity building on gender equality and

unconscious gender biases for students, university staff and decision-makers. Regarding this, students were asked about their experience of participating in such activities. Data from the survey showed that 42% of students included in the study have participated in activities concerning gender issues, while 58% have no such experiences. The low involvement of students in gender-focused activities (trainings, seminars, discussions etc) is an important indicator of the institution's willingness to organise and include students in these activities. Students who have previously participated in gender-related activities were asked to specify the kind of activities based on a list of recommendations. The aim is to identify students' lack of participation in activities for further recommendations to the institution. Table 1 introduces students' responses regarding this.

Table 1: Student's participation in gender-focused activities (%)

Participation of students in activities on gender issues (%)		
	Frequency	Percentage
Activities/trainings on gender equality	35	33.3%
Activities/ trainings on gender mainstreaming in education	23	21.9%
Activities focused on advocacy for gender equality	12	11.4%
Activities/ trainings on gender equality policies	17	16.1%
Activities/trainings on gender stereotypes, prejudices, gender-based discrimination	18	17.3%
Total	105	100%

Source: The authors

Activities for gender advocacy or awareness of gender bias and discrimination have a low percentage of student involvement. This data may be used as a reference to determine the types of activities that UNIKO should organise in the future. Training and activities with a focus on gender stereotypes and discrimination are important tools to show students how gender stereotypes, sexism and discrimination affect identity construction and to encourage them to be critical to any case related and develop a realistic perception as well.

3.2. Representation in the decision-making units

Gender balance in decision-making bodies, recruitment and career progression is one of the areas of intervention identified by the European Commission about gender mainstreaming in higher education institutions.

Our analysis of student's perceptions of the representation of decision-making units is focused on two main indicators: representation in the student council and addressing the concerns of girls and boys by the student council. The Council of Students is a student representative body, that results from the students' elections held in UNIKO. The Council of Students addresses and represents students' concerns and interests and promotes their ideas and achievements. The Council of Students in UNIKO has 90 members, 60 girls and 30 boys. Girls are overrepresented in the Council of Students. This reflects the fact that they constitute the majority of students at UNIKO. Students were asked if this important decision-making body equally represents them and if it equally addresses their concerns. Students were asked to choose the scale of agreement or disagreement with the claims: "*Boys and girls are equally represented to the Council of Students*" and "*The Council of Students equally addresses the*

concerns and interests of boys and girls”. Table 2 summarises the survey findings regarding gender-equal representation in decision-making bodies.

Table 2: Responses regarding the questions: “Boys and girls are equally represented in the Council of Students?” and “The Council of Students equally addresses the concerns and interests of boys and girls” (%)

		Frequency	Percentage
Boys and girls are equally represented in the Council of Students	Agree/ Strongly agree	160	64%
	Disagree/ Strongly disagree	65	26%
	No idea	25	10%
	<i>Total</i>	250	100%
The Council of Students equally addresses the concerns and interests of boys and girls	Agree/ Strongly agree	195	78%
	Disagree/ Strongly disagree	15	6%
	No idea	40	16%
	<i>Total</i>	250	100%

Source: The authors

Data showed that in students’ perception, the Council of Students is an important decision-making unit that reflects and best expresses gender differences. Students included in the survey show that boys and girls are equally represented in this unit (64% of them claim that girls and boys are equally represented in the Council of Students). In addition to student gender representation in decision-making units, the analysis is focused on evaluating their perception of how the Council of Students addresses the concerns and interests of girls and boys. Data above showed that 78% of students claim that the Council of Students equally addresses the concerns and interests of boys and girls. The Chi-Square test of independence was used in each question to check whether there was a statistically significant difference between the observed frequencies in the categories of answers. The p-value (<0.05) showed a significant statistical difference in responses. This means that the indicators are statistically significant and show that students are gender-equally represented in the Council of Students and the Council of Students equally addresses the concerns of boys and girls.

3.3. Awareness of gender equality and unconscious gender biases

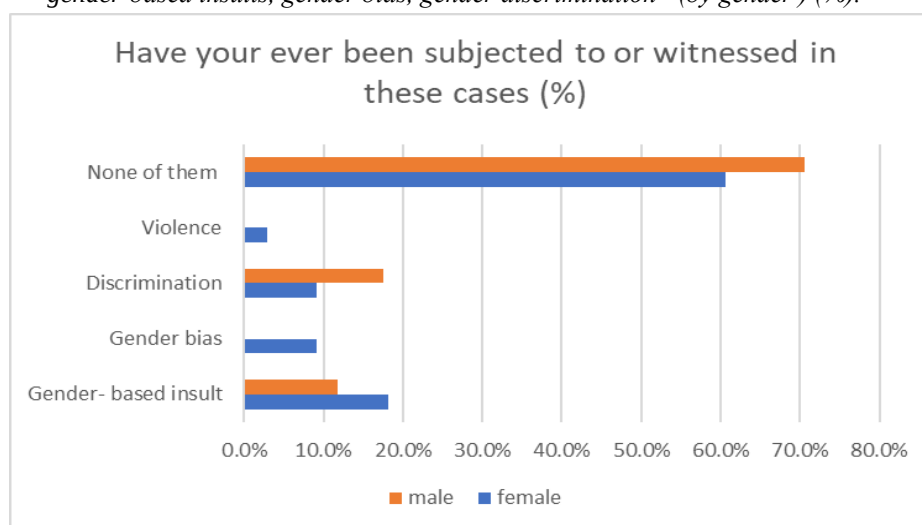
Gender bias is a preference towards one gender over another. It can be conscious or unconscious and expressed in many ways, from subtle glances to apparent reactions. Gender stereotypes are prejudices in which males and females are arbitrarily attributed qualities and roles based on their sex. Studies show that gender stereotypes are firmly rooted in our culture and contribute significantly to gender inequality (Thornton et al., 1983; Tiedemann 2000; Cuddy et al., 2010). We are often unaware of them, yet they influence all of us, men and women. The equal treatment principle between women and men means the lack of every kind of discrimination based on gender. To fight discrimination and promote real equality between women and men, it is crucial to establish effective measures of protection against sexual harassment and harassment based on gender. Awareness of gender equality and unconscious gender biases in the work/school is also a priority area in the framework of gender mainstreaming in higher education institutions. It is important to combat gender-based violence and sexual and moral harassment through preventive actions and initiatives to raise awareness.

The Code of Ethics of UNIKO (Kodi i Etikës 2022) has legal provisions based on this topic, respectively articles 4 and 6:

- All members of the university have the right to be treated with equal understanding, respect and consideration and not to be discriminated against, directly or indirectly, because of one or more factors, including religion, gender, sexual orientation, conscience and beliefs, the personal, physical aspect and colour, language, ethnic or social origin, citizenship, personal and health conditions, pregnancy, family choices, age.
- UNIKO opposes any form of unfair social prejudice, any disturbance or harassment arising out of any of the motives mentioned above and any offensive or humiliating practices or the idea of one group's supremacy or moral superiority over another.
- UNIKO does not tolerate sexual abuse or harassment, understood as discriminatory behaviour that violates a personal sense of human dignity, and provides victims with adequate protection, free from prejudice.

It is important to note that the Council of Ethics of UNIKO has never treated any of the above issues because there have never been any complaints or related cases. Apart from this, understanding students' perceptions is very important to identify the presence or absence of cases of gender bias and gender discrimination in the academic environment. The respondents were asked if they have been subject to or have witnessed any case of gender bias or gender discrimination during their experience in the institution.

Figure 3: The survey results regarding the question “Have you ever been subjected to or witnessed cases of gender-based insults, gender bias, gender discrimination” (by gender) (%).



Source: The authors

Figure 3 shows the survey findings concerning gender bias and discrimination in university life. As shown in the figure 60 to 80% of the respondents have not been victims of gender bias and gender discrimination (or have witnessed such cases). Data regarding gender variables show that 36.4% of female students have been subjected to or have witnessed cases of gender-based insults, gender bias or gender discrimination in university. Regarding the same question, the survey results showed that 29.4% of male students have witnessed cases of gender-based insults, gender bias or gender discrimination in university. Awareness of reporting cases of gender bias and discrimination should be a priority in UNIKO's future gender equality plan. The percentage of the responses by gender to the question about gender bias and discrimination should be considered the most relevant for determining the actions to be included in the future GEP. European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE 2024), considers gender awareness-raising an important tool to provide reliable and accessible information to build a better understanding of gender equality as a core value of democratic societies.

4. Conclusions

There is a visible commitment of UNIKO regarding gender equality policies within the institution. The approval of the GEP is an important indicator of this commitment. Students' perception of the university as an inclusive environment supports this commitment. The study showed that students clearly understand 'gender mainstreaming' as a strategy for developing gender equality. They consider of great importance the approval of the gender equality plan but the study showed that students are not aware of UNIKO's GEP. This significant indicator highlights the need to promote UNIKO's work and commitment to strengthening gender equality. The study revealed a low participation of students in gender-focused activities. A significant indicator relates to the gender equality representation in the Council of Students. However, the study showed that there are several cases of gender bias and gender discrimination among students within the University of Korca. This finding may lead to further research in the future to understand the cause of gender bias from a cultural and structural perspective. Due to the research findings, it is recommended greater promotion of UNIKO's commitment to strengthening gender equality. It is necessary to inform students about the Gender Equality Plan of UNIKO and the possibility of accessing it. It is also important to take actions concerning:

- Greater involvement of students in gender-focused activities is important
- Organising gender-related training for students and staff, with a focus on gender-based violence, gender identity and harassment and how to address them
- Awareness of reporting cases of gender bias and discrimination should be a priority in UNIKO's future gender equality plan.
- Addressing gender stereotypes in policies and practices

The study findings on students' perception of gender equality policies may lead to further improvements in the next gender equality plan of UNIKO.

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