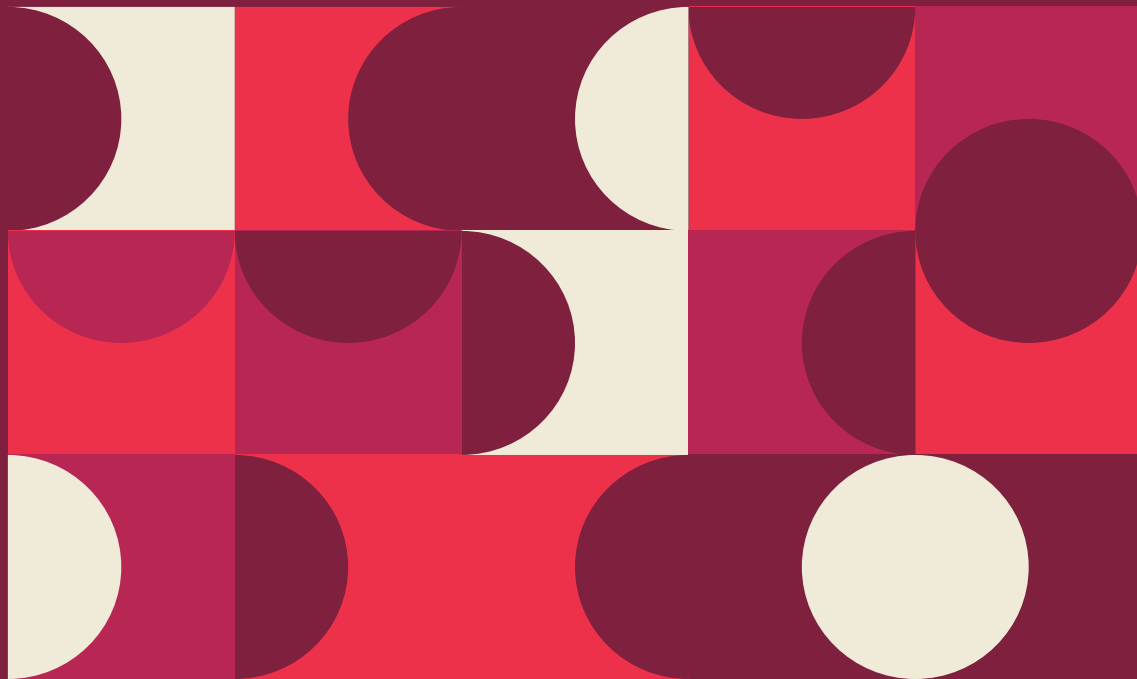


EQUATION



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Guidelines to Assess Gender Equality for Accreditation Institutions

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EQUATION

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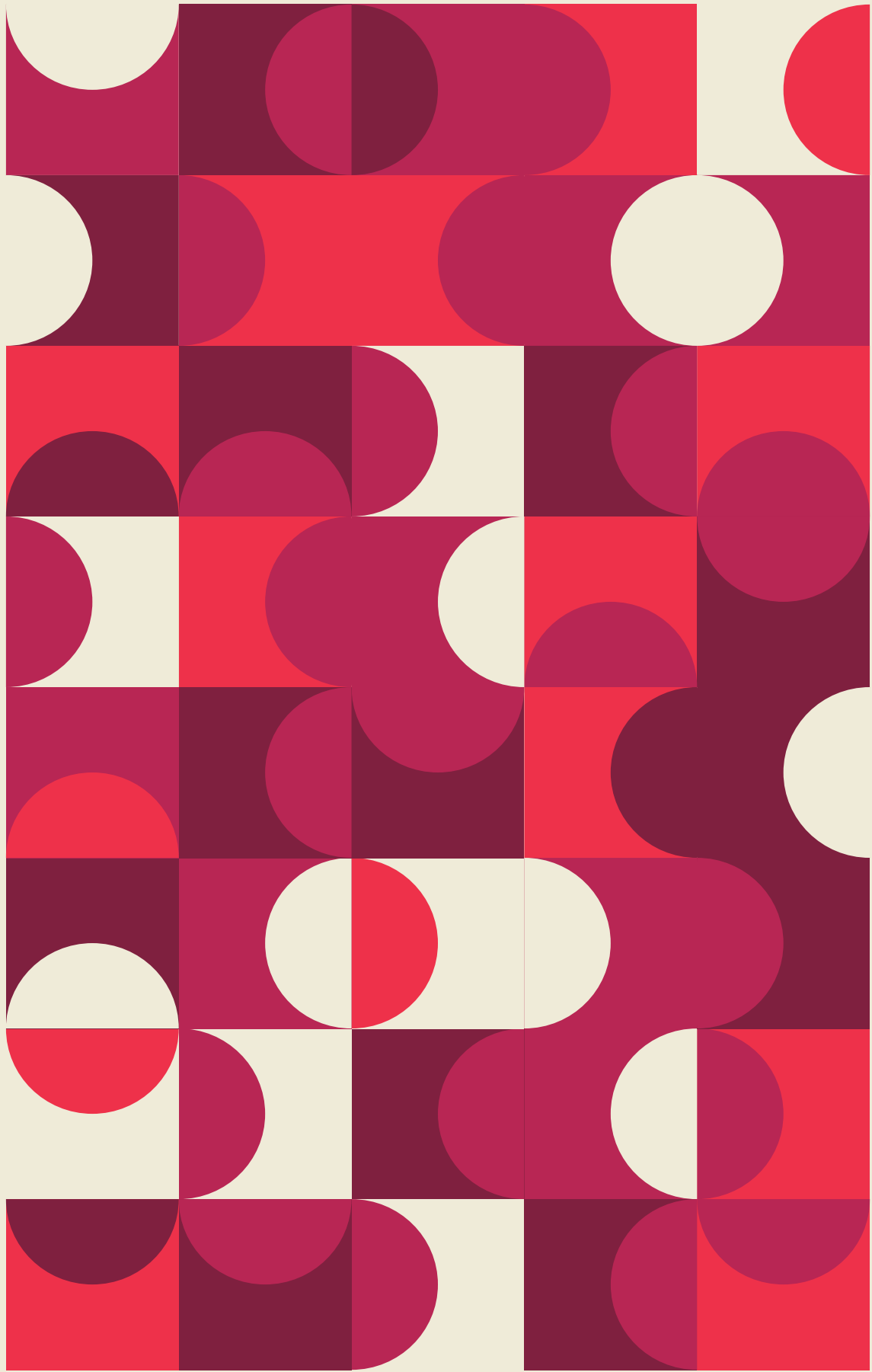
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List of Abbreviations

- HEI - Higher Education Institutions
- BSC - Business Schools
- GE - Gender Equality
- DEIB - Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging
- SOGIESC - sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics
- LGBTIQ+ - lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer and people with diverse identities.
- ESG - Environmental, Social and Governance Standards
- SDG - Sustainable Development Goal
- GRI - Global Reporting Initiative
- CSRD - Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive
- EFRAG - European Financial Reporting Advisory Group
- QA - Quality Assurance
- ESRS - European Sustainability Reporting Standards
- IRO - Impact, Risks, Opportunity.
- DMA - Double Materiality Assessment
- IOM - International Organization for Migration
- ILO - International Labour Organization
- LLT - Learning, Training, and Teaching

Executive Summary

The European Union (EU) has developed a comprehensive framework of public policies and legal instruments aimed at advancing Gender Equality (GE) across all its member states. This framework is built upon a combination of EU treaties, national legislation, strategic programs, and budgetary commitments. Among the key legal foundations supporting GE are international human rights treaties ratified by multiple EU countries, including the Treaty of Rome (1957), the Treaty of Maastricht (1992), the Treaty of Amsterdam (1997), the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU (2000), and the Treaty of Lisbon (2007). These legal instruments establish binding obligations for member states, ensuring the integration of gender equality principles into national policies and legislative frameworks (García M., 2022, pp. 461-462).

To uphold gender equality as a fundamental value and guiding principle of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EC, undated), the EQUATION project has conducted rigorous, high-quality research within its consortium. This initiative seeks to evaluate the extent to which gender equality measures are either promoted or overlooked in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), Business Schools (BSCs), Accreditation Bodies, and Agencies. By advancing ethical standards and establishing a structured framework, the project aims to enhance social cohesion across organizations, fostering the implementation and sustainability of gender equality initiatives within these sectors.

Figure 1. European Pillar of Social Rights.



Source: European Commission, undated.

The EQUATION project, through Work Package 4 (WP4), is focused on integrating GE principles into quality assurance processes for HEI and BSCs. The Guidelines for Accreditation Institutions in Gender Equality (DA4.2.) propose a specific set of criterias and a framework to ensure that GE is fully ingrained into the conception, design, and implementation of their accreditation processes. By developing tools and training for accreditation evaluators, the project aims to better equip them to recognize and address gender gaps in the institutions allowing GE to become a central part of the accreditation agenda throughout all European regions.

The Guidelines begin by examining the role of Accreditation Agencies in promoting Gender Equality (GE) (Part 1). This section provides an in-depth analysis of the current status of GE integration within accreditation systems, drawing from interviews and empirical assessments. It reviews existing efforts, challenges, and progress made in embedding GE principles. Additionally, it explores the development of accreditation criterias and framework that incorporate GE, as part of the sustainable agenda, concluding with an overview of the Learning, Training, and Teaching (LTT) Program designed for Accreditation Evaluators.

Part 2 presents the theoretical foundation for assessing GE within accreditation and quality assurance frameworks. It offers a structured, theory-driven introduction to GE criteria, defines key concepts, and provides the criteria and framework, as well as the strategic guidelines for integrating GE into accreditation systems. This last section, also outlines actionable steps that accreditation bodies can adapt to enhance GE implementation. The discussion culminates with a pilot case study on CEEMAN's approach to integrating GE criteria, serving as a practical example of the framework's application. The document concludes with strategic recommendations for strengthening GE integration in accreditation at an international level.

While this project operates within a specific consortium and targets a particular audience, the proposed Gender Equality (GE) criterias and overarching framework may require adaptation to accommodate different industries and social contexts. This is especially relevant within the European Union, where supranational policies provide a common foundation, yet national laws shape how GE measures are interpreted and applied within accreditation frameworks. Ensuring flexibility in implementation will be essential for fostering meaningful and sustainable progress in gender equality across diverse legal, intersectional, and cultural environments. By embedding adaptable and context-sensitive approaches, this initiative aims to contribute to a more inclusive and equitable accreditation landscape on both a national and international scale.

Introduction

Accreditation processes are designed to ensure the quality of institutions and their programs through rigorous standards that reflect the expectations of stakeholders, communities, and society (Duarte & Vardasca, 2023). Although, accreditation processes often vary across regions, as they are influenced by governmental advisors, such as Ministries of Education, and other recognised bodies. These variations reflect cultural and administrative contexts, where the interpretation and measurement of educational quality are shaped by local needs and priorities.

CEEMAN's International Quality Accreditation (IQA) emphasizes the importance of relevance, dynamism, excellence, and societal impact in management education. Its rigorous standards not only ensure high-quality education but also foster innovation and adaptability, enabling institutions to address evolving stakeholder needs while maintaining global relevance. CEEMAN IQA places a strong emphasis on aligning educational practices with societal priorities, including sustainability and ethical responsibility, CEEMAN IQA supports institutions in shaping a transformative vision for management education - one that combines academic excellence with social impact, advancing both organizational performance and societal well-being. In pursuit of this mission, CEEMAN actively engages in projects that reinforce these values. This vision aligns with the broader role of accreditation agencies shaping the future of Higher Education Institutions and Business Schools (HEIs & BSC).

On the other hand, the GE criteria and framework discussed in this paper are based on the sustainable framework that serves for institutional accreditation, directed to assess overall quality. This distinction provides a nuanced understanding of quality assurance (QA) mechanisms across diverse educational landscapes (Duarte & Vardasca, 2023). To support those involved in accreditation evaluations, detailed definitions on framework, criteria and guidelines, as well as key terms associated with indicators are further explained. This clarity fosters a shared understanding, enabling consensus on achievements and areas for improvement.

Evidence suggests that global education policies and diverse cultural and administrative contexts influence the implementation of QA methods in HEIs across Europe, the United States, and Asia. As Massy (2010) notes, “the sophisticated quality assurance methods are categorized into three main areas: accreditation, evaluation, and peer-reviewed quality audits” (p. 203–2025). Despite these advancements, “quality” remains a complex concept, interpreted differently among stakeholders. In fact, some authors argue that “quality is understood as exceptional in standards; as perfection in consistency; as fitness for purpose in meeting the specified requirements; as value for money addressing cost-effectiveness; and as transformative, changing realities for the better” (Van Kemenade, et al, 2008, p. 175–185).

QA focuses on standardization of processes, sometimes undermining the diversity and creativity essential in HEIs. For this reason, Institutions are encouraged to embrace sustainable frameworks to address changes, including the fast-rise of online learning, transnational education, AI ethical protocols and the increased diversity of learners.

Given this context, the 2030 agenda and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide the direction in which European regulation compiles institutions towards the adoption of measures that drive society to a fair and just future. Nonetheless, “on the organizational level, companies are also exerted by different stakeholders to adopt these social and responsible initiatives” (Krasodomska et al., p.124, 2022), in which educational institutions are not an exception.

This GE framework integrates the United Nations’ 2030 Agenda, placing the SDGs at its core, through the European Sustainability Reporting Standards (ESRS) that promote justice and systemic change on the basis the 5P based world (people, planet, prosperity, peace and partnerships), (EFRAG, 2022). The main purpose of this interconnection between education, sustainability and the reporting criteria and framework are with the intention to encourage accountability and transparency, “leaving-no-one-behind”. The ESRS have a significant impact on scope, volume and granularity of sustainability related information to be collected and disclosed by organizations, mandatorily after January 2024, reporting in 2025 (EFRAG, 2022).

The SDGs in education are drivers that play a key role in social change, as “higher levels of educational attainment are associated with positive economic, labor market, and social outcomes for individuals” (OECD, 2024). Often, it is through the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives that institutions are pressured by internal and external stakeholders to pursue fairness and justice in business (Aguilera et al., 2007). Although, on January 5/2023 the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) entered in force in the European Union to strengthen the rules concerning social and environmental information that companies have to report, regardless of their size, sector or main activity.

HEIs and BSCs will benefit not only from complying with the law, but also sustainability is “magnifying glass due to the myriad of ways in which performance is accounted for” (GRI, 2022). Considering the previous, the official definition of a framework used in these guidelines “serve as a tool for shaping direction to contextualize information providing guidance and shaping people’s thoughts on how to approach certain topics” (GRI, 2022). In contrast, criterias are defined as “containing specific, measurable and detailed metrics of “what” should be reported. They are often defined and replicable” (GRI, 2022). An example is the GRI initiative that employs a multistakeholder approach to establish transparency and accountability in sustainability reporting.

Likewise, criteria provide objective rules for evaluating, assessing, making decisions and enabling comparison, such is the case for the ISO (International Organization for Standardization). Complementing these elements, the guidelines offer practical views and instructions and best practices to implement effectively.

Recent studies demonstrated that institutions that are generally concerned for gender equality and justice are perceived among employees as ethically responsible, thus providing them with some sense of control over their instrumental motives. This means that employees tend to assume that overall conditions will be for them as well (Aguilera et al., 2007). Based on this moral compass, employees seek to work in institutions that share this ethical and moral framework. As mentioned before, there are a myriad of benefits among those the

attraction of diverse talent, and “the increased supply and revenue, a chain of resilience, and spawn investor interest to ensure licenses for operation” (Busco, 2020).

The ethical and social responsibility are aspects that Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and Business Schools (BSCs) must nurture due to their dynamic interactions with a diverse range of stakeholders. Internal stakeholders include staff, auditors, leadership teams, peer reviewers, and boards of executives within accreditation bodies. External stakeholders are universities, their leadership, experts within broader academic networks, international organisations such as UN agencies, government agencies, and policymakers.

This interconnected landscape reinforces the importance of promoting GE and ethical strategies through concrete policies that integrate justice, equality, participative democracy, social responsibility, and sustainability. These efforts must also address stakeholder expectations while complying with applicable laws and international norms of behaviour (Avogaro, 2023). Accreditation agencies play a key role in this context, ensuring that ethical and socially responsible practices are embedded in institutional frameworks and operationalised to meet the needs from both internal and external stakeholders.

Aligned with the EQUATION project’s objectives and the European Pillar of Social Rights principles, the Guidelines explore strategies for integrating GE within accreditation agencies across Europe. Through collaboration under the Erasmus+ goals of social inclusion and diversity, the SDGs, and the CSRD, this deliverable DA4.2 positions GE at the center, with its criteria and framework. The aim is to empower institutions in their quality assurance practices to effectively confront and dismantle systemic barriers impacting individuals, irrespective of race, gender expression, gender identity, sexual orientation and other intersecting identities.

Benefits for Institutional Accreditation on Gender Equality

Improving disclosure of gender equality information can bring several benefits for institutions aiming for accreditation, particularly when aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the 2030 Agenda. These benefits might include greater internal awareness and strategic alignment with gender-related issues, empowering the institution to identify and manage gender equality risks and opportunities more effectively. This can lead to better decision-making and long-term strategic planning that directly supports SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), among other SDGs and the legal requirements established by the new Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD).

Expanded access to funding and investment opportunities is another benefit, as meeting the criterias required for inclusion in gender equality-focused investment portfolios and sustainability-oriented indices enhances institutional appeal. Institutions that demonstrate commitment to gender equity are more attractive to investors focused on ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance), leading to potentially lower capital costs, improved credit ratings, and favorable assessments from financial and accrediting bodies.

Strengthened engagement and transparency with stakeholders is also achieved by openly disclosing gender equality data and aligning with the SDGs. Institutions foster more constructive relationships with key stakeholders, particularly investors, accreditation agencies, and regulatory bodies, by building trust, encouraging active support from these stakeholders, and demonstrating an institution’s commitment to measurable, global criterias, enhancing its credibility within different ecosystems.

Boosting institutional reputation and sustaining social license to operate are additional outcomes. Beyond regulatory and investor appeal, institutions also gain broader public trust and legitimacy by aligning with the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda. This commitment resonates with students, staff, and the general public, reinforcing the institution’s social credibility. Such alignment not only strengthens the institution’s reputation but also demonstrates that it is a responsible, forward-thinking organization dedicated to societal progress and sustainable development.

Defining Gender Equality in Accreditation¹

The EQUATION project seeks to contribute significantly to the promotion of gender equality in Accreditation Agencies and Bodies, HEIs and BSCs, as part of the annex strategy of the CSRD and the SDGs, core to this endeavour is to understand the main differences between concepts regarding Gender and Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging (DEIB); Intersectionality, among others, useful to provide context on the criteria, framework and guidelines further explained.

Gender, as the European Commission defines it:

the social construction of women and men, of femininity and masculinity, which varies in time and place, and between cultures. The notion of gender appeared in the seventies and was put forward by feminist theorists who challenged the secondary position of women in society. It departs from the notion of sex to signal that biology or anatomy is not a destiny. It is important to distinguish clearly between gender and sex. These terms are interchangeably while they are conceptually different (2011).

Gender, as defined by UN Women, refers to the socially attributed characteristics, roles, and opportunities associated with being male or female, as well as the relationships between men and women, girls, and boys. These attributes and roles are constructed through socialization processes, making them contextual, time-bound, and subject to change. Gender shapes societal expectations and determines what roles are deemed appropriate for individuals within a given social framework (UN, n.d.).

In most societies, significant disparities exist between men and women, particularly in responsibilities, activities, access to and control over resources, and participation in decision-making. As a socio-cultural construct, gender also intersects with other critical factors, including race, class, poverty levels, ethnicity, and age, offering a broader anthropological perspective.

Nonetheless, other authors explain gender as “an individual’s actual or perceived sex, gender identity, self-image, appearance, behavior, or expression, whether or not that gender identity, self-image, appearance, behavior or expression is different from that traditionally associated with the sex assigned at birth” (de Blasio and Malalis, 2016).

Understanding the sex and gender system is crucial, as it is through this mechanism that unequal power dynamics manifest. Patriarchy is a social, cultural, political, and economic system in which masculine individuals exert power and domination over females (Pilcher et al., 2004). In feminist theory, patriarchy is seen as the primary reason why female leaders worldwide have historically fought for rights such as voting, education, and political participation, which were not easily granted in the 16th and 19th centuries. Patriarchy has led to an unequal division of labor, resources, and access to education, disproportionately affecting women and young girls, as well as other marginalized groups based on their sexual orientation, race, religion, and other aspects of their identities.

Patriarchy and androcentrism are intertwined systems that uphold unequal power dynamics by centering men and male norms as the societal standard. For example, leadership roles in many workplaces are predominantly held by men, with male leadership styles often regarded as the default or ideal. This reinforces biases and structural barriers that disadvantage women and non-binary individuals, who may be perceived as less competent or unsuitable for leadership simply because they do not conform to these norms. Together, patriarchy and androcentrism perpetuate gender inequality, discrimination, and violence while limiting opportunities for those who challenge traditional male-dominated roles.

Feminism stands in opposition to patriarchy, not to men themselves. This distinction is essential, as feminism

¹ The whole glossary available in Appendix 1.

comprises various schools of thought, similar to philosophy, each advocating for different roles and rights for women in society. For instance, abolitionist feminism seeks to dismantle systems of oppression, such as racism, capitalism, and patriarchy, which intersect to perpetuate inequality. Ecofeminism highlights the link between the exploitation of the environment and how this affects the life of women and young girls in rural areas, calling for ecological sustainability and gender equality. Liberal feminism focuses on achieving equality between men and women through legal and political reforms, such as equal pay, reproductive rights, and anti-discrimination laws. These and other feminist frameworks continue to evolve in response to societal changes, reflecting feminism's adaptability as a discipline rooted in human progress and social justice.

Workplace discrimination against women and LGBTQ+ individuals, gender pay gaps, and limited access to leadership positions are clear manifestations of patriarchy. Furthermore, individuals may face discrimination in various contexts based on multiple aspects of their identity, meaning that discrimination is often intersectional.

Intersectionality is a critical framework that explains the interconnections and interdependencies between social categories and systems. Coined by Kimberle Crenshaw in the context of the United States, the term addresses the experiences of minority and ethnic women. This approach has gained prominence in business and management studies, highlighting the systematic dynamics of power among different groups and the shifting configurations of inequality. Intersectionality posits that knowledge is situated, contextual, and relational, reflecting political and economic power dynamics; is the analytical sensibility and a way of thinking about identity and power (Crenshaw, 2015).

United Nations (2000) explains the concept of intersectionality:

the structural and dynamic consequences of the interaction between two or more forms of discrimination or systems of subordination. (Intersectionality) specifically addresses the manner in which racism, patriarchy, economic disadvantages and other discriminatory systems contribute to creating layers of inequality that structure the relative positions of women and men, races and other groups. (UN Gender and racial discrimination: Report of the Expert Group Meeting)

Intersectionality emphasizes the configuration of power, disadvantage, and privilege at both individual and societal levels. It examines the nuances and complexities within group comparisons, challenging assumptions of homogeneity within groups. For example, discrimination in a job interview can occur for various reasons, such as being a single mother, a black lesbian woman, or both, illustrating multiple aspects of an individual's identity. In terms of privilege, companies may specify that candidates must come from a world-class university, which most citizens cannot afford to attend. This example highlights classism and privilege as forms of discrimination that limit access to employment for the majority.

Understanding intersectionality in management praxis is important as one central purpose of this concept is to foreground the experiences of marginalised individuals without entering into tokenism. At a practical level the utility is to give them voice, revealing their experiences relating to oppression and marginalization, with this opportunity to disclose, in a safe space, managers and business leaders provide a starting point for personal and societal transformation (Collins, 1990). Recognizing these issues are real, exist and name them by their true nature is the first step towards fostering active change.

The **Academic Wheel of Privilege** in Figure 4, illustrates the concept of intersectionality by mapping approximately 20 identity types across seven categories: living, culture, caregiving, education, career, gender and sexuality, race, health and wellbeing, and childhood and development. These identities are arranged within three concentric rings representing levels of privilege, with the outermost ring indicating the least privilege and the innermost circle signifying the highest. The model highlights how intersecting identities influence one's social positioning, demonstrating that individuals closer to the center are more likely to experience compounded privilege. This visual framework emphasizes the dynamic relationship of identities and how privilege or disadvantage can intensify based on one's unique combination of characteristics.

Privilege refers to unearned advantages or benefits that certain individuals enjoy due to factors such as inheritance, economic opportunities, and other circumstances. Having privilege should not be viewed as inherently negative, unless it is used to exclude others from decision-making or deny them equal opportunities. Instead, privilege should be used responsibly, leveraging the power it brings for the collective good.

Figure 2. Academic Wheel of Privilege.



Source: Elsherif, M. M., et al.; 2022.

Discrimination can be intersectional and occurs when a person or group is treated less favorably than others on specific grounds, such as their sexual orientation (e.g., being gay or bisexual). This is known as **direct discrimination**. Alternatively, discrimination can arise from apparently neutral measures that disproportionately disadvantage certain groups based on similar grounds, unless such measures are objectively justified. This is referred to as indirect discrimination, for instance, when institutional policies limit access to organizational benefits, such as parental leave or remote work, based on sex or gender (CD, 2000).

The Gender **Equality in Academia and Research** report by EIGE (2022) highlights scientific evidence that men often benefit from positive bias, as they are presumed to possess higher competence and performance levels than women, particularly in male-dominated disciplines. Despite academia and research being perceived as meritocratic fields, implicit biases frequently influence selection and promotion processes. These biases can affect not only research outcomes but also funding decisions, as time pressure, ambiguous assessment criteria, and the evaluation of individuals rather than ideas create conditions for bias to thrive.

A gender-balanced workforce (e.g., 50/50 men and women) does not necessarily equate to a diverse workplace. Assertions such as “we are diverse because we have many women” reflect **gender blindness** – meaning the failure to recognize how societal, cultural, economic, and political contexts shape gender roles and responsibilities that not only affect women, but LGBTBIQ+ people, individuals with disabilities, among others. This oversight often manifests in workplace power dynamics, workload distribution, the nature of assigned tasks (administrative work often assigned to women only), salaries and career path progression, budgeting roles, further embedding inequality.

The underlying causes of discrimination stem from negative or stigmatizing attitudes, perceptions, and unconscious biases. These beliefs, viewing a person or group as less valuable reinforces the notion that they are undeserving of full social acceptance, leading to devaluation, rejection, and denial of opportunities commonly available to others. Over time, this stigmatization can erode self-worth, prompting affected individuals to engage in protective behaviors such as self-exclusion and isolation. For LGBTIQ+ persons, stigma is often compounded by intersectionality, resulting in layered and more pervasive forms of discrimination.

With the purpose to educate, every definition is explained in detail without ambiguity, we have structured this section as a reference dictionary that can be consulted at any time while using this document regarding the different concepts and forms of discrimination, violence and harassment present in the system sex-gender (ILO, 2019–2022; EC, 1998; EIGE, 2022; FRA, 2009).

Diversity in the workplace refers to any dimension of differentiation and reflects unique experiences within social, historical, political, and other contextual settings (Roberson 2019; ILO, 2022). It refers not just to different aspects, but also similarities in age, personal characteristics, SOGIESC, religion, race, ethnicity and work roles. Each person has multiple groups they identify with, which can change over time, potentially influencing and shifting employment opportunities and outcomes. It is important in terms of social representation.

Equality recognizes that each person has different circumstances, that historically some groups have experienced discrimination, and that reaching equal outcomes will not be achieved by treating everyone the same. Equality and reaching equal outcomes requires resources and opportunities to be allocated according to circumstance and need (ILO, 2022).

Inclusion, on the other hand, is relational. It refers to the experience people have in the workplace and the extent to which they feel integrated and valued for who they are, the skills and experience they bring at work, to have a voice and a vote in status quo. Creating an inclusive workplace culture and environment enables diverse employees to experience equality and thrive, increases employee engagement and influences business performance.

Belonging is a deeply personal and contextual mediated experience where individuals feel secure, accepted, included, valued and respected by a defined group, connected with their personal or professional values in harmony (Levett-Jones et al, 2007). There is a distinction between inclusion and belonging, because one can be included yet feel they do not belong or they are not welcomed. Considering this, belonging is the result of having a balance between diversity, equality and inclusion.

Social Justice, Social justice is closely tied to human rights and refers to promoting fairness, equality, and equity across multiple aspects of society, including economic, educational, and workforce opportunities (Jost & Kay, 2010; Kendi, 2016; Petersen et al., 2016).

Should we choose between Gender Equality, Gender Equity or DEIB?

Equity and equality are key to promoting justice and fairness in institutions, but they serve different roles. Equity involves tailored measures to address systemic barriers and ensure fairness, while equality focuses on impartial treatment and uniform outcomes. Together, they highlight how “neutral” systems can unintentionally reinforce disadvantages (Duarte, M. et al., 2023).

For example, a hiring process based solely on standardized criteria may exclude individuals from marginalized groups who lack access to professional networks or advanced education. Equity-focused interventions, such as mentorship programmes or revised evaluation methods, can bridge these gaps, ensuring fair opportunities for all.

DEIB is the compound of critical, constructivist and transformative approaches that integrate and propel balanced power dynamics in the workplace and opportunities for all. DEIB is not limited to leadership or specialized offices; it requires participation at all organizational levels to challenge structural inequities. By fostering inclusion, representation, and belonging, practitioners help institutions break down barriers and create envi-

ronments where all individuals can thrive. This approach not only promotes social justice but also strengthens organizational performance and competitiveness, regardless of the sector/industry.

1. Current Status of Gender Equality Integration in Accreditation Systems

In recent years, there has been an increasing recognition of the importance of gender equality across various sectors, including higher education. Accreditation agencies, as evaluators of quality in educational institutions, play a pivotal role in setting and upholding standards that influence gender balance. However, the integration of gender equality in accreditation standards varies significantly across agencies, with room for enhanced clarity and accountability. This part of the document examines the current state of gender equality within accreditation systems, highlights findings from the EQUATION project and other agency-specific initiatives, and provides actionable recommendations to promote a more balanced and inclusive approach.

Key challenges include:

- The absence of standardized GE metrics in accreditation systems.
- Limited awareness among evaluators about the importance of GE.
- Resistance to change within institutions due to cultural and structural barriers.

1.1. Current Efforts in Gender Equality Across Accreditation Agencies

Several major accreditation agencies have begun to include gender balance within their standards and internal structures. Although progress has been made, each organization varies in its depth and approach:

- EFMD (European Foundation for Management Development): EFMD has a relatively balanced gender representation, with female leaders in key roles, such as Vice-Presidents and departmental managers. While the executive level still leans male, EFMD demonstrates a commitment to gender inclusivity, especially in accreditation and professional development roles.
- AACSB (Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business): AACSB exhibits a significant female presence in executive positions, including the CEO. The balance between male and female representation across operational and strategic teams reflects AACSB's progressive approach to gender diversity. However, the board retains a slight male majority, suggesting ongoing efforts to achieve full parity.
- AMBA (Association of MBAs) and BGA (Business Graduates Association): While both agencies show female representation at mid-level roles, higher governance structures, like boards, are predominantly male. Female leaders are more visible in areas such as accreditation, marketing, and services, with opportunities for improvement at the top governance levels.
- CEEMAN (International Association for Management Development in Dynamic Societies): CEEMAN sets a strong example with prominent female leaders in its President and Vice-President roles. With balanced gender representation across mid-level management and operational positions, CEEMAN demonstrates a solid commitment to gender equality, though additional efforts could further balance board positions.
- ENQA (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education): ENQA stands out with female leaders in prominent roles, such as President and Director. The balanced gender distribution within the board and secretariat reflects a high level of gender inclusivity.
- QAA (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education): With a female CEO and a fairly balanced board, QAA is a positive example of gender inclusivity in leadership. However, male members still slightly outnumber females on the board.

- INQAAHE (International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education): INQAAHE has a female CEO and several female board members, though males still hold a majority in leadership. This suggests a need for continued efforts to enhance gender balance at the governance level.
- EQAA (European Quality Assurance Agency): EQAA shows significant gender imbalance, with no women on its board. This reveals a substantial gap and underscores the need for active initiatives to integrate gender diversity into its leadership.
- NAKVIS (Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education): NAKVIS has female representation on its council, though leadership is predominantly male. Increasing female participation in leadership roles could enhance its approach to gender equality.
- EQAR (European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education): EQAR demonstrates a commitment to gender equality, particularly in committees such as the Register and Appeals Committees. The Executive Board, while still slightly male-dominated, shows progress in gender balance.

In addition to organizational representation, many accreditation bodies have incorporated gender equality into their evaluation criteria. These agencies recognize gender balance as part of their broader diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) frameworks:

- AACSB: As part of its core standards, AACSB emphasizes gender diversity in both faculty recruitment and student admissions, requiring institutions to demonstrate gender balance in their recruitment, admissions, and leadership practices.
- AMBA and BGA: Both agencies expect accredited institutions to maintain gender balance within faculty and student bodies. Continuous improvement in gender equality across academic structures is mandated as part of the accreditation process.
- EQUIS (EFMD Quality Improvement System): EQUIS evaluates institutions based on policies supporting gender diversity among faculty, staff, and students. Gender balance is a criterion within EQUIS's focus on people and institutional culture.
- CEEMAN IQA: CEEMAN's International Quality Accreditation (IQA) prioritizes gender equality as part of its social impact goals, with institutions expected to support gender balance across educational, leadership, and operational areas.
- FIBAA (Foundation for International Business Administration Accreditation): FIBAA requires gender balance within faculty and staffing and equitable access to professional development. This aligns with FIBAA's broader mission of promoting DEI within accredited institutions.

1.2. EQUATION Project and Country-Specific Findings

The EQUATION Project, supported by the European Commission, highlights the importance of integrating gender equality into accreditation processes. By examining the status of gender representation within business schools and accreditation frameworks, EQUATION aims to create actionable insights that can inform new standards and practices. The project includes a structured Work Package 2 (WP2) which uses surveys and interviews across participating institutions to gather data on gender-related issues.

- Country Contexts: EQUATION's findings highlight how country-specific factors such as local laws, economic conditions, and societal norms impact gender equality in academia. For example:
 - In Poland, legal frameworks support gender equality, but there are persistent pay gaps and slower career advancement for women.
 - Latvia faces gender segregation in educational choices, with women concentrated in the humanities and men in technical fields.

- Slovenia sees high female participation in higher education, but this has yet to fully translate into equal representation in higher academic ranks and leadership, suggesting that barriers beyond education limit women's empowerment.
- EQUATION's Approach to Gender Data Collection: Through structured surveys and interviews, EQUATION's WP2 captures both quantitative and qualitative data. These assessments could serve as models for accreditation agencies, allowing them to track, analyse and report on sex-disaggregated data systematically.
- Recommendations from EQUATION Findings: Based on WP2 insights, EQUATION advocates for the integration of gender and diversity criteria within accreditation bodies, as well as processes that align with institutional gender equality or diversity strategies embedded in local contexts. As such, it helps ensure a cohesive approach to gender equality standards to be relevant and achievable.

1.3. Rethinking accreditation mechanisms to integrate GE

The purpose of accreditation is to evaluate and ensure the quality and relevance of educational institutions, yet its significance often takes a backseat to rankings in the eyes of students and employers. Accreditation must shift from being a checkbox exercise to marketing its virtues as a quality assurance brand to key stakeholders, such as students, employers, and society. By emphasizing accreditation as a marker of quality and societal contribution, institutions can elevate its importance above rankings.

Currently, many criterias are relegated to the background, losing their potential to drive meaningful change. To address this, accrediting bodies should prioritize gender equality as a core principle that demonstrates an institution's commitment to equity and societal betterment.

Steps in the Accreditation Process: Relevance and Excellence

The CEEMAN IQA accreditation process represents a good practice to emphasize both relevance and excellence. Relevance refers to the impact of teaching and research on students, employers, and society, with its meaning varying across contexts. At its core, relevance is about fostering meaningful contributions to societal and business challenges. Excellence, on the other hand, ensures that institutions meet global benchmarks while also demonstrating innovation and adaptability to both local and global needs. Together, these principles guide accreditation frameworks in promoting high-quality education that is both impactful and responsive to evolving societal demands.

Accreditation must expand beyond its traditional scope to include criteria that prioritize social responsibility and meaningful impact. As a cornerstone of equitable and inclusive societies, gender equality should be embedded within this framework, ensuring that institutions are evaluated not only on academic and professional excellence but also on their commitment to diversity, fairness, and social progress.

Recognizing gender equality as a key accreditation criterion reflects the evolving role of educational institutions in shaping societal values. Accreditation should function as a dynamic mechanism that upholds academic quality while driving broader social change. By integrating gender equality within a broader commitment to equity and inclusivity, accrediting bodies can enhance the relevance of accreditation and position it as a catalyst for transformative progress in education and beyond.

1.4. The EQUATION Project's Data-Driven Model for Gender Equality Integration

The EQUATION project's methodological approach offers a valuable template for accreditation agencies looking to integrate gender equality into their evaluation processes. Key strategies from EQUATION's framework include:

- Methodical evaluation of gender standards: EQUATION's systematic analysis of accreditation standards and gender equality impact reveals how agencies can assess the effectiveness of their criteria. A similar

approach could be adopted by accreditation bodies to create gender-specific benchmarks.

- Stakeholder engagement for insight: EQUATION's interviews and surveys with stakeholders, including academic staff and students, provide diverse perspectives on gender issues. Regular stakeholder engagement can offer agencies continuous feedback on gender equality practices.
- Actionable reporting and development of standards: EQUATION's report on gender equality serves as a foundation for developing new accreditation standards. Accreditation bodies can adopt similar reporting processes to create action plans that respond to real-world challenges in gender balance.

The EQUATION project, particularly through Work Package 2 (WP2), has provided critical insights into how accreditation agencies address gender equality in higher education. Accreditation bodies such as AMBA, AACSB, and EFMD/EQUIS have made strides in integrating gender equality into their frameworks.

According to the Report on Gender Equality in Business Schools and Accreditation (Gender Equality Report ...), despite standards that promote gender balance in leadership positions, recruitment, and retention of women in academia, barriers remain, particularly in addressing deeply ingrained cultural norms and systemic biases in the evaluation of academic performance and career progression. The accreditation standards should therefore include metrics for diversity and inclusion, going beyond mere numerical representation.

2. Accreditation Criteria and the Framework for Gender Equality²

Accreditation processes often aim to uphold certain standards in educational institutions, ensuring that they meet established benchmarks of quality and relevance. However, in practice, students and other stakeholders frequently prioritize institutional rankings over accreditation status. Consequently, accreditation can sometimes be perceived as secondary to market-driven indicators of success.

Accreditation systems must embrace a socially responsible approach, encouraging institutions to adopt transparent and inclusive practices. Diversity, in all its forms, to build a vibrant and equitable learning environment. Institutions should strive to facilitate mutual learning experiences that enable individuals to better understand themselves and others. Such efforts should be complemented by mechanisms that allow stakeholders to critically assess and provide feedback on institutional practices.

To effectively embed GE into accreditation processes, accreditation agencies must begin by reflecting critically on their own practices. The self-assessment ensures their approach to gender equality aligns with the criterias they will require from others. The development of a framework for GE in accreditation is a critical step, one that demands innovative practices and that should be comprehensive, evidence-based, and supported by clear indicators to measure progress and impact.

To ensure effectiveness, the framework should employ clear guidelines that might include benchmarking against best practices. Institutions can integrate specific GE indicators into existing criterias, ensuring they provide added value. Understanding what institutions prioritize such as funding, competitive positioning, and reputation can guide the incorporation of GE standards in ways that align with their strategic objectives.

2.1. Aligning with ESG

The proposed criteria is the Environmental, Social and Governance Standards (ESG), which serve as a reference for QA in accreditation bodies and higher education. Institutions must not only report on these criteria but also integrate GE as an obligatory element, moving beyond mere box-checking exercises, and leverage their reporting mechanisms to track meaningful outcomes and impacts.

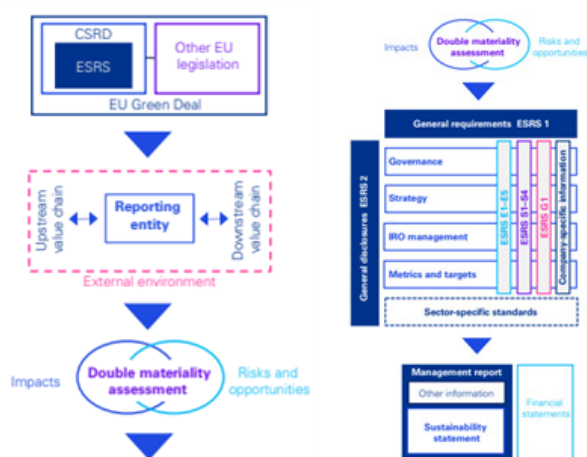
² This subchapter has been developed based on interviews conducted with various experts involved in accreditation.

In KPMG’s report, *ESRS: Insights into Sustainability Reporting (2024)*, the European Sustainability Reporting Standards (ESRS) is a critical framework for aligning with the European Union’s policy objectives under the CSRD. Institutions within the CSRD’s scope are mandated to prepare a sustainability statement that adheres to the ESRS framework. This statement, in addition to financial disclosures, must provide comprehensive information about the resources, relationships, impact and value creation across the organization’s value chain.

Understanding these resources, relationships, and interdependencies is essential for accurately identifying and reporting sustainability-related impacts, risks, and opportunities (IROs). Material IROs are determined through a double materiality assessment³ (DMA), including potential liabilities. This dual lens ensures a comprehensive approach to sustainability reporting, integrating both external and internal dimensions of materiality.

The ESRS serves as a legitimate and comprehensive framework applicable across all EU member states, incorporating key aspects of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging (DEIB). A notable feature is its focus on the “own workforce”, requiring institutions to disclose information about directly employed individuals and non-employees, among other internal and external stakeholders. By addressing these categories, ESRS 2 reinforces the importance of fostering equitable and inclusive work environments. (See Figure 3).

Figure 3. Understanding CSRD and ESRS at a glance.



Source: ESRS “Insights into sustainability reporting” by KPMG (2024).

Some key facts relevant for general knowledge are that the CSRD specifies that institutions have to apply these reporting framework and criteria “by the beginning on or after 1 January 2024 (i.e. reporting this year – 2025) for certain large companies, with a phased introduction for others in subsequent years” (KPMG, p., 4, 2024). Additionally, reporting is required at the same time and for the same period as financial statements by law.

2.2. Useful definitions to navigate ESRS

The European Sustainability Reporting Standards (ESRS) are designed to be applied collectively, with significant interconnections among them. ESRS 1 establishes the principles for sustainability report preparation, while ESRS 2 outlines overarching disclosure requirements in governance, strategy, management of impacts, risks, and opportunities (IROs), and metrics.

The social standards (ESRS S1-S4) are particularly the area where we will focus on the institution’s impact on GE, regarding employees, workers within the value chain, consumers, and communities. These criteria emphasize promoting fair treatment, equity, and inclusion across all stakeholder groups.

³ Read more in appendix 2. Guidelines.

Additionally, the governance standard (ESRS G) addresses key issues of business conduct, including ethical practices, accountability, and transparency, reinforcing the institution's commitment to responsible and sustainable operations. It is important to recognize that not all ESRS apply uniformly to all institutions, and the process for developing ESRS⁴ involves five key steps that all experts should consider.

Given the mandatory nature of these standards across the EU and the focus of this publication, the primary area of attention will be the **Social Standards**, specifically those aspects that intersect with **GE**. However, before delving into this, it is essential to first outline key sustainability definitions to guarantee clarity and context.

Impacts refer to the effects that an institution's products and services may have, or have already had, on the environment and people, including human rights considerations. These impacts are linked to both the institution's own operations and its value chain. They can be actual or potential, negative or positive, intended or unintended, reversible or irreversible, and may arise over short, medium, or long-term periods.

Risks are those that stem from environmental, social, or governance factors, which may negatively affect an institution's financial position, performance, cash flows, access to finance, or cost of capital over the short, medium, or long term.

Opportunities are derived from environmental, social, and governance factors that could positively influence the institution's financial position, performance, and cash flows over the short, medium, or long term.

Stakeholders are entities or individuals who can affect or be affected by the institution. In the context of sustainability, stakeholders are typically divided into two groups. The first group consists of stakeholders whose interests may be directly impacted by the institution's operations, either negatively or positively. The second group includes primary users of general-purpose financial reports, such as investors, lenders, and creditors, as well as business partners, unions, social partners, civil society organizations, non-governmental organizations, academics, and governments.

Sustainability matters, refers to environmental, social and human rights and governance factors, which a company needs to provide material information about in the sustainable statement.

Impact materiality, a sustainable matter, is material from an impact perspective when it could have an actual or potential impact (positive or negative) on people or the environment over the short, medium or long term. Including impacts not only from the institution, but also connected to the value chain and the business relationships⁵.

2.3. Gender Equality Criteria

ESRS S1 is the primary social standard addressing an institution's workforce, incorporating 13 disclosure requirements related to key aspects such as DEIB. While some of these requirements align with established indicators, they are supplemented by additional criteria that may require the collection of new data. This data collection process, alongside considerations of data protection and implementation, can present additional challenges.

Notably, these disclosures are closely linked to DEIB, and they promote transparency and accountability in accreditation bodies and HEIs.

⁴ See more in appendix 2. Guidelines.

⁵ See expanded definitions on Appendix. 1.

Figure 4. ESRS S1 “Own workforce” topics and sub-topics.

Topic	Subtopic	Sub-subtopic
Own workforce	Working conditions	Secure employment Working time Adequate wages Social dialogue Freedom of association, existence of works councils and information, consultation and participation rights of workers Work-life balance Health and safety
	Equal treatment and opportunities for all	Gender equality and equal pay for work of equal value Training and skills development Employment and inclusion of persons with disabilities Measures against violence and harassment in the workplace Diversity
	Other work-related rights	Child labour Forced labour Adequate housing Privacy

Source: ESRS “Insights into sustainability reporting” by KPMG (2024).

The objective of ESRS S1 is to offer a comprehensive understanding of an institution’s sustainability-related impacts on its own workforce. This includes reporting on actions taken to prevent, mitigate, and/or remediate actual or potential impacts, as well as addressing associated risks and opportunities. Additionally, it requires the disclosure of the nature, type, and extent of the institution’s sustainability-related risks and opportunities, particularly in relation to its workforce impacts and dependencies, and how these are managed.

Furthermore, it also enables users to revise the extent to which an institution aligns or complies with international and European human rights instruments and conventions, including: The European Convention of Human Rights, The UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, the International Bill of Human Rights, The revised Convention of Human Rights, The European Pillar of Social Rights and Union Legislation, including the EU labour law, among others.

The ESRS S1 distinguishes between employees, non-employees and other workers as follows:

- Employees: Differentiated by type of employment contract such as, permanent (no end-date), temporary (set end-date), full time (voluntary disclosure), part-time (voluntary disclosure), and non-guaranteed hours.
- Non-employees: Self-employed worker as an independent contractor.
- Temporary agency worker.
- Other workers: Other workers that are on a mobility program.

Some IROs are closely tied to the strategies and business models adopted by institutions, making it an essential part of the analysis for various reasons. Two key methods to determine their relevance are as follows: First, by analyzing the accreditation body’s value proposition such as offering cost-effective accreditation services, this could inadvertently pressure institutions to cut costs, potentially impacting the labour rights of their workforce, such as underpaid staff or abused employees. Second, by examining the accreditation body’s cost structure and revenue model like shifting the financial risk of accreditation to institutions (e.g., requiring upfront payments or fees for additional services), this could create pressure on HEI to reduce staff or limit benefits, which might negatively affect the working conditions of their own employees.

2.4. Gender Equality Guidelines for Accreditation

Building on the previous points, it is evident that accreditation bodies should first assess their internal workforce policies and practices in alignment with the social standards outlined in ESRS, the SDGs and human rights that intersect with GE dimensions, before conducting such reports on HEIs. Therefore, here is an adaptation of Equation's proposal for DEIB accreditation standards:

Level 1	Governance and Leadership.
Level 2	Accountability Mechanisms and Transparency.
Level 3	Employee Lifecycle: Inclusive Hiring, Talent Development, Leadership Pathways and Compensation.
Level 4	Social Responsibility and Community Engagement.
Level 5	Monitoring and Continuous Improvement.

*Regardless of the type of institution, these standards can be universally integrated into both current and ongoing procedures established by leadership.

We propose developing a template of standards, criteria, and indicators for agencies to incorporate into their priorities. These criteria should cover two key areas:

1. Internal QA: focusing on the agency's internal processes and policies for promoting gender equality.
2. External QA: emphasizing the evaluation of gender equality within the institutions being accredited.

INTERNAL QA – Accreditation Agency's Internal Commitment to Gender Equality

Level 1: Governance and Leadership Standards

- Accreditation standards should explicitly include gender equality as a standalone criterion, establishing clear benchmarks for achieving balanced gender representation across faculty, staff, and leadership roles.
- Accreditation bodies should prioritise gender balance and diversity across governing bodies, leadership teams, and decision-making committees. To support this, institutions must periodically report gender-sensitive data, incorporating representation in leadership, faculty, and student bodies.
- Accreditation bodies should also assess their own workforce policies to ensure equitable representation and inclusivity, extending efforts beyond women to include individuals from diverse backgrounds and covered on a specific budgeting plan. *Due to double materiality risks identified.
- Set minimum targets for gender balance on institutional boards and committees, ensuring balanced representation at decision-making levels.
- There should be a clear DEIB policy developed by the leadership teams considering the lived experiences of their employees, and that addresses barriers across all phases of the employee experience, and offers equal opportunities for marginalized and diverse groups of individuals.
- Accreditation bodies and HEIs should be required to implement inclusive decision-making processes that encourage diverse viewpoints, counting the involvement of gender and other minority groups in strategic planning, budgeting and policy-making.
- Accreditation bodies should implement policies to prevent gender discrimination in leadership appointments.

- Accreditation bodies should raise awareness of intangible gender inequality (e.g., stereotypes, sexist or misogynistic practices) and work towards overcoming patriarchal, male-centric organizational cultures.

Level 2: Data Collection and Accountability Mechanisms

- Mandate the collection and reporting of gender-specific data. Regularly review decision-making processes, staff composition, and policy effectiveness. Publish reports on gender equality initiatives and their progress.
- Establish an intersectional Gender Equality Steering Committee to oversee the implementation and monitoring of gender equality goals, ensuring representation across age, nationalities, languages, gender, and other dimensions of diversity.
- Commit publicly to gender equality by adopting a declaration aligned with frameworks such as the European Pillar of Social Rights, the SDGs, and the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD).
- Incorporate gender equality as a core criterion in accreditation guidelines. Develop rubrics that evaluate gender-sensitive practices in accredited institutions. (pilot study on how to do that available below).
- Detect and enhance gender-sensitive language in regulations and guidelines.
- Introduce mechanisms that allow employees and leaders to treat fairly and with confidentiality the harassment and violence accusations in the workplace, such as whistle-blowers.

Level 3: Employee Lifecycle: Inclusive Hiring, Talent Development, Leadership Pathways and Compensation

Recruitment and Retention phase	Implement and monitor initiatives aimed at promoting diverse representation across ethnicity, disability, gender, and other underrepresented groups within the institution.
	Design inclusive hiring practices and policies that ensure the talent acquisition process is free from barriers, enabling diverse individuals to access employment opportunities on an equal footing. These practices should also consider revising job descriptions to avoid exclusionary language, implementing blind CV reviews, and assembling diverse hiring panels. Introduce targeted outreach programs to attract candidates from marginalized backgrounds and provide accommodations throughout the hiring process for individuals with disabilities or other specific needs.
	Develop onboarding programs that are supported in employee experience programs, fostering a sense of belonging from day one, including mentorship or buddy systems that pair new hires with experienced employees to help them navigate organizational culture and to embody the organizational values.

Employer branding and Leadership pathways

Career progression and vertical mobility: Create transparent career progression frameworks that outline clear paths for vertical and lateral growth within the institution. Include defined milestones and criteria for advancement, ensuring that these opportunities are equitably communicated and accessible to all employees.

Performance reviews and administrative workload distribution: Establish standardized, objective performance evaluation criteria to prevent bias in reviews. Train managers to recognize and mitigate bias during evaluations, ensuring that all employees are assessed fairly based on their contributions and achievements.

Develop and assess employee engagement strategies, such as inclusion programs, and Employee Resource Groups (ERGs), that raise awareness about societal inclusion and foster understanding of intersectionality. These programs should focus on how employees can build ethical, safe and respectful relationships at work, leveraging their differences to create a more inclusive and collaborative environment.

Develop policies to ensure that administrative or “invisible” tasks (i.e., note-taking, organizing meetings, and event planning) are equitably distributed across the organization. This prevents such tasks from disproportionately falling to women or marginalized employees, which can hinder their career advancement.

Advance training opportunities and career development programs are accessible to all employees, with a focus on empowering women, underrepresented minorities, and other marginalized groups within the workforce.

Encourage mentorship and peer networks for underrepresented genders in any field, supporting women in male-dominated areas and men in female-dominated fields.

Talent Development

Offer equitable access to leadership training, certifications, and advanced learning opportunities to ensure that employees can upskill or reskill, and prepare for growth within the organization.

Accreditation bodies must demonstrate their commitment to DEIB by offering regular DEIB training for all staff, focusing on unconscious bias, gender equality, and creating inclusive environments.

Accreditation bodies should provide accessible facilities and make reasonable accommodations for employees with disabilities or those from marginalized groups.

Promote initiatives where leaders actively mentor or sponsor women, underrepresented minorities, and marginalized employees to prepare them for leadership roles.

Compensation

Equal Pay and Equal Access Employee Benefits: It is essential to identify and address any gender pay gaps, safeguarding that the compensation system in place is transparent, equitable, and aligned with fair labour practices and with the labour law from each country. The compensation and benefits package should be established through collaboration with workers' unions, guaranteeing fair and equal treatment for all employees. Additionally, Accreditation bodies and HEI should communicate transparently this information in their reports and vacancies published for the general public.

Providing equal access to employee benefits, such as maternity, paternity, parental and/or carers' leave, mobility programs, healthcare, and other support mechanisms, must be provided to all employees, regardless of race, gender, identity, or other personal characteristics. This approach ensures that all staff members are treated with fairness and respect, promoting an inclusive workplace culture.

Employee Well-being and Safety

Implement comprehensive anti-harassment and anti-discrimination policies that include clear mechanisms for reporting and addressing incidents, ensuring a safe and accessible process for all employees. These policies should provide protection and support for individuals from diverse backgrounds, including women, and ensure an inclusive workplace where all employees can participate fully without fear of harm or discrimination. These policies should explicitly outline remedies and affirmative action roadmaps to counteract workplace violence and discrimination.

Develop clear procedures for reporting, investigating, and addressing incidents of harassment, discrimination, or violence. Ensure these processes are transparent, confidential, and accessible to all employees, including multilingual support where necessary. Include disciplinary measures for offenders and ensure accountability across all organizational levels.

Provide robust support systems for victims, including access to counselling services, legal advice, and employee assistance programs. Establish designated contact points or ombudspersons to guide victims through the reporting and resolution process.

Develop an affirmative action roadmap that promotes inclusivity by addressing systemic barriers to equality. This roadmap should focus on equitable hiring, retention, and promotion practices, as well as ongoing anti-bias and cultural competency training for employees at all levels.

Policies for remote work and work from home (WFH): Introduce considerations for remote work arrangements on a case by case basis, recognizing the diverse needs of employees, such as those with caregiving responsibilities, health conditions, or neurodiverse traits. Ensure remote work policies are equitable and include measures to prevent isolation, foster inclusion, and maintain psychological safety in virtual settings, as well as any accommodation required for people with disabilities.

Offer comprehensive mental health support tailored to employees' diverse needs, such as therapy sessions, stress management workshops, and mental health awareness campaigns. Include targeted resources for neurodiverse employees, such as flexible work arrangements, sensory-friendly environments, and specialized support personnel.

Regularly train employees, managers, and leadership on recognizing, preventing, and addressing harassment and discrimination. Create safe spaces for dialogue and feedback, fostering a culture of respect and inclusivity.

Level 4. Social Responsibility and Community Engagement

- Commitment to Social Impact and Equity: HEIs should demonstrate how they contribute to DEIB goals through their social responsibility programs, including supporting women and minorities in their communities and beyond. For example, vacancies for women who have been victims of domestic violence, to encourage the reintegration to work in a safe environment.
- External Reporting on DEIB Progress: HEIs must commit to transparent reporting on DEIB initiatives, progress, and challenges in their sustainability reports, which should align with the standards laid out in ESRS S1 and other relevant frameworks.

Level 5. Monitoring and Continuous Improvement

- Ongoing Monitoring and Reporting: Accreditation bodies should engage in continuous monitoring of their DEIB performance, using key performance indicators (KPIs) to track progress towards gender equality and inclusivity goals. This can include regular reporting on gender pay gaps, diversity in leadership, employee satisfaction surveys, and other metrics.
- Feedback Mechanisms: Develop mechanisms that allow employees to anonymously report issues related to gender inequality, discrimination, and harassment, ensuring that there is accountability and transparency in addressing these concerns.
- Review and Update Standards Regularly: Accreditation bodies must periodically review and update DEIB standards in response to societal changes, legislative updates, and feedback from stakeholders to ensure they remain relevant and effective. Additionally, changes must be communicated to HEI in their network to integrate them in a comprehensible time.

Additionally, accreditation agencies should also evaluate gender equality within the institutions being accredited, as part of an external quality assurance process.

EXTERNAL QA - Assessing Gender Equality within the institutions being accredited

A. Institutional Policies and Governance

Accreditation agencies should assess the foundational resources and infrastructure of HEIs, ensuring inclusivity in faculty qualifications, and leadership representation. Benchmarks for gender balance in these areas should be explicit and enforceable. Internal policies and regulations, especially the composition of committees in sensitive areas should be composed of members on a diversity basis (anti-mobbing committees, ethics committees, disciplinary committees, etc.).

Actions:

- Require institutions to have formal gender equality policies aligned with national and international frameworks.
- Assess gender representation in leadership positions (e.g., university boards, executive teams, and faculty governance bodies).
- Ensure gender-balanced composition in accreditation self-assessment teams and institutional review committees.

B. Faculty and Staff Recruitment, Retention and Promotion

Accreditation agencies should consider gender equality in HEIs, in staff recruitment and promotion policies. Institutions should incorporate transparent hiring practices that actively seek to promote gender balance, especially in senior academic and administrative positions. Gender equality training, mentorship programs, and workshops could be part of faculty development initiatives to support this aim.

Actions:

- Evaluate recruitment policies to ensure gender balance and prevent bias in hiring processes.
- Monitor gender ratios in faculty and staff positions, including leadership roles.
- Assess the implementation of policies on equal pay, career advancement, and work-life balance.
- Require institutions to provide gender-sensitive mentorship and professional development programs.

C. Curriculum and Pedagogy

Accreditation bodies should assess HEIs for their integration of inclusive teaching practices, ensuring the curriculum represents diverse perspectives and fosters an inclusive learning environment for all genders and identities.

Actions:

- Assess whether gender equality perspectives are integrated into course content across disciplines.
- Evaluate the representation of women and diverse gender perspectives in syllabi, reading lists, and case studies.
- Promote inclusive teaching methodologies that ensure equitable participation of all students.
- Foster teaching methods that promote inclusivity and highlight the importance of gender diversity for all academic disciplines.

D. Research and Funding

Actions:

- Require institutions to track and report gender-disaggregated research funding data.
- Evaluate policies supporting gender-balanced research teams and leadership in research projects.
- Encourage institutions to integrate gender perspectives in research agendas and funding priorities.

E. Student Access, Experience and Outcomes

Actions:

- Ensure inclusion in access to educational programs, scholarships, and leadership opportunities.
- Assess institutions' policies on preventing gender-based discrimination and harassment.
- Monitor gender-specific student retention, graduation rates, and career outcomes.
- Promote gender-sensitive student support services, including childcare, counseling, and mentoring programs.

F. Organizational Culture

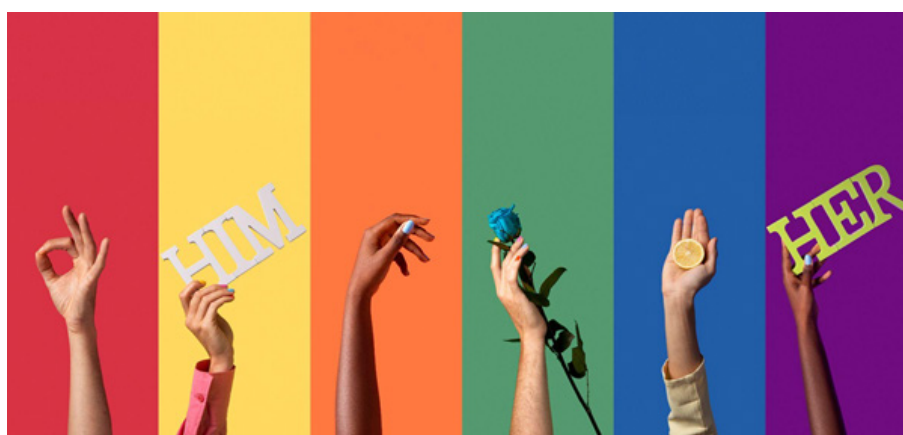
Actions:

- Require institutions to conduct regular organizational climate assessments through surveys and focus groups.
- Assess the presence and effectiveness of gender equality offices or dedicated diversity officers.
- Ensure that institutions have clear mechanisms for reporting and addressing gender-based violence and discrimination.

G. Public Engagement and Social Responsibility

Actions:

- Evaluate institutions' efforts to promote gender equality beyond the campus (e.g., partnerships with gender-focused organizations, community outreach programs).
- Encourage universities to engage in advocacy and awareness-raising initiatives on gender equality.



Source: <https://www.freepik.com/>

3. Pilot study on how to integrate Gender Equality criteria in the Accreditation

The integration of gender equality into accreditation processes is grounded in key theoretical frameworks that provide a lens to critically assess and transform institutional practices. Institutional change theory emphasises the importance of structural reforms within accreditation bodies and HEIs, advocating for systemic approaches to embed gender-sensitive practices. This perspective aligns with feminist theories of gender equality, which argue that addressing gender disparities is not only an ethical obligation but also a strategic driver for improving the quality, inclusivity, and global competitiveness of higher education institutions (Gender Equality Report).

Furthermore, intersectional theory highlights the multifaceted nature of inequality, urging accreditation processes to consider how overlapping identities such as race, ethnicity, disability, and socioeconomic status interact with gender to shape experiences within Accreditation bodies and HEIs. Together, these theoretical frameworks stress the need for proactive and dynamic change models that evaluate and challenge rooted norms, ensuring that gender equality is a core metric in institutional assessments. By embedding these theoretical principles, accreditation processes can act as catalysts for equitable and inclusive education systems.

3.1. Framework of the introduction of gender equality in accreditation

A proposed framework for integrating gender equality into accreditation processes presents a structured approach detailed in chapter 2. This framework emphasizes leadership commitment, strategic planning, and the incorporation of gender-sensitive practices into accreditation standards and guidelines, that can be later used into accreditation processes for HEIs.

Key measures include conducting gender audits, building capacity, engaging stakeholders, and establishing transparent reporting mechanisms. The plan aligns with global frameworks such as the SDGs, ESG standards, and ILO conventions, focusing on accountability, continuous improvement, and societal impact.

Proposed deliverables include a comprehensive Gender Equality Handbook, tailored training modules, standardized evaluation templates, and a public benchmarking dashboard to monitor progress and transparency of outcomes.

3.2. CEEMAN's Integration and promotion of gender equality criteria

Based on the documents provided and CEEMAN's existing accreditation standards, the organization can adopt and respond in the following ways to integrate and promote gender equality. The following ideas are provided in the recommendation manner and can be further replicated at other similar accreditation agencies.

Level 1 | Governance and Leadership

- Issue a public statement declaring CEEMAN's commitment to gender equality as part of its mission, aligning with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 5: Gender Equality) and other global frameworks.
- Form a Gender Equality Steering Committee to oversee and support the integration of gender equality measures across all accreditation processes.
- Establish mechanisms to ensure balanced gender representation in CEEMAN'S leadership and governance bodies.
- Strategic changes to CEEMAN's standards to include gender equality (See modifications after this guidelines)

Level 2 | Accountability Mechanisms and Transparency.

- Revise accreditation standards, including gender equality metrics such as Gender-disaggregated data reporting on faculty, staff, and student demographics or other relevant metrics.
- Ensure the publication and broad dissemination of evidence-based policies that address key areas such as pay equity, recruitment practices, career progression opportunities, and work-life balance initiatives.
- Mandate institutions to implement gender-sensitive curricula and actively promote a gender-inclusive organizational culture.

Level 3 | Employee Lifecycle: Inclusive Hiring, Talent Development, Leadership Pathways and Compensation.

- Develop and provide comprehensive learning and teaching modules that address identifying and mitigating unconscious bias, preventing workplace discrimination and violence, and fostering psychological safety alongside inclusive leadership practices.
- Publish a "Gender Equality Handbook" with actionable guidelines for member institutions.

Level 4 | Social Responsibility and Community Engagement.

- Engage Stakeholders by organizing workshops, consultations, and peer learning opportunities to share best practices in achieving gender equality in education and accreditation.
- Partner with international organizations like UN Women, ILO, and others to align accreditation standards with global best practices.

Level 5 | Monitoring and Continuous Improvement.

- Conduct gender audits to assess CEEMAN's internal policies and practices, identifying gaps in gender equity.
- Incorporate mandatory gender audits into accreditation evaluations for all member institutions.
- Implement systems for annual reporting on gender equality metrics and progress across accredited institutions.
- Include gender-related KPIs in CEEMAN's accreditation framework.

CEEMAN Strategic Criteria Modifications

Explicit Inclusion in Standards:

- Mandate institutions to integrate gender equality into their governance and strategic plans.
- Establish criteria for diversity in leadership and governance roles within institutions.

Focus on Intersectionality:

- Address intersectional issues by including provisions for equity across race, socioeconomic status, and other dimensions alongside gender.

Enhanced Reporting Mechanisms:

- Require institutions to disclose gender-disaggregated data and publish it transparently as part of accreditation submissions.

Integration with ESG and DEIB:

- Align standards with European Sustainability Reporting Standards (ESRS) and Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) principles.

Promote Pilot Studies:

- Collaborate with institutions to test and refine gender equality criteria before full implementation

4. LTT Program for Accreditation Evaluators and Business Schools

Name of the Event: LTT for WP4

Date of meeting: March 3, 2025

Place of meeting: Bled, Slovenia /

Receiving Organization: CEEMAN – the International Association for Management Development in Dynamic Societies

Venue: IEDC-Bled School of Management (main building), Prešernova cesta 33, 4260 Bled

LTT Program for Accreditation Evaluators and Business Schools

As part of Work Package 4 (WP4) under the EQUATION project, this Learning, Teaching, and Training (LTT) event is dedicated to equipping accreditation evaluators and business school representatives with the necessary tools to assess and integrate gender equality within accreditation frameworks. The interactive program will introduce participants to the Guidelines for Accreditation Institutions, focusing on real-world challenges and opportunities in mainstreaming gender equality within business school accreditation standards.

Through expert-led discussions, case studies, and interactive group activities, participants will explore gender-inclusive accreditation standards and share best practices for embedding Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging (DEIB) principles and Sustainability agenda into quality assurance processes. Their feedback will play a vital role in refining and finalizing the EQUATION project's accreditation guidelines. The event ensures deep engagement and meaningful dialogue, fostering collaboration among project partners and experts committed to driving institutional change in higher education accreditation.

PROGRAM

Morning session

Time	Program	Lead/responsible
09:00	Arrival & Registration	CEEMAN
09:30	Welcome by the Host	Danica Purg, President of CEEMAN and Founder & Dean of IEDC
09.45	Brief update on the current status of the project	Aigerim Kaumenova, CEEMAN
10:00	Developing Accreditation Guidelines for Gender Equality: Our Approach	Tjaša Cankar, IEDC, Tatiana Buelvas, CEEMAN, & Aigerim Kaumenova, CEEMAN
11.00	Coffee Break	
11.30	Keynote: Gender Inclusive Standards for Accreditation	Tatiana Buelvas, CEEMAN
12.30	Keynote: Evolution of Accreditation Systems and Sustainability Agenda	Olgun Cicek, INQAAHE
13:00	Lunch break	

Afternoon session

Time	Program	Lead/responsible
14:00	Group Discussion: Integrating Gender Equality into Practice: Accreditation Systems	All participants sharing their cases. Moderator: Aigerim Kaumenova, CEEMAN
15:30	Coffee break	
16:00	EQUATION Project Discussion and Future steps	Moderator: Aigerim Kaumenova, CEEMAN
16:30	Harvesting and Wrap-up	
17.30	Dinner at Špica restaurant	

Name of the Event: Dissemination event for WP4 - Advancing Gender Equality in Accreditation

Date of meeting: March 4, 2025

Time of meeting: 09.00 to 18.00

Place of meeting: Bled, Slovenia / hybrid

Receiving Organization: CEEMAN - the International Association for Management Development in Dynamic Societies

Venue: IEDC-Bled School of Management (main building)

Address: Prešernova cesta 33, 4260 Bled, Slovenia

Registration: <https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSfV6o2TaXdSKDRr6z5ltQpnrvn5uD9FudbfR8N-nGv76b7MIbg/viewform?usp=dialog>

Dissemination event for WP4

Advancing Gender Equality in Accreditation

This Dissemination Event for Work Package 4 (WP4) under the EQUATION project serves as a platform to present and discuss key project outcomes, including the Gender Equality Guidelines for Accreditation Institutions, Gender Equality Plans (GEPs), and the broader implications of integrating gender mainstreaming into business school accreditation.

The event will feature presentations of project results, showcasing research findings, best practices, and implementation strategies. Expert insights will be shared on adapting accreditation standards to align with sustainability and gender equality agendas. Interactive discussions will explore challenges and solutions for embedding Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging (DEIB) principles in accreditation, with a dedicated session focused on overcoming resistance to change in accreditation processes.

Bringing together accreditation bodies, business school leaders, and policy experts, this event fosters collaboration and knowledge exchange to drive sustainable institutional change. A networking dinner will provide further opportunities for engagement and partnership building.

This dissemination event is a key milestone in ensuring that the EQUATION project's recommendations shape the future of accreditation in business education, supporting gender-inclusive and equitable higher education environments.

PROGRAM

Morning session

Time	Program	Lead/responsible
08:45	Arrival, registration	IEDC-Bled School of Management; CEEMAN
09:00	Welcome Speech	Danica Purg, President of CEEMAN and Founder & Dean of IEDC, Slovenia Mislav Ante Omazic, President of IEDC, Slovenia, Full Professor, University of Zagreb, Croatia
09.30	EQUATION Project Outcomes Presentation	WP2: Gabriela Węglarz, Academic Mobility Coordinator, WSB University, Poland WP3: Tjaša Cankar, Researcher, IEDC, Slovenia WP4: Tatiana Buelvas, Researcher, CEEMAN, Slovenia
11:00	Coffee break	
11:30	Expert Panel on the Adjusting Accreditation Standards to the Sustainability Agenda	Soumodip Sarkar, Full Professor, Department of Management, University of Évora, CEEMAN IQA Peer Reviewer, Executive President of Science & Technology Park, PACT, Portugal Olgun Cicek, Full Professor, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia, INQAAHE Board member, Spain Moderator: Aigerim Kaumenova, Director, CEEMAN, Slovenia
12:45	Lunch	

Afternoon Session

Time	Program	Lead/responsible
14:00	Women's Equality in Academia	Susan Madsen, Founding Director, Utah Women & Leadership Project and Inaugural Karen Haight Huntsman Endowed Professor of Leadership, USA
14:30	Discussion Session: Overcoming Resistance to Change in Accreditation Processes	Moderated by Deniss Sceulovs, Riga Technical University, Latvia
15:30	Coffee break	
16:00	Best Practice Case: Vistula University's case of implementing Gender Equality Plan	Interactive Session moderated by Anna Sabat, Director of Management, Vistula University, Poland
16.30	Best Practice Case: CEEMAN's Case integration of Gender Equality Criteria into International Quality Accreditation	Aigerim Kaumenova, Director, CEEMAN, Slovenia
17.00	Final Remarks Group photo & Networking	Aigerim Kaumenova, Director, CEEMAN, Slovenia
17.15	End of Dissemination event	
17.30	Dinner	

Recommendations for Future Accreditation Standards

- Focus on long-term outcomes, such as removing systemic barriers to women’s participation in leadership.
- Promote institutional cultural change that goes beyond ticking boxes on diversity.
- Ensure continuous monitoring and provide capacity-building support to institutions struggling with gender equality (Gender Equality Report ...)(Guidelines on Gender Eq...).
- Accreditation bodies and HEIs must proactively integrate ethical AI protocols into their standards, ensuring safeguards for employees, students, and staff users. This aligns with the EU’s AI Act, which establishes a comprehensive framework to mitigate AI risks while fostering trust and innovation. To uphold fairness and inclusivity, these institutions should implement transparent AI practices, particularly in high-risk applications like admissions, recruitment, and performance evaluations. Ethical protocols should include robust risk assessments, mechanisms to prevent discriminatory outcomes, and oversight systems to monitor AI-driven decisions. By embedding these practices, accreditation bodies and HEIs can ensure AI systems respect fundamental rights and enhance equitable opportunities for all stakeholders, positioning themselves as leaders in ethical AI adoption.
- HEIs should implement quality assurance processes with a balanced approach that fosters genuine improvement and accountability while minimizing unintended consequences. To avoid a compliance-driven culture and “gaming” behaviors, institutions should focus on meaningful performance enhancements rather than merely managing indicators. Strategies should include fostering a culture of continuous improvement, aligning metrics with institutional values, and ensuring transparency in assessment practices.
- The absence of sector-specific standards for accreditation bodies and higher education institutions presents a valuable opportunity to advance research and develop frameworks for assessing gender equality (GE) and environmental, social, and governance (ESG) practices within these industries across the European region.

Conclusion

The EQUATION project’s Work Package 4 (WP4) provides a comprehensive and hands-on framework for embedding gender equality (GE) principles into accreditation. By proposing clear standards, practical tools, and actionable frameworks, the project equips accreditation agencies with the means to recognize, address, and ultimately close gender gaps within higher education institutions (HEIs) and business schools.

The document has outlined the theoretical foundations, practical guidelines, and pilot examples, the CEEMAN case study, to demonstrate how accreditation bodies can systematically incorporate GE into their quality assurance (QA) systems. From initial exploratory assessments to the development of evaluator training and learning programs, the focus has been on creating an actionable roadmap that accreditation agencies across Europe can adapt to their unique contexts.

In conclusion, the EQUATION project delivers a pioneering model for integrating gender equality into accreditation. It provides the tools and best practices for the changes in accreditation towards gender equality, and as such the necessary basis to a mindset shift required to embed GE into the DNA of quality assurance and accreditation processes. By doing so, it advances the collective goal of fostering more inclusive, equitable, and socially responsible education systems, setting the stage for a transformative impact on higher education and society at large.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1. Gender Equality and Sustainability Glossary.

It is erroneous to assume that individuals necessarily conform to traditional masculine or feminine gender roles based solely on their appearance or societal expectations. This misconception is often referred to as **heteronormativity**, which entails presuming someone's heterosexuality or adherence to binary gender roles based on external characteristics. For example, a person perceived as a man may not identify as heterosexual or may identify as non-binary or queer, challenging conventional assumptions linked to appearance and gender identity.

On the contrary, **sexual characteristics** make references to the biologically determined characteristics or a range of genders in terms of their reproductive organs and function based on chromosomal complement and physiology. Therefore, sex is globally understood under the classification of living things as female or male (EC, 2011). This distinction between sex and gender is particularly important, as many people commonly assume that all women are born with vaginas and all men with a penis. However, various conditions related to biological sex demonstrate that such assumptions are not universally applicable, highlighting the diversity of physical characteristics that exist within and beyond these traditional categories.

Sexual orientation therefore, is the term used to describe physical and emotional attraction towards individuals of the same sex, the opposite sex, or both. It also includes the lack of sexual interest or attraction, known as asexuality. Whereas, **gender identity** refers to the identification of an individual with the gender they feel, recognize, and/or name as their own. Moving away from the binary system of sexual difference allows for the recognition of diverse gender identities that are not limited to the male- female binary.

Gender expression helps to comprehend the outer manifestation of gender roles, such as identifying as a woman, a man, both, or neither. This is conveyed through behavior, clothing, hairstyle, voice, physical traits, and more. Gender expression is shaped by societal gender expectations but is not necessarily fixed, nor does it have to align with a person's biological sex, gender identity, or sexual orientation.

Figure 5. A graphical explanation of the gender categories



Source: Author's own elaboration, 2024.

In order to explain every definition clearly without ambiguity, we have developed this part as a dictionary anyone using this document can consult at any given time:

Androcentrism is the practice of considering the male perspective as the only valid and universal viewpoint. This biased perspective centers exclusively on male experiences, rendering women invisible in social, cultural, and intellectual contexts. By positioning men as the standard or measure of all things, androcentrism marginalizes women, excluding them from dominant narratives and social life.

Misogyny, the dislike of, contempt for, or ingrained prejudice against women, is another critical component of patriarchy. It manifests in various ways, including the unequal division of labor, resources, and access to education, which disproportionately affects women and young girls. Misogyny also intersects with heteronormativity and androcentrism, further marginalizing women who do not conform to traditional gender roles or heterosexual norms.

Binary is a social and hierarchical system that is based on the belief that only two genders exist in societies: feminine and masculine. These genders are typically assigned to individuals at birth, as male or female. This binary framework reinforces the discrimination, exclusion, and violence against any gender identity, expression, or experience that falls outside these two categories.

Ethnicity is a social category defined by shared cultural traits such as language, ancestry, traditions, and beliefs, while race is a social construct used to classify people based on physical characteristics. Both categories have been shaped by dominant groups to maintain power and privilege, contributing to systemic racial inequality. While ethnicity often reflects cultural identity and belonging, race has historically been used to justify discrimination and unequal treatment, reinforcing social hierarchies.

Androgyny is the characteristic of a person whose appearance or mode of expression is a mixture of feminine and masculine characteristics and/or behaviors.

A gender fluid person does not identify with a single gender identity but may shift between masculine, feminine, or other gender expressions. Individuals who identify as gender fluid may frequently change their gender identity depending on the context. It is also referred to as unstable gender.

Queer is an English term used as an alternative to LGBT. While it has historically been used in a derogatory manner, many young LGBT individuals now embrace it as a form of self-affirmation. The term also represents a broader movement or philosophical approach, particularly in the United States during the 1980s and 1990s, which advocates for human diversity in all its forms. Queer rejects fixed or static identities, promoting versatility and the broad range of human potentials.

Transsexual is an adjective (commonly used by the medical profession) to describe individuals who seek or have undergone medical interventions, such as hormones and/or surgery, to alter their primary and/or secondary sexual characteristics in order to feminize or masculinize their bodies. These interventions are typically accompanied by a permanent change in gender role. However, it is important to note that not all transgender individuals pursue or undergo gender-affirming surgeries (change of sex), such as transitioning from their current genitalia to a vagina or penis.

Asexual is a person who does not feel erotic attraction to other people, can relate affectively and romantically, yet does not necessarily imply not having libido, or not practicing sex, or not being able to feel arousal.

Homosexual is someone who experiences emotional, romantic, or sexual attraction to individuals of the same sex. This term can refer to both lesbian women and gay men.

Bisexual is a person who is emotionally and/or sexually attracted to people of both sexes.

Cisgender refers to individuals whose gender identity aligns with the gender they were assigned at birth, based on their biological sex. For example, a woman whose pronouns are she/her.

Heteronormativity, posits heterosexuality as the default, natural, and privileged sexual orientation, is another practical manifestation of androcentrism. It assumes that everyone is inherently heterosexual, making this the ideal and superior way of being compared to other sexual orientations. This perspective leads to discriminatory attitudes and behaviors, such as the belief that gay people are “just confused” or that transgender individuals are “mentally ill”. These forms of discrimination and transgressions are rooted in the patriarchal system.

Cisnormativity refers to the expectation, belief, or stereotype that all people are cisgender, or that being cisgender is the only normal or acceptable condition. This assumes that individuals assigned male at birth will always identify and present as men, and those assigned female at birth will always identify and present as women.

Transgender persons are those individuals who have a gender identity which is different from the gender assigned at birth and those who wish to portray their gender identity in a different way than the gender assigned at birth. Trans people can also be those individuals who present themselves as contrary to the expectations of their gender role assigned to them at birth whether through clothing, accessories, cosmetics, and body modifications. Examples can include: males who become trans-females, females who become trans-males, transsexuals and cross-dressers.

Disability is any condition of the body or mind (impairment) that makes it difficult for a person to perform certain activities (activity limitation) and interact with the world (participation restrictions). Some examples include vision, movement, thought, learning, remembering, hearing, communication, mental health, social relationships.

Neurodiversity refers to natural variations in how the brain processes and interprets information. It describes the idea that there is no single ‘right’ way to experience and interact with the world. Some examples: ADHD - attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, autism, dyslexia, OCD - Obsessive-compulsive disorder, bipolar disorder, among others.

Understanding the sex and gender system is crucial, as it is through this mechanism that unequal power dynamics manifest. **Patriarchy** is a social, cultural, political, and economic system in which masculine individuals exert power and domination over females (Pilcher et al., 2004). In feminist theory, patriarchy is seen as the primary reason why female leaders worldwide have historically fought for rights such as voting, education, and political participation, which were not easily granted in the 16th and 19th centuries. Patriarchy has led to an unequal division of labor, resources, and access to education, disproportionately affecting women and young girls, as well as other marginalized groups based on their sexual orientation, race, religion, and other aspects of their identities.

Unfortunately, discrimination often serves as the starting point for a series of escalating issues that can affect individuals’ public and private lives, making it a global and multidimensional problem. **The Pyramid of Hate** illustrates how biased behaviors can increase in complexity, eventually leading to acts that constitute crimes. Similar to any pyramid, the upper levels are supported by the lower levels. When individuals or institutions consider behaviors at the lower levels acceptable or “normal”, it results in the behaviors at the next level becoming more accepted. The Pyramid of Hate demonstrates that when inequalities and violence are consistently normalized, they have the potential to evolve into life-threatening consequences, such as genocide, which is built upon accepted and shared behaviors among a supremacist group (ADL, 2018).

Figure 6. Pyramid of Hate.



Source: Anti-Defamation League, 2018.

At the base of the Hate Pyramid lies prejudice, including gender-based perceptions that women are not equal to men in rights and dignity, commonly referred to as **gender bias**, which also affects diverse individuals. **Unconscious or implicit gender bias** is an automatic and/or unintentional mental association based on gender shaped by traditions, norms, values and culture (ILO, 2017). It is particularly problematic in the assessment and evaluation of individuals, such as during fellowship decisions, interviews, or granting of awards. This bias impedes objective and fair judgment, making it a significant driver of gender inequalities in research and innovation (EIGE, 2022).

Anchoring bias, the cognitive tendency to rely heavily on the first piece of information encountered (the “anchor”) when making decisions, using it as a baseline for comparison, even if it is irrelevant or insufficient.

Confirmation bias, the inclination to seek out, favor, or interpret information in a way that reinforces pre-existing beliefs or assumptions, often disregarding evidence that contradicts them.

Halo effect, a cognitive bias where positive impressions of a person in one area (e.g., appearance or charisma) influence the perception of their abilities or traits in unrelated areas, leading to overly favorable judgments.

In-Group bias, the tendency to favor, support, or value individuals perceived as part of one’s own group, often based on shared characteristics, beliefs, or affiliations, while showing bias against those outside the group.

Stereotypes, generalized and often oversimplified beliefs or assumptions about a group, where perceived traits of the group are unfairly attributed to all individual members, ignoring personal differences.

Sexism is the prejudice or discrimination based on a person’s sex or gender. Sexist attitudes may stem from traditional stereotypes of gender roles, and include the belief that a person of one sex is naturally superior (mentally, physically, etc.) to another person. I.e. not granting a promotion to a woman for the sole fact of being a woman.

Mobbing, a form of workplace bullying where an individual is targeted by a group of colleagues or by a superior through persistent harassment, exclusion, or undermining behavior, leading to emotional distress and diminished professional standing.

Mansplaining, a term used to describe a situation where a man explains something to a woman in a condescending, over-simplified, or patronizing manner, often assuming she has no knowledge on the subject, regardless of her expertise.

Gaslighting occurs in intimate relationships when a partner repeatedly undermines and distorts their partner’s reality by denying facts, the situation around them, or their partner’s feelings and needs. It can cause a survivor to question themselves and become unable to trust their own perceptions and judgements. This gains the partner control and power over the survivor whose self-doubt and erosion of confidence leads to increased dependence on the partner who is behaving abusively.

Patronizing, refers to treating someone with an apparent kindness or superiority that actually conveys a sense of condescension or belittlement, as if the person is incapable of understanding or handling something on their own. This behavior often involves speaking down to others, assuming they are less knowledgeable or competent.

Heterosexism, viewing heterosexuality as superior, and assuming all people are heterosexual.

Hate crimes, acts that constitute an offence under criminal law and are motivated by bias or prejudice towards particular groups of people.

Hate speech, refers to any form of communication whether spoken, written, or behavioral that attacks, demeans, or uses pejorative and discriminatory language against an individual or group based on their identity. This includes references to religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, color, gender, or other personal characteristics. Rooted in intolerance and hatred, hate speech often fosters division and dehumanization. It can also manifest subtly, such as when a person's expressed pronouns are intentionally ignored, demonstrating a refusal to respect their identity and reinforcing discriminatory attitudes.

Homo-, bi-, trans- and intersexphobia, is the fear of gay or lesbian people, bisexual people, transgender people or intersex people, respectively, which may manifest in exclusionary behavior, stigma, harassment, discrimination and/or violence. This is often based on stereotypes and preconceived ideas over SOGIESC.

Legal recognition of gender identity, multiple countries recognize the right of transgender people to correct their gender on official documents, such as national identity cards or passports. Some countries, including Australia, Bangladesh, Germany, Iceland, India, Nepal, New Zealand and Pakistan, additionally recognize a third gender or sex classification represented as O, T or X on official documents. Many of these national laws have been criticized as being inaccessible to transgender people and those with other diverse gender identities.

Ethnic segregation, the separation or division of people into distinct ethnic groups, often leading to social and spatial inequalities, can be seen in cities with ghettos.

Tokenism, superficial inclusion of underrepresented groups to give an appearance of equality without addressing structural inequities.

Ableism, discrimination or prejudice against individuals with disabilities, based on the belief that able-bodied people are superior. It is also expressed by the misconception that individuals with disabilities need to be fixed.

Body shaming, criticizing or mocking someone's physical appearance, often in a way that perpetuates unrealistic beauty standards and undermines self-esteem.

Fat phobia, prejudice, discrimination, or aversion directed at individuals based on their weight, often rooted in societal biases that stigmatize larger bodies.

Racism, discrimination, prejudice, or antagonism directed against someone based on their race, often rooted in the belief in racial superiority.

Xenophobia, prejudice and discrimination or hostility towards people from other countries or cultures.

Classism, prejudice or discrimination based on social class, perpetuating inequalities between different socioeconomic groups.

Islamophobia, prejudice, fear, or hatred directed at Muslims or Islam, often manifesting in discrimination or violence.

Ageism is prejudice or discrimination based on an individual's age, often targeting older adults or, in some cases, younger individuals.

Aporophobia is discrimination, rejection, or aversion towards people experiencing poverty or homelessness.

Ethnocentrism, is the belief in the inherent superiority of one's own ethnic group or culture, often resulting in prejudice, exclusion, or a lack of respect for other cultures. Unlike ethnic pride, which celebrates cultural identity in a way that is inclusive and invites others to appreciate and enjoy its richness, ethnocentrism imposes a narrow worldview that devalues or dismisses cultural differences. Ethnic pride fosters mutual understanding and exchange, while ethnocentrism builds barriers, reinforcing division and bias.

Horizontal segregation is when women and men tend to concentrate in certain scientific fields. For example, while women are more likely to be found in fields such as social sciences and humanities, men are more inclined to study, teach and/or research topics related to engineering or technology.

Vertical segregation, top positions are more frequently occupied by men in the organizational hierarchy. Evidence shows that resources distributed through research funding are not equally accessible to researchers of all genders.

Glass cliff, a phenomenon where individuals from underrepresented groups, especially women, are placed in leadership roles during times of crisis, making them more likely to fail.

Maternity wall, discriminatory barriers faced by women in the workplace due to motherhood, such as being perceived as less competent or committed.

Glass ceiling, invisible barriers that prevent individuals, particularly women and minorities, from advancing to top leadership positions despite qualifications.

Microaggressions are subtle, often unintentional, discriminatory comments or actions that marginalize individuals based on their identity. These brief, everyday instances can communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative views, reinforcing a worldview of superiority. Microaggressions manifest in various forms: micro-insults, which are insensitive, rude, or demean an individual's identity or heritage; micro-invalidations, which exclude, negate, or dismiss an individual's thoughts or feelings; and micro-assaults, which are explicit verbal or nonverbal attacks meant to hurt the victim, such as name-calling, avoidant behavior, or intentionally discriminatory actions. These apparently small acts contribute to larger patterns of exclusion and inequality.

Harassment is a form of discrimination when unwanted conduct related to any of the grounds takes place with the purpose or effect of violating the dignity of a person and of creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment. Harassment can consist of a single issue, or several incidents over a period of time. Also, it can take many forms as: threats, intimidation, or verbal abuse, unwelcome remarks and jokes about sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression.

Economic violence, is a form of abuse where individuals or groups are deprived of economic resources or opportunities, often through manipulation, control, or exploitation, leading to financial instability and dependency.

Political discrimination, the unfair treatment of individuals or groups based on their political beliefs, affiliations, or actions, often resulting in marginalization, exclusion from decision-making processes, or denial of political rights.

Bystander, an individual who witnesses an event or situation, such as an act of discrimination or violence, but does not actively intervene or take action to prevent or address the wrongdoing.

The ILO Convention on Ending Violence and Harassment, 2019 (No. 190), emphasizes the importance of an inclusive, integrated, and gender-responsive approach to combat violence and harassment in the workplace, addressing the underlying risk factors such as gender stereotypes, intersecting forms of discrimination, and unequal gender-based power dynamics. Harassment is categorized into three main forms: **physical**, which involves acts causing injury, distress, health issues, or even death, such as beating or use of weapons; **sexual**, which includes any non-consensual sexual acts, attempts to obtain sexual acts, trafficking, or any actions targeting a person's sexuality without consent; and **psychological**, which involves abusive behaviors like

verbal or written coercion, economic violence, online harassment (e.g., stalking or explicit messages), and blackmail. These acts can be isolated or repeated, ranging from minor incidents to severe actions that may constitute criminal behavior.

Discriminatory attitudes towards SOGIESC often stem from fear and a lack of accurate knowledge and understanding. Raising awareness and challenging stereotypes and myths can significantly contribute to reducing stigma and fostering inclusivity. In some cases, individuals may not recognize that “casual” jokes or “remarks” in the workplace can be harmful and perpetuate discrimination. Others may have internalized negative perceptions of LGBTIQ+ individuals through socialization or cultural norms, often without personal experience. Such views are further reinforced when laws criminalize or discriminate against people based on their SOGIESC, creating a culture of impunity that enables violence against LGBTIQ+ persons, for instance.

Considering the previous, Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging starts to operate within the organizational landscape as a framework that introduces social justice concepts into the daily operations of companies, regardless of their sector – education, research, tech, startups and others.

Androgyny is the characteristic of a person whose appearance or mode of expression is a mixture of feminine and masculine characteristics and/or behaviors.

Intersexuals refers to individuals born with physical characteristics of both sexes. This includes external genitalia that appear ambiguous and do not fit the standard classification of “male” or “female”. Historically, such individuals were colloquially referred to as “hermaphrodites”, though this term is now considered outdated and inappropriate.

Intergenders describes someone who does not identify as cisgender. This may include individuals who experience a blend of genders, identify as agender, are gender fluid, or position themselves elsewhere on the gender spectrum. The term serves as an umbrella for those who do not fit within the binary framework of male or female. It is also referred to as intermediate gender and is equivalent to the term “genderqueer”.

Androsexual is a person who is sexually attracted specifically to men.

Lesbian is a woman whose emotional and/or sexual attraction is directed towards other women.

Gay is a man whose emotional and/or sexual attraction is directed towards other men.

Demisexual is someone who does not experience sexual attraction unless they have formed a strong emotional connection with another person.

Pansexual is someone who experiences erotic or emotional attraction to another person, regardless of their sex, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, or sexual roles. This includes the ability to form intimate and/or sexual relationships with them. Pansexuality is also referred to as omnisexual.

Heterosexism, viewing heterosexuality as superior, and assuming all people are heterosexual.

Trans women are individuals who were assigned male at birth but identify at some point along the spectrum of femininity, regardless of their transitional or legal status, gender expression, or sexual orientation.

Trans men are individuals who were assigned female at birth but identify at some point along the spectrum of masculinity, regardless of their transitional or legal status, gender expression, or sexual orientation.

Gender Dysphoria: According to the DSM-V and ICD-10 (international classifications of diseases), gender dysphoria is defined as the discomfort or aversion an individual feels towards their own genitalia. However, the fact that some transgender individuals may wish to modify their genitalia does not necessarily mean they have an intense dislike of them. Similarly, many transgender people do not experience a significant conflict with their genitalia and may not see the need for undergoing extensive plastic surgeries, which often have unsatisfactory results.

The degree of “dysphoria” is variable, and in many cases, it is non-existent, largely depending on the external pressures individuals have faced throughout their lives concerning their bodies and identities. Gender dysphoria is not synonymous with transgender identity, and therefore, an increasing number of countries (such as Spain, Portugal, Argentina, Hungary, Sweden, etc.) and medical societies no longer consider genital surgery a requirement for recognizing a transgender person’s identity or granting the legal modification of their documents.

Body shaming, criticizing or mocking someone’s physical appearance, often in a way that perpetuates unrealistic beauty standards and undermines self-esteem.

Fat phobia is the prejudice, discrimination, or aversion directed at individuals based on their weight, often rooted in societal biases that stigmatize larger bodies.

Islamophobia is the prejudice, fear, or hatred directed at Muslims or Islam, often manifesting in discrimination or violence.

Ethnocentrism, is the belief in the inherent superiority of one’s own ethnic group or culture, often resulting in prejudice, exclusion, or a lack of respect for other cultures. Unlike ethnic pride, which celebrates cultural identity in a way that is inclusive and invites others to appreciate and enjoy its richness, ethnocentrism imposes a narrow worldview that devalues or dismisses cultural differences. Ethnic pride fosters mutual understanding and exchange, while ethnocentrism builds barriers, reinforcing division and bias.

Sustainability Glossary

A reporting entity refers to an institution that produces reports for external parties, containing both narrative and metrics related to its own activities as well as those across its value chain.

Own operations, such as those proper from the normal operation of our organization, or institution, including activities or relationships with the workforce.

Upstream, in evaluating value chain means service providers or suppliers.

Downstream, in the value chain refers to external stakeholders such as customers or distributors.

External environment, referencing financial, geopolitical and regulatory environment.

Impact assessment: Assess the regulatory framework applicable to your institution to determine whether and when the ESRS will apply to your sector. Identify whether your institution will disclose information voluntarily or as part of mandatory requirements

Materiality assessment: Analyze the scope and structure of your institution’s value chain to identify relevant IROs and determine where data will be sourced. Conduct the Double Materiality Assessment (DMA) to pinpoint IROs that are critical for reporting. Ensure you understand the specific information required for disclosure and collect data from various sources, including third parties like suppliers, auditors, and external stakeholders.

Maturity assessment: Institutions must develop a robust internal control to ensure data integrity in sustainability reporting. Collaborate with relevant team members to evaluate how process owners are defining and capturing the necessary data for the sustainable reports.

Reporting transformation: Plan the approach for presenting sustainability statements, considering the necessary resources and timelines. Anticipate resource requirements early in the process, and if needed, consult subject-matter experts to guide the identification and understanding of relevant IROs.

Assurance readiness: Work with internal audit teams to develop procedures that provide assurance over the sustainability reporting process. Ensure that the information being reported is accurate and well-documented, with clear audit trails, to prepare for external verification and assurance

Due diligence is an ongoing process through which institutions identify, prevent, mitigate, and account for their actual and potential negative impacts on the environment and people connected to their operations. This process also triggers changes in the institution's business model, activities, relationships, and operations in response to evolving challenges. Furthermore, due diligence instruments provide management with criteria for prioritizing actions based on the severity and likelihood of identified impacts.

Double materiality is a two-dimensional approach that considers sustainability matters as material if they have an impact on either the institution or its financial performance. Impact materiality relates to how sustainability matters affect people and the environment, while financial materiality reflects their potential impact on the institution's financial performance.

DMA (Double Material Assessment) is a structured approach to sustainability reporting. EFRAG describes three main following steps on conducting a materiality assessment with the aim of obtaining the material impacts, risks and opportunities to report on:

1. Understand the context and define a stakeholder engagement strategy (often used surveys under GDPR agreement)
2. Identify potential material topics and their impacts, risks and opportunities (IROs).
3. Analyze the materiality of the identified impacts, risks and opportunities to create a final list of sustainability topics to be included in reporting.

It is important to outline the financial effects, both short-term, medium-term, and long-term, that arise from these risks and opportunities; as the impact may constitute potential liabilities.

Key characteristics for evaluating materiality include:

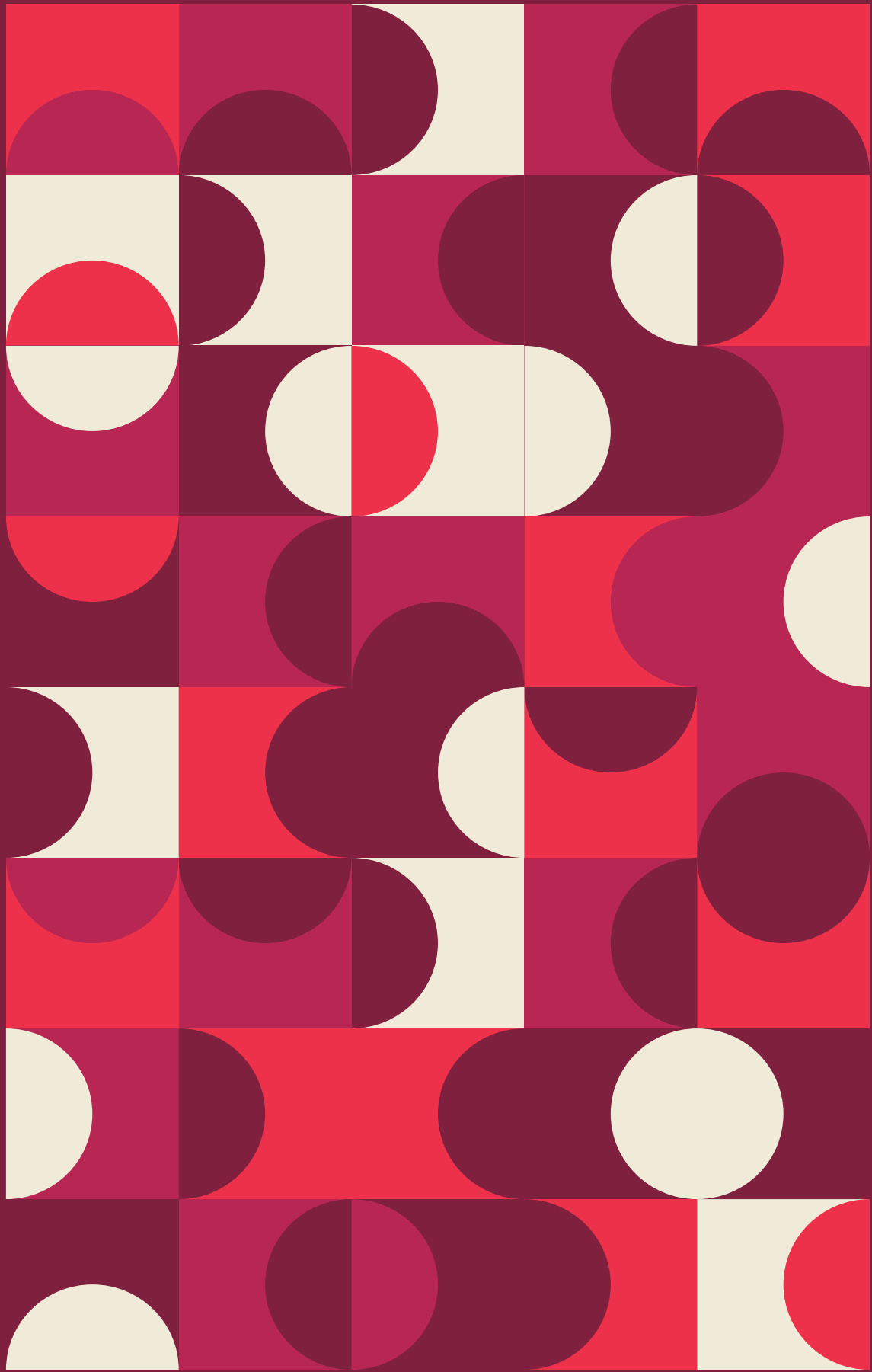
- Scale: The magnitude of the positive or negative impact on people or the environment.
- Scope: The extent of the impact, including its reach across the institution's value chain.
- Severity: The irreversibility of the impact, considering whether it can be remediated or not.
- These characteristics are often interdependent. For instance, a large-scale impact, even if wide-ranging, may be more difficult to remediate if it is severe.
- Potential, in assessing impacts, is considered as the likelihood of occurrence or probability of the impact happening. This can be determined qualitatively or quantitatively. In risk management, they can be potential magnitude and likelihood of occurrence.

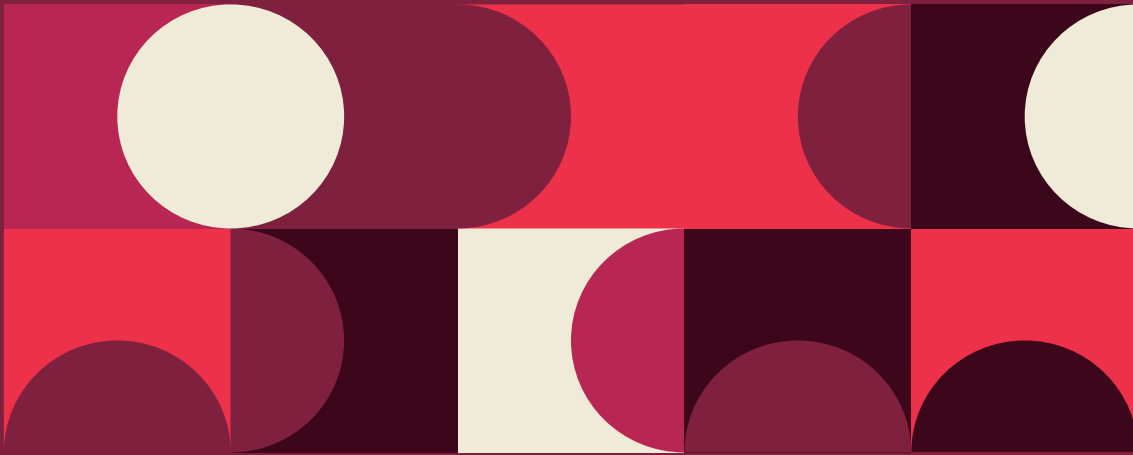
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