

GENDER EQUALITY PLAN

2023 - 2025



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1. Helixconnect Europe Gender Equality Plan

1.1 Introduction

Helixconnect Europe's Gender Equality Plan (GEP) is a strategic document that outlines our commitment for the next two years (2023 – 2025) to address gender inequalities and promote diversity within our organization. Our focus extends beyond gender, encompassing various aspects such as age, culture, physical ability, sexual orientation, multilingualism, and more. In a time when societal norms are evolving rapidly, we recognize the significance of fostering an inclusive community that not only rejects discrimination but actively embraces differences as ethical values and valuable resources that can drive positive change.

The GEP serves as a powerful tool to counteract the adverse impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, which studies indicate disproportionately affected women and risked reversing the progress made in recent years. As an institution that works with other higher institutions such as universities, vocational schools, NGOs, innovators, etc. it is our duty to offer a path free from biases and stereotypes, one that values individuality and uniqueness. Our goal is to move away from preconceived notions and towards a society that appreciates talent without creating unnecessary divisions, ensuring that no one is left behind. We believe that by cultivating an inclusive and equitable environment within our community, we can also export these best practices, innovative perspectives, and impactful ideas globally.

The Gender Equality Plan is not merely a response to a European requirement but a passionate commitment to the call of the Research and Innovation Directorate-General of the European Commission. This call mandates that all public institutions, including our organization, must have a GEP to access research funding under the Horizon Europe program. Our GEP publicly reaffirms our dedication to the principles of gender equality and intersectionality, which are core values shared by European educational institutions. It also leverages the collective efforts of national and international networks working on these issues, presenting concrete actions for implementation.

This document builds upon existing policies pursued by Helixconnect Europe while exploring new goals and strategies to overcome persistent obstacles to gender equality and diversity. The GEP spans a two year period (2023 - 2025), and we intend to align it with our

Strategic Plan in the years to come, taking into account the annual analysis presented in the Gender Equality Report and the Positive Action Plan (PAP) proposed by the Guarantee Committee. Our aim is to create an inclusive and communicative learning and work environment where all individuals are treated equitably, fostering trust, a sense of belonging, shared goals, and ultimately contributing to the growth of our entire institution.

1.2 Gender Equality in Research and Innovation

Gender equality is a core value of the European Union and a vital component of the United Nations' sustainable development goals (SDGs). Within the context of research and learning, gender equality is imperative to ensure that research and innovation systems contribute to democratic and equal societies. Additionally, studies have shown a positive correlation between a country's innovation capacity and its gender equality index. While the reasons for this correlation are multifaceted, gender equality brings multiple advantages to research and innovation:

- **Enhanced Quality and Impact:** Gender equality ensures that research and innovation are representative of and pertinent to the entire spectrum of society, thereby improving their quality and impact.
- **Positive Work Environments:** Promoting gender equality creates conducive work environments that facilitate high-quality research and learning. It maximizes the potential and talents of all staff and students.
- **Talent Attraction and Retention:** By assuring all staff that their abilities will be acknowledged fairly and appropriately, gender equality attracts and retains talent in the field of research and innovation.

Responsible Research and Innovation (RRI) is a framework that encourages organizations to align their research and innovation processes with societal needs, values, and ethical considerations. It emphasizes the importance of involving various stakeholders, including the public, in decision-making and ensuring that innovation is not only technically sound but also socially and environmentally responsible.

At Helixconnect Europe, we are committed to the principles of Responsible Research and Innovation, and we integrate this concept into all our innovation processes. This means that in addition to pursuing technological advancements, we actively engage with stakeholders, consider ethical implications, and aim to create innovations that have a positive impact on society while minimizing any potential negative consequences. By applying RRI, we ensure that our innovation efforts are not only cutting-edge but also aligned with the broader goals of sustainability, inclusivity, and ethical responsibility.

2. Gender Equality Policy (GEP) Framework

2.1 Legal basis

Gender equality is a core principle deeply embedded in the legal and policy framework of the European Union (EU). Several fundamental EU legal documents, such as Articles 2 and 3(3) of the Treaty on European Union (TEU), Articles 21 and 23 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights, and Article 8 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), emphasize the imperative of gender equality. For instance, Article 8 of the TFEU explicitly mandates the Union to eliminate gender inequalities and promote equality between women and men across all its activities, underscoring the importance of gender mainstreaming.

Moreover, the Treaty of Lisbon reaffirms this commitment to gender equality through Declaration No. 19, which is annexed to the Final Act of the Intergovernmental Conference that adopted the Treaty. The Europe 2020 EU Economic Growth Policy also underscores the goal of increasing women's participation in the labor market and includes specific targets, like those related to childcare coverage, to support the work-life balance for both women and men.

Addressing issues like the gender pay gap and organizational diversity are high priorities for the European Commission, directly aligned with EU Funds' objectives. This commitment is evident in legally binding directives such as Directive 2014/95/EU, which focuses on disclosing non-financial and diversity information by certain large undertakings and groups. Non-binding recommendations like Recommendation 2014/124/EU promote the principle of equal pay through transparency. The EU's action plan, "Tackling the Gender Pay," reinforces these efforts.

The EU's Strategic Engagement for Gender Equality 2016-2019 recognizes EU Funds as a crucial investment tool for promoting gender equality. It emphasizes various measures, including monitoring Member States' progress towards childcare targets, addressing barriers to migrant women's employment within the European Agenda on Migration, and fostering women's entrepreneurship.

The 2011–2020 Gender Equality Pact outlines three main EU ambitions: closing gender gaps in employment and social protection, promoting work-life balance, and combating all forms of violence against women. The European Pillar of Social Rights introduced in 2017 underlines "gender equality" as one of its key principles and is designed to improve living and working conditions across the EU. The recently adopted Work-life Balance Directive champions gender equality by introducing legal measures like paternity leave and strengthening parental leave rights, along with policy measures aimed at improving long-term care and childcare services and removing disincentives for second earners.

Moreover, the global commitment to gender equality extends to the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its sustainable development goals (SDGs). Gender equality is not only a standalone goal (SDG 5) but also a cross-cutting element of all 17 SDGs. The Agenda explicitly emphasizes the importance of systematically mainstreaming the gender perspective, with a specific indicator on gender budgeting. This underlines the significance of gender equality not just within the EU but also on the global stage.

2.2 The Gender Advisory Board

At Helixconnect Europe, we are committed to promoting gender equality and fostering a diverse and inclusive workplace.

The Gender Advisory Board is also an essential component of Helixconnect Europe's commitment to promoting gender equality and fostering an inclusive work environment. It serves as a strategic body responsible for advising and guiding the organization on matters related to gender equality. The Gender Advisory Board is composed of a diverse group of individuals within the organization, representing different departments and roles with Miss Lola Vaskovic serving as Gender Officer. This diversity ensures a wide range of perspectives and experiences are considered when addressing gender equality issues.

The Gender Advisory Board collaborates closely with other departments and teams within Helixconnect Europe to ensure that gender equality is integrated into the fabric of the organization. Through the efforts of the Gender Advisory Board, Helixconnect Europe aims to create an inclusive workplace where all employees are treated equitably, and their unique contributions are recognized and valued. The board's initiatives and policies are designed not

only to meet legal requirements but also to foster a culture of respect, diversity, and empowerment.

It is noteworthy that Helixconnect Europe currently boasts equal gender representation among its employees. This balanced representation reflects the organization's commitment to gender equality, starting from its own workforce.

The Gender Equality Plan outlines our strategy and actions to ensure equal opportunities, fair treatment, and the full participation of all employees, regardless of their gender, in our community. As we mainly work on Erasmus+ and Horizon projects, we recognize the importance of diversity and inclusion in driving innovation and achieving our mission.

2.3 Helixconnect Europe GEP Action plan

Thus, we plan to implement gender equality policies based on these steps:

1. Leadership and Commitment:

a. **Leadership Commitment:** The company's leadership team will lead by example in promoting gender equality and inclusion within the organization.

2. Recruitment and Hiring:

a. **Unbiased Job Descriptions:** Ensure that job descriptions are free from gender bias and promote diverse candidates.

b. **Diverse Candidate Pools:** Actively seek a diverse pool of candidates for job openings through various recruitment channels.

3. Career Development:

a. **Training and Development:** Provide equal access to training and development opportunities for all employees, regardless of gender.

b. **Mentorship:** Establish mentorship programs to support the career growth of underrepresented genders.

c. **Promotion and Advancement:** Monitor promotions and advancement to ensure gender equity, and address any disparities.

4. Work-Life Balance:

a. **Flexible Work Arrangements:** Offer flexible work arrangements, including remote work options, to support work-life balance for all employees.

b. **Parental Leave:** Provide equitable parental leave policies for all genders to promote caregiving responsibilities.

5. Equal Pay:

a. **Pay Equity Analysis:** Regularly review and analyze pay structures to identify and address gender pay gaps.

b. **Salary Transparency:** Promote transparency regarding compensation and benefits to ensure fairness.

6. Reporting and Accountability:

a. **Regular Reporting:** Publish regular reports on the company's progress toward gender equality goals and initiatives.

b. **Accountability:** Hold managers and teams accountable for promoting gender equality within their respective areas of responsibility.

7. Harassment and Discrimination:

a. **Anti-Harassment Policy:** Implement and enforce a comprehensive anti-harassment policy that ensures a safe and respectful work environment for all employees.

b. **Reporting Mechanisms:** Establish clear and confidential reporting mechanisms for incidents of harassment or discrimination.

8. Diversity and Inclusion Programs:

a. **Employee Resource Groups:** Encourage the formation of employee resource groups that promote diversity and inclusion.

b. **Diverse Suppliers:** Support and promote relationships with diverse suppliers and partners.

9. Monitoring and Evaluation:

a. **Regular Assessment:** Continuously assess and evaluate the effectiveness of gender equality initiatives and adjust them as needed.

b. **Feedback Mechanisms:** Encourage feedback from employees to inform improvement efforts.

10. Communication and Awareness:

a. **Internal Communication:** Regularly communicate updates and progress on gender equality initiatives to all employees.

b. **External Communication:** Highlight our commitment to gender equality in our external communications and partnerships.

By implementing this 10-step Gender Equality Plan, Helixconnect Europe aims to create a workplace that is not only inclusive but also fosters innovation and creativity. We believe that a diverse workforce is essential to our success and the achievement of our goals.

3. End notes

In line with Helixconnect Europe's mission to foster innovation, facilitate growth, and promote integration among innovators, NGOs, industry, and government, our Gender Equality Policy is a fundamental component of our commitment to creating an inclusive and equitable work environment. We recognize that as we bridge the gap between Eastern Europe, Western Balkans, and the global innovation systems, it is imperative to ensure that our organization upholds the principles of diversity, gender equality, and fairness in all our endeavors.

Our work, characterized by a hands-on approach to innovation and knowledge and technology transfer, demands that we embrace modern technologies and organizational performance frameworks. These transformative processes necessitate a conscious effort to promote gender equality and diversity as essential drivers of innovation and sustainable impact. At Helixconnect Europe, we believe that the inclusion of diverse perspectives, experiences, and talents is key to achieving our mission effectively and ethically.

To support our commitment to gender equality, we operate under the guidance of an international advisory board comprising influential figures from industry, innovation, and policy-making sectors. This collaborative approach ensures that our gender equality initiatives are tailored, practical, and in alignment with global best practices. We understand that fostering gender equality not only benefits our organization but also contributes to the broader goal of creating a fair and responsible impact on society.

By integrating our Gender Equality Policy with our core mission and values, we aim to create a workplace that values and celebrates the unique contributions of every individual, regardless of their gender. Our commitment to gender equality is not just a standalone initiative but an integral part of our strategy to drive innovation, promote growth, and facilitate meaningful integration within the innovation ecosystem.

Together, through our dedication to gender equality and inclusivity, we will continue to build a dynamic and forward-thinking organization that thrives on the diverse talents of its workforce, upholds ethical principles, and contributes positively to the communities we serve.