

# **Administrative Legacies in Policy Enactment: the Bureaucratization of Gender Equality in Higher Education**

**Abstract:** This article explores how administrative tradition mediates the enactment of gender equality policies within higher education institutions. Drawing on policy enactment theory and historical institutionalism, it analyses how institutional dynamics shaped by the Napoleonic administrative tradition influence the translation of policy mandates into practice in the context of Catalonia. The study employs qualitative data from semi-structured interviews with university actors, a content analysis of course syllabi, and an examination of institutional policy documents. The findings reveal that policy enactment is shaped by bureaucratic processes that prioritize formal compliance over substantive engagement, resulting in what we term the ‘bureaucratization of the gender perspective.’ This phenomenon manifests in three key ways: the rigid formulation of institutional guidelines, the tokenistic inclusion of gender-related elements in course documentation, and the persistent gap between formal mandates and classroom practices. The study concludes that while formal frameworks can legitimize feminist efforts within universities, they also risk reducing gender equality to a superficial exercise in regulatory compliance. These findings contribute to ongoing debates about the limits of institutional reforms in fostering substantive cultural and pedagogical change, particularly in contexts where governance is marked by procedural uniformity and legal formalism.

**Keywords:** Policy enactment; Administrative tradition; Gender equality; New Public Management; Higher education reform; Southern Europe.

## **1. Introduction: Gender Equality as a Policy Priority in (Higher) Education**

The advocacy efforts of feminist movements and alliances across different geographies and contexts have prompted political actors and institutions to pay attention to the gendered dynamics influencing education (Monkman & Webster, 2015). In fact, policies aimed at fostering gender equality in education have been increasingly occupying a central position within global education policy agendas (Lahelma, 2014; Monkman &

Hoffman, 2013). Several national and subnational governments have thus introduced policies in this regard—i.e., texts that “seek to frame, constitute and change educational practices” (Lingard & Ozga, 2007, p. 2)—to allow for greater inclusivity and equitable representation in both curricular content and institutional practices. These initiatives often emphasize the integration of gender mainstreaming approaches, which seek to embed gender equity considerations across all aspects of educational policy and planning.

However, as these policies are operationalized in different contexts, the tension between their transformative aims and the institutional constraints they face becomes apparent. The implementation of such gender-sensitive reforms in education are often channelled through New Public Management (NPM) governance mechanisms, which tend to reduce complex gender issues to quantifiable indicators (Ana, 2024; Martínez-Labrin & Castelao-Huerta, 2023; Morley, 2016). Indeed, as noted in prior research, feminist demands absorbed into education institutions often face depoliticization under NPM frameworks, undermining their transformative potential (Authors, forthcoming; Stratigaki, 2004; Verloo, 2001). This process is characterized by a focus on measurable outputs and accountability metrics that prioritize technical efficiency over substantive engagement with structural inequalities. This trend shifts feminist initiatives away from contentious, grassroots activism toward institutionalized advocacy aligned with predefined policy goals and funding requirements. Consequently, feminist rhetoric is frequently co-opted to advance managerial objectives, reframing gender equality as a quantifiable target rather than a site for systemic transformation (Ana, 2024, p. 221). Within these institutional frameworks, feminist actors are often compelled to navigate a precarious balance between pursuing meaningful change and adhering to bureaucratic constraints that risk hollowing out their political agenda. These attempts reflect what Ana describes as the “bureaucratic formalization of feminist demands,” where the transformative potential of feminist interventions is compromised by their absorption into rigid institutional frameworks (Ana, 2024, p. 234). As a result, policies aimed at fostering gender sensitivity in education risk prioritizing compliance and administrative alignment over fostering genuine shifts in power dynamics within educational systems.

This article examines how these dynamics have unfolded in Catalonia, one of Spain's autonomous regions,<sup>1</sup> by analysing the translation of discourses on gender equality in education into specific institutional and regulatory frameworks within a southern European context that is characterized by both longstanding and recent gender equality efforts. In Catalonia, gender equality has been positioned as a priority within the education system since the first half of the 2000s. Specifically in higher education, various policies have emphasized the importance of integrating a 'gender perspective'<sup>2</sup> into university teaching (e.g., Catalan Act 1/2003, Spanish Act 4/2007), as part of a broader array of gender equality initiatives. Despite these mandates being in place for over two decades, their implementation was often inconsistent (González Pérez, 2018; Verge, 2020, 2021). Notably, in 2015, the Catalan Equality Law (Act 17/2015) reinforced this approach by requiring the integration of a gender perspective across all academic disciplines, thereby intensifying efforts to advance gender equality. Particularly, this law established the inclusion of an explicit consideration of gender as a prerequisite for the accreditation of undergraduate and postgraduate degree programs by the Catalan University Quality Assurance Agency (AQU). By linking gender equality to quality assurance, the regulatory body now requires the adoption of a gender perspective as a key criterion for granting official recognition to university degrees (AQU, 2019; Verge, 2020).

Within this context, initial teacher training is positioned as a cornerstone for advancing gender equality as a policy priority, as it equips educators for primary and secondary education—key stages where addressing gender equality is not only most at stake but also holds the greatest potential for long-term impact. This is established in Catalonia's Education Law (Act 12/2009, of July 10), which underscores "coeducation"<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Note that Spain's political organization can be considered quasi-federal (Rius-Ulldemolins & Zamorano, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> In Catalonia and Spain, this term (often translated as 'gender lens') refers to considering how gender shapes patterns of inequality and lived experiences. While policies use it in the singular ('perspectiva de gènere' in Catalan or 'de género' in Spanish), we sometimes use the plural to acknowledge the diversity of 'gender perspectives' when not directly citing policy language.

<sup>3</sup> Coeducation is a term traditionally used in the region to refer to gender equality in education. While it used to refer to mixed education, it is now understood as "the educational practice that promotes real equality of opportunities and values equally the experiences, abilities, and social and cultural contributions of women and men, ensuring equal rights and avoiding sexist, homophobic, biphobic, transphobic, or

and “effective equality between men and women” as the ‘governing principles’ of the education system. Subsequent policy documents (e.g., Agreement GOV/5/2015; Decree 119/2015, of June 23; Decree 187/2015, of August 25) have further specified and developed this principle at different levels and in relation to different aspects of the system, including curriculum and school buildings, projects, programs, and institutional documents (Authors et al., 2021). More recently, the current Curriculum Decree (Decree 175/2022, of September 27) has established the ‘gender perspective’ as one of the six core principles of the Catalan education curriculum for primary and secondary education. The Decree emphasizes that initial teacher training programs must incorporate a strong focus on gender perspectives to align with the priority given to this issue within schools. Teacher training in higher education institutions is thus an especially compelling site to examine how gender equality policies are enacted (and contested), as it directly shapes the educators who, in turn, influence primary and secondary education, where these policies are expected to have the greatest impact.

With the above in mind, in this article we examine how policy mandates aimed at fostering gender perspectives are translated, recontextualized, and enacted within Faculties of Education in charge of initial teacher training at public universities in Catalonia. Drawing on policy enactment theory (Ball et al., 2012), we focus on how university actors reinterpret these mandates and how the institutional dynamics and legacies that shape their enactment. In alignment with a historical institutionalist perspective, we argue—and show how—the administrative tradition of universities plays a crucial role in shaping the processes of policy enactment. Worth noting, while previous research has explored the implementation of gender mainstreaming in Spanish and Catalan universities, it mainly focuses on single-case studies or not exclusively on teacher training (e.g., Donoso-Vázquez & Velasco-Martínez, 2013; García-Cano Torrico et al., 2023; Larrondo & Rivero, 2019; Merma-Molina et al., 2023; Tildesley, 2023; Villarroya & Boté-Vericad, 2023). This study, therefore, makes a contribution (a) by offering a comprehensive analysis of initial teacher training across all public universities in Catalonia—addressing a critical gap in understanding the intersection of gender equality policies and teacher education—, and (b) by deepening existing debates on how

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androcentric stereotypes, as well as discriminatory attitudes based on sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression” (Department of Education and Professional Training, 2024).

administrative traditions condition policy enactment. In this sense, the article conceptualizes the “bureaucratization of the gender perspective” to capture how policy mandates are predominantly enacted through formal compliance procedures that privilege uniformity and documentation over substantive pedagogical change. This notion emerges from the interaction between the empirical material and the theoretical frameworks mobilized in the study, and connects with broader debates on the institutionalization of social justice agendas (e.g., Cornwall, 2007; Kunz & Prügl, 2019; Ylöstalo, 2020).

The article is structured as follows. Following this introduction, two sections elaborate on the theoretical frameworks underpinning this study, focusing on policy enactment theory and the concept of administrative traditions. The fourth section details the methodological approach, including data collection methods and analytical strategies. The fifth section presents the findings in three key dimensions: the formal incorporation of gender mandates in teacher education programs, the institutional responses that shape this process, and the decoupling between formal compliance and classroom practices. The final section offers a critical discussion of these findings, situating them within broader debates about bureaucratic formalism and policy implementation in education, and reflects on the implications of these findings for gender-sensitive education.

## **2. Policy Enactment and the Re-Creation of Gender Mandates**

In this article, we draw on the notion of “policy enactment” (Ball et al., 2012; Maguire et al., 2014) to analyse the processes of recontextualization of policy mandates—in this case, the requirement to integrate gender perspectives into university teaching in Catalonia. Rather than adopting a top-down view of policy as something rationally and linearly implemented, where unforeseen outcomes are attributed to factors such as poor policy design, inadequate tools, or insufficient resources (Cerych & Sabatier, 1986; Falabella, 2020), we understand policy enactment as a dynamic and non-linear process of (re)creation, reconfiguration, and resignification. This perspective is grounded in the premise that “policies do not normally tell you what to do; they create circumstances in which the range of options available in deciding what to do are narrowed or changed, or particular goals or outcomes are set” (Ball, 1994, p. 19). To be sure, the enactment of policies often involves a decoupling between policy design and practice (Bromley & Powell, 2012; Donina & Paleari, 2019).

Along this line, the role of actors' agency, beliefs and priorities, as well as local features such as the institutional context, is crucial to understand a process that is deeply imbued by negotiation, contestation, and conflict (Ball, 1994; Braun et al., 2010; Ozga, 2000; Viczko & Riveros, 2015). This means that, taking the case of universities (and Faculties of Education in particular), faculty are not only to be conceived of as mere 'implementers' of policy mandates, but as agents who play an active role in recontextualizing, re-signifying and redefining such policies considering their personal and professional biographies, together with the institutional, historical, and socio-political contexts in which universities are located (Ball et al., 2012; Ozga, 2000). Exploring the process of enactment—in this case, in Catalan universities—entails offering a detailed account of the intricate connections between policy, practice, and context, and how these elements are mutually mediated and transformed (Falabella, 2020). This is why we understand this process as entailing more (re-)creation than implementation and more non-linear production than linear reproduction (Ball et al., 2012)—or, in other words, how policies are translated “through reading, writing and talking of text into action and the abstractions of policy ideas into contextualised practices” (Braun et al., 2010, p. 549). Approaching policy enactment this way is useful to understand the responses in Faculties of Education to the policy mandate of the introduction of gender perspectives in teaching, or, put differently, how they are (re)creating such a policy mandate. For this reason, considering that the enactment of policy mandates does not occur in a vacuum, exploring the administrative traditions at play is crucial for understanding how institutional contexts shape the agency of university actors in re-creating policy mandates. This is the focus of the next section.

### **3. The 'Napoleonic' Administrative Tradition Meets Neoliberal Bureaucratization**

Closely related to the notion of 'policy enactment' and the importance it places on context in shaping the process of putting education policies into practice, we argue that administrative traditions play a central role in configuring this context. In this article, we understand administrative traditions as a “historically based set of values, structures, and relationships with other institutions that defines the nature of appropriate public administration within a society” (Peters, 2021, p. 23). These traditions encompass legacies inherited from the past as well as contemporary adaptations to new circumstances; thus, the concept of 'administrative tradition' should not be seen as static but as dynamic and continually evolving (Peter, 2021, p. 24). The concept aligns with

historical institutionalism in understanding institutional patterns as relatively stable—yet adaptable—and suggests that these patterns create forms of path-dependency (Kickert, 2011; see Pollitt et al., 2007; Suárez & Bromley 2016). This implies, therefore, that historical behavior patterns influence contemporary administration (Peters, 2021, p. 24). In other words, these administrative traditions create the context where some responses are more likely to occur than others and are, therefore, mediating factors in the processes of policy enactment (Verger et al., 2019).

The administrative tradition prevailing in Catalonia and Spain reflects the ‘Napoleonic’ administrative model, as is the case in other Southern European countries such as France, Italy, and Portugal (Painter & Peters, 2010; Donina & Paleari, 2019; Kickert, 2011; Ongaro, 2008). Although it is far from monolithic, this model—distinct from other administrative traditions present in Europe such as the Anglo-American (e.g., UK, Ireland), the Germanic (e.g., Germany, Austria, the Netherlands), or the Scandinavian (e.g., Denmark, Sweden, Norway) (see Painter & Peters, 2010)—is characterized by three key features: First, there is a fundamental reliance on public law to define the tasks of the administrator, emphasizing a legalistic orientation in which administrators are primarily legal officials tasked with applying codified law to individual cases (Peters, 2021, p. 58). Second, the tradition heavily employs ex-ante mechanisms of compliance, wherein “approval must be sought ex ante, rather than having the legality of the actions assessed ex post” (Peters, 2021, p. 59). Third, the principles of formality and uniformity dominate, limiting the discretion of ‘street-level bureaucrats’ compared to other administrative traditions. As Peters notes, the Napoleonic state seeks to maintain consistent governance practices and reduce the latitude available to individual administrators, which reinforces central control and uniform policy implementation (Peters, 2021, p. 61).

The Napoleonic administrative tradition, with its emphasis on centralized control and legalism, is fundamentally at odds with the managerialist ethos of NPM—materialized in instruments of governance such as quality assurance. As Peters explains, “the emphasis on law and central control of administration simply does not fit well with the emphasis on managerial autonomy and more decentralized public organizations” (Peters, 2021, p. 66). As noted, in the Napoleonic model, administrators operate within strict legal frameworks, relying on ex-ante compliance mechanisms to ensure legality before actions are taken, a practice that contrasts sharply with NPM’s philosophy of “let

the managers manage” (Peters, 2021, p. 58). Furthermore, NPM prioritizes performance metrics and results-oriented governance, which conflict with the Napoleonic focus on formal procedures and uniformity in public services. As Peters notes, “performance measures and other aspects of managerialism may be difficult to reconcile with the basic principles of this tradition” (Peters, 2021, p. 69). For example, while NPM encourages performance-related pay and individualized rewards, these measures often clash with the Napoleonic commitment to equity and standardized service provision (Peters, 2021, p. 67). Even when elements of NPM are adopted—such as performance indicators—they are often “indigenized to preserve the centralized and legalistic orientation of the system” (Peters, 2021, p. 71).

In Catalan and Spanish universities, particularly from the 1980s onwards, the Napoleonic administrative tradition of higher education began to adapt to democratization and globalization pressures. Following decades of centralized control under the Franco dictatorship (Horowitz, 1974; Pedró, 1988; Sánchez-Ferrer, 1997; Vidal, 2003), the system underwent reforms aligning with global trends, including the adoption of NPM principles (García-Juanatey et al., 2021). These reforms reflect what Hibou (2015) terms ‘neoliberal bureaucratization’—a paradoxical process where market-driven logics coexist with intensified regulation through “procedures of standardization and certification” (Hibou, 2015, p. 17). Rather than fully replacing the Napoleonic reliance on ex-ante legalistic controls and rigid uniformity, these reforms resulted in a layering of governance models, where traditional mechanisms were supplemented, and sometimes contradicted, by NPM-inspired ex-post evaluations focused on performance metrics (Donina & Paleari, 2019; Dobbins et al., 2011; Peters, 2021, p. 58). For instance, while accreditation now incorporates research output and measurable achievements, state-mandated uniform requirements, such as those for teacher qualification pathways (e.g., Orders ECI/3854/2007, ECI/3857/2007, and ECI/3858/2007), continue to enforce bureaucratic rigidity. As Peters (2021, p. 66) observes, this hybrid system reveals the inherent tensions in layering two divergent logics: the procedural rigidity and uniformity of the Napoleonic tradition clash with the managerial autonomy and decentralization championed by neoliberal reforms, creating a governance structure that is neither fully flexible nor entirely centralized.

#### **4. Methods and Data**

This study focuses on the Faculties of Education at the five public universities in Catalonia: Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB), Universitat de Barcelona (UB), Universitat de Girona (UdG), Universitat de Lleida (UdL), and Universitat Rovira i Virgili (URV). Specifically, we analysed three key initial teacher training degree programs at each university: (a) the Bachelor's Degree in Early Childhood Education (ECE), (b) the Bachelor's Degree in Primary Education (PE), and (c) the Master's Degree in Secondary Teacher Training (STT). These programs are the required qualifications for becoming a teacher in the Catalan formal education system at the early childhood, primary, and secondary levels, respectively.

We employed two complementary data collection methods: semi-structured interviews and document analysis. For the semi-structured interviews (N=24), we engaged faculty members from the Faculties of Education at the five universities included in the study. These interviews were conducted in both face-to-face and virtual formats. Participants were selected purposively to ensure both relevance and diversity. Initial contacts targeted actors with direct responsibilities in the enactment of the gender perspective, such as program coordinators, relevant course leaders, and the school-level equality officer—where this figure existed. Subsequently, a snowball sampling technique was used (Noy, 2008) to include additional faculty identified as knowledgeable stakeholders, either through their teaching responsibilities or participation in equality-related initiatives. This strategy ensured coverage across the five universities and the three programs studied, while including participants with a range of roles and responsibilities relevant to the enactment of gender equality mandates. The study complied with internationally recognized standards of research integrity and the university's code of good practices. All participants provided informed consent, and the principles of confidentiality, anonymity, and care guided the entire research process.

Alongside the interviews, we analysed institutional documents addressing responses to the policy mandate. These comprised 13 policy documents published between 2016 and 2023, including the gender equality plans of the five universities and, where available, specific guidelines, recommendations, or directives produced by the Faculties of Education on how to incorporate the gender perspective. Additionally, we conducted a content analysis of the course syllabi—the official documents provided by educational institutions outlining the main components of each course—for the three programs across the five Faculties of Education. This analysis focused on the academic

year 2023-2024 (N=510). Specifically, we examined the syllabi for all mandatory courses in the Bachelor's Degrees in ECE and PE, and for all courses (both mandatory and elective) in the Master's Degree in STT. The inclusion of elective courses in the latter program was justified by the structure of the Master's, where a significant portion consists of specialization courses (e.g., mathematics, Catalan, physics and chemistry, and their specific didactics). Limiting the analysis to core courses (i.e., those taken by all students) would have excluded a substantial part of the program. The coding focused on whether gender-related terms (e.g., women, gender, feminisms, diversity, intersectionality) appeared in different sections of the syllabi, namely competencies, contents, methodologies, and evaluation criteria.<sup>4</sup> Each section was coded dichotomously (0=absent, 1=present), enabling descriptive quantitative analysis of the extent of gender perspective inclusion across programs. This part of the analysis was designed to provide a quantitative snapshot of the formal incorporation of gender-related terms in course design, a baseline against which to situate the qualitative findings. In this way, the combination of document analysis and interviews provides a comprehensive understanding of the introduction of the gender perspective in Faculties of Education in Catalonia, capturing both formal frameworks and their translation into teaching practices.

Data analysis in this study was neither conceived nor conducted as a separate or sequential step following data collection. Instead, collection and analysis were integrated, aligning with Rubin's (2021) assertion that, in qualitative research, data collection inherently constitutes data analysis, occurring simultaneously and in dialogue. This approach diverges from the traditional positivist logic in educational research, which often frames the research process as linear and sequential. This organic approach is reflected in two key aspects. First, the interview script was designed based on a preliminary analysis of course syllabi and institutional regulations regarding the introduction of a gender perspective in teaching across the universities. Insights from this initial analysis informed and guided the development of the interview questions. Second, after each interview, an initial analysis was conducted to expand, refine, and complement information for subsequent interviews. These iterative analyses allowed for adjustments in focus, enabling triangulation of data and corroboration of findings with participants.

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<sup>4</sup> Since the analysis focused on the presence or absence of explicit mentions of gender, it did not account for the gender (im)balance in the authorship of course readings or the use of inclusive language in the wording of the course syllabi.

As such, the interviews were not only a means of data collection but also a process for validating and addressing gaps in the evidence. This implies that interviews were read and coded through several rounds of analysis. Initial categories, emerging from preliminary observations, were progressively refined—merged, expanded, or created—through an iterative dialogue between theory and empirical material. This process also sought to ensure consistency in the application of categories. In this way, coding moved beyond the descriptive level to generate analytical depth and interpretive insight. Importantly, following feminist and critical scholarship (e.g., Bettez, 2015; Rubin, 2021), we approached data collection and analysis reflexively, acknowledging how our social positions and subjectivities informed the process. Rather than striving for neutrality, we considered reflexivity a means to enhance ethical integrity and analytical depth, which entailed ongoing critical self-awareness about how our locations as researchers influenced both interactions with participants and interpretations of the data.

## **5. Exploring the Introduction of the Gender Perspective into the Teachers Training Curriculum**

The results are organized into three subsections that analyse the process of introducing the gender perspective in Faculties of Education through the lens of the Napoleonic administrative tradition. The first subsection examines the regulatory framework, highlighting how national and regional legislation have established a top-down, uniform approach to integrating gender perspectives into curricula. The second subsection investigates the bureaucratic nature of this process, and emphasizes how formal compliance is often prioritized over substantive engagement. Finally, the third subsection examines how gender-related mandates translate into teaching practices, revealing a gap between formal compliance and meaningful pedagogical change.

### **5.1. Law-Making, Normative Cascading, and the Pursuit of Uniformity**

The regulation of teacher education programs in Catalonia is no exception to the emphasis of the Napoleonic administrative tradition on centralized control, legal formalism, and uniformity in governance (Peters, 2021). Both the Bachelor's Degrees in ECE and PE and the Master's Degree in STT fall under specific national regulations issued by the Spanish Ministry of Education. These regulations mandate that all universities adhere to standardized requirements to ensure program accreditation,

including the integration of competencies such as gender equality, equity, and respect for human rights (Order ECI/3854/2007; Order ECI/3857/2007; Order ECI/3858/2007). This regulatory framework creates what Peters describes as a highly centralized and uniform administrative system, in which compliance is primarily achieved through ex-ante controls and adherence to codified law (Peters, 2021, p. 59).

For example, the decree regulating initial training for the Bachelor's in ECE specifies that students must acquire the ability to “design and regulate learning spaces in diverse contexts that address the unique educational needs of students, gender equality, equity, and respect for human rights” (Order ECI/3854/2007, p. 53736). Similarly, the decree for the Bachelor's in PE requires students to be competent in “designing and regulating learning spaces in diverse contexts and addressing gender equality, equity, and respect for human rights that shape the values of civic education” (Order ECI/3857/2007, p. 53747). The requirements for the Master's Degree in STT expand this mandate further, demanding that graduates demonstrate competence in “designing and developing learning spaces with special attention to equity, emotional education and values, gender equality, citizenship education, and respect for human rights that facilitate life in society, decision-making, and the construction of a sustainable future” (Order ECI/3858/2007, p. 3). These explicit and detailed requirements, which have been present since the programs' inception following the implementation of the Bologna Agreement, showcase the pervasive influence of normative frameworks on the design of teacher education. Beyond these foundational program requirements, gender perspectives have gained significant momentum in recent years due to the enactment of Catalonia's Equality Act 17/2015. This legislation links the accreditation of university programs to the integration of the gender perspective in teaching, creating an unprecedented connection between quality assurance and gender equality (AQU, 2019; Verge, 2021; Authors, 2025), which we will further discuss in the next subsection.

At the institutional level, Catalan universities have developed detailed policies and tools to operationalize this mandate. For example, the UAB approved its *Guide for the Introduction of the Gender Perspective in Teaching* in 2017 (Observatori per a la Igualtat UAB, 2017), followed by the adoption of transversal competences such as “Acting in one's own field of knowledge by assessing gender/sex inequalities” (UAB, 2018, p. 1). The UB, in turn, published its *Guide for the Incorporation of the Gender Perspective in Teaching Plans and Courses* in 2021, alongside specific faculty-level guidelines aimed at

integrating this perspective into course design (UB, 2021; UB, 2023). Similar initiatives were undertaken at other universities, such as the UdL and URV, both of which introduced university-level transversal competencies linked to gender and developed institutional guidelines for faculty (Centre Dolors Piera-UdL, 2021; URV, 2021). The UdG, while lacking a transversal competency, implemented measures such as training and monitoring within the framework of its Second Equality Plan (UdG, 2021).

This highly bureaucratic cascade of norms—beginning with national regulations, amplified by Catalan legislation, and institutionalized through university-level policies—illustrates, from a historical institutionalist perspective, a rigid, top-down logic characteristic of the Napoleonic administrative tradition. These frameworks create an impression of uniform progress towards gender equality by embedding gender-related competencies into program requirements and institutional structures.

However, as Peters (2021) notes, the emphasis on formalism and uniformity in this tradition often comes at the expense of flexibility and adaptation, leaving the practical translation of these norms into curricular content open to significant variation and interpretation. Thus, while these cascading norms seem to provide a powerful framework for promoting gender sensitivity, the translation of these policies into teaching practices remains uncertain. In the following subsection, we delve deeper into how faculty and administrative staff have navigated this avalanche of legislation, examining how it was first translated into course syllabi and linked to the accountability-through-accreditation mechanisms embodied by the Catalan University Quality Assurance Agency (AQU).

## **5.2. The Bureaucratic Construction of a Gender-Equal Reality: Insights from Course Syllabi and Accountability Mechanisms**

The introduction of the gender perspective into initial teacher training programs in Catalonia offers a compelling example of what Hibou (2015) terms “the bureaucratic production of reality.” As mentioned above, by linking gender equality mandates with quality assurance processes—such as accreditation requirements—, this process illustrates how formal compliance can create the appearance of substantive progress while often operating as a highly abstract and formalized mechanism detached from deeper cultural and institutional change.

At the heart of this bureaucratic transformation is the above-mentioned Act 17/2015, which explicitly linked university accreditation to the incorporation of a gender perspective in teaching. This mandate required universities to review and adjust their course syllabi to reflect gender-related competencies, content, and assessment criteria, aligning with the centralized governance and ex-ante compliance mechanisms characteristic of the Napoleonic administrative tradition. As our analysis of course syllabi shows, by 2023-2024, 65.42% of courses across the five Faculties of Education included explicit mentions of the gender perspective in their syllabi, with notable examples such as competencies related to “gender equality, equity, and respect for human rights” embedded in all degree programs mimicking the phrasing of the existing regulations (Order ECI/3854/2007; Order ECI/3857/2007; Order ECI/3858/2007).

This formal inclusion highlights the bureaucratic logic driving this process, which, when examined through a historical institutionalist lens, reflects how administrative traditions shape the translation of mandates into organizational practices. Hibou (2015) observes that neoliberal bureaucratization operates through an “abstraction and generalization” so extensive that formalities are often mistaken for reality itself. The formal integration of gender-related competencies into course syllabi reflects this phenomenon. Mentions of gender equality often appear in competencies and objectives and, to a much lesser extent, are also reflected in course content and assessment criteria. Examples of such mentions include stating that gender equality is part of the course’s competencies, having contents specifically related to gender and sexuality—e.g., women, gender equality, feminisms, diversity, intersectionality, etc.—, and explicitly stating that the methodologies are gender-sensitive, among others. While UAB and UB lead with higher percentages of inclusion, reaching 85.54% and 71.26% respectively, other universities hover between 50% and 60%. Nevertheless, these numbers suggest a significant alignment across institutions, creating what Hibou calls a “fiction of reality,” where compliance with formal mandates takes precedence over meaningful institutional transformation.

The process of integrating changes into the syllabi was often framed as collaborative rather than top-down, as equality coordinators sought to engage instructors and faculty in shaping the implementation. Rather than unilaterally imposing adjustments, some emphasized the importance of a thoughtful and inclusive approach. As one coordinator explained:

We made a general request, in fact, to all the faculty responsible for the different courses. Yes, it was done like that. Because we wanted each member of the teaching staff to evaluate the most natural fit with what was being done in the course, right? I could have done it myself, indeed... but I didn't consider it that way, precisely because I thought that this way you could generate tensions, discomfort, that it wouldn't really be done because it wasn't thought out how to do it. (Interviewee 21, program coordinator).

However, in many cases, faculty members expressed a sense of obligation. Despite the coordinators' efforts to frame the process as one of self-reflection and contextual adaptation, it was often perceived, through the lens of bureaucratic mandates, as a top-down directive. One faculty member candidly shared:

We were forced, all the instructors in charge of the different courses, to include the competence or elements related to gender according to a series of indicators... So, in methodology, in reading lists, in content, in classroom dynamics... These indicators were shared with all the instructors so that they could implement them in their syllabi. (Interviewee 9, faculty member).

Others conveyed their experiences through language that reflected a sense of obligation, often employing verbs that underscored a duty or requirement rather than a voluntary engagement: "A few years ago, well, we *had to* incorporate the gender perspective into all the syllabi. [...] We incorporated it by including it to all the syllabi and we carried out a thorough task of reviewing that it was incorporated into all the syllabi" (Interviewee 11, faculty member, added emphasis).

Beyond reflecting the challenges of shifting perceptions within organizational cultures accustomed to hierarchical structures, the formal task of integrating the gender perspective into course syllabi often amounted to an exercise in box-ticking, with limited engagement in deeper pedagogical reflection or structural change. This aligns with Hibou's (2015) observation that bureaucratization reduces complex social realities to quantifiable tasks detached from the nuanced and contextualized processes they are supposed to address, as illustrated in the following quote:

We are required to, they must be worked on. And we were the ones who clicked, clicked, clicked, clicked [the gender-related competence into the different courses].

We placed it everywhere. They are like things that you must comply with because there is a regulation that says so. (Interviewee 15, program coordinator).

This illustrates the mainly ritualistic nature of the process, as driven by accountability-through-accreditation mechanism implemented by AQU. The directive to integrate the gender perspective often originated from external pressures rather than internal motivation, resulting in a “bureaucratization of the gender perspective”. Viewed through a historical institutionalist lens, this ritualization reflects the weight of the Napoleonic administrative tradition in Catalan universities, where—as Peters (2021) suggests—autonomous decisions are replaced by automatic behavior and one of bureaucracy’s most well-known pathologies, i.e., ‘passing the buck’ (Peters, 2021, p. 72).

Moreover, as Hibou (2015) warns, the abstraction inherent in bureaucratic processes can distort reality. While the relatively high percentages of courses incorporating the gender perspective into syllabi suggest compliance with policy mandates, they do not guarantee substantive changes in teaching practices. As one faculty member succinctly put it: “We know perfectly well how [changing] the syllabi allows you to get accreditation from AQU, but then you don’t really know how this translates into the actual practice” (Interviewee 9, faculty member).

Thus, while the bureaucratic mechanisms driving the integration of the gender perspective into course syllabi have created a parallel reality where gender equality appears institutionalized, this reality remains largely formal. The next section explores the extent to which these formal changes translate into actual teaching practices, shedding light on the persistent gap between the formal and practical levels in the implementation of gender-sensitive education.

### **5.3. Unmasking the Gender Mirage in Practice**

While the introduction of the gender perspective into initial teacher training programs in Catalonia has created a formal framework of compliance, its translation into actual teaching practices remains inconsistent and often superficial. Despite the relatively high percentages of courses mentioning the gender perspective in their syllabi, faculty members acknowledged that this does not necessarily lead to meaningful classroom transformations, but often reflects symbolic compliance or, at best, surface-level change.

This discrepancy is rooted in the bureaucratic nature of the implementation process. Course syllabi, though intended as formal ‘contractual tools’ within the framework of Neoliberal bureaucracy—detailing course objectives, content, and evaluation methods—, often fall short of influencing actual teaching practices. Many participants described the inclusion of gender-related elements as a procedural task with little pedagogical engagement. One equality officer shared that, “The system requires coordinator teachers to check a box confirming the inclusion of a gender perspective before they can proceed with validation. However, this is a mere formality, with no further questions or validations to ensure genuine implementation.” (Interviewee 4, equality officer).

Participants also pointed to the superficiality of many changes. Non-sexist language and token mentions of gender equity in syllabi often mask the lack of substantive engagement with gender-sensitive teaching. One interviewee observed, “There is attention to basic things like the initial greeting, ‘*benvolguts i benvolgudes*’ [‘Dear all’], and little else. I don’t see that the discourse has gone much further” (Interviewee 6, faculty member). Another compared these changes to ‘cosmetic’ alterations: “It’s superficial and for appearance’s sake... It’s like a car: we don’t open the hood to see what’s inside the engine, we just paint the outside of the car. Now a patch over here, now a purple ribbon over there” (Interviewee 4, equality officer). This lack of depth extends to how faculty interpret and enact the gender perspective. As one interviewee explained, highlighting the variability in implementation: “The study guide is a general umbrella, and then everyone interprets it differently” (Interviewee 2, faculty member). Such uneven interpretations were often accompanied by perceptions that the mandate amounted to little more than a bureaucratic exercise, a sentiment echoed by several participants. As an equality officer noted,

This mandate that everyone had to include gender perspective in the study guide came up. So, there was a moment when it was almost ridiculous, that in all the syllabi ‘gender perspective’ began to appear, but then I looked at the contents and they hadn’t changed. And it was a newly bureaucratized thing, I mean, everything at the regulatory level gets bureaucratized, it goes through whatever inspections it must go through, but it doesn’t touch ground. (Interviewee 4, equality officer)

This process, while criticized for its superficiality, was compared by some participants to other curricular mandates: “It doesn’t reflect what is being done in class. Just like you will see linguistic competence. Nobody works on that. Or group work competence. [...] There are things included because they have to be there. (Interviewee 15, program coordinator).

Nevertheless, alongside the prevalence of symbolic compliance and surface-level change, participants also highlighted examples of genuine pedagogical transformation. One faculty member noted, “There are different courses that have indeed taken advantage of the opportunity. ‘Since we are doing this, let’s do it well, right?’ Not just a formal thing, but something substantial, right?” (Interviewee 11, faculty member). Others saw the bureaucratic process as a necessary starting point for broader cultural change: “Sometimes these aspects that break through, that pave the way, also need... a more formal, more institutional framework that gives them visibility” (Interviewee 21, program coordinator). Another argued, “I believe that if something becomes mainstream for social improvement, it is welcome, I will always defend it. Because being on the margins is OK, but it does not help social transformation” (Interviewee 3, faculty member).

The findings reveal a dual reality. On one hand, the ‘bureaucratization of the gender perspective’ has allowed universities to project an image of compliance and progress, satisfying external accountability requirements. On the other hand, this formalization risks trivializing the deeper objectives of gender-sensitive education, reducing it to a box-ticking exercise that lacks substantive impact. As one equality officer summarized, “In the paper everything fits, but nobody really cares. What matters here is that we are complying with this at a formal level, but not at a material level” (Interviewee 4, equality officer). Nevertheless, for many faculty members, this process represented an initial step towards more meaningful engagement with gender issues in education. Importantly, for some, what began as a mere bureaucratic imposition eventually opened unexpected spaces for substantive engagement—which adds nuance to the overall pattern of bureaucratization. The findings highlight, thus, the complexities and contradictions of policy enactment, illustrating how formal compliance can both obscure and enable progress in addressing gender injustices in education.

## **6. Discussion**

This study has examined the enactment of policies aimed at introducing gender perspectives into teaching within Faculties of Education in Catalonia. By analysing this process, the study highlights the dynamic interaction between agency and structure in the enactment of educational policies (Ball et al., 2012; Braun et al., 2010; Ozga, 2000). That is, rather than a linear or rational process, policy enactment emerges as a site of recontextualization and appropriation by the actors involved. Most important for this study, the agency exercised by these actors cannot be understood in isolation; it is deeply embedded within—and shaped by—the context in which it operates. From a historical institutionalist perspective, in the case of Catalonia, this context is profoundly influenced by the ethos and materialities of the Napoleonic administrative tradition (Kickert, 2011; Ongaro, 2008; Peters, 2021), which mediates and constrains how policies are enacted, as evidenced in three key dimensions.

First, at the institutional level, universities and Faculties of Education have primarily enacted gender-related mandates through the creation of guidelines and regulations. These include documents, recommendations, and even the introduction of transversal competencies that formally embed gender perspectives into programs. This bureaucratic, document-centric approach is characteristic of the Napoleonic tradition (Peters, 2021), and reflects what can be described as normative cascading. Although the 2015 Equality Act linked the policy mandates regarding gender equality to policy instruments aligned with NPM—i.e., accreditation—the enactment of these mandates has been mediated by the Napoleonic administrative topography and its pursuit of uniformity. As discussed, the trend towards neoliberalization of universities in Catalonia and Spain, and the adoption of NPM governance mechanisms in particular, did not replace the Napoleonic legacy (García-Juanatey et al., 2021; Vidal, 2003). Instead, it created a complex and often contradictory layering—a ‘neoliberal bureaucratization’ (Hibou, 2015)—as observed in other Southern European contexts that share a similar administrative tradition (Donina & Paleari, 2019).

Second, the influence of the Napoleonic tradition is evident in the changes introduced at the curricular level, particularly through course syllabi. Many syllabi were modified to include gender-related elements in competencies, objectives, and, to a lesser extent, content and assessment criteria. Interestingly, as the findings illustrate, some of these changes were introduced in a seemingly arbitrary manner, treating them as a tick-box exercise to meet formal requirements—an outcome consistent with the findings by

Meier and Celis (2011). This highlights the formalistic ethos of the Napoleonic tradition, where adherence to bureaucratic procedures is prioritized over substantive engagement, often resulting in outcomes that remain at the level of symbolic gestures or surface-level adjustments (Kickert, 2011; Ongaro, 2008; Peters, 2021).

Third, the legacy of the Napoleonic tradition also becomes apparent in the decoupling between syllabi content and actual classroom practices (Bromley & Powell, 2012). Faculty members, the ultimate actors responsible for enacting policy mandates, frequently viewed syllabi as mere bureaucratic formalities—documents required for institutional compliance, rather than meaningful tools for guiding teaching practices. Many participants openly acknowledged that syllabi did not reflect what occurred in their classrooms, with a pervasive sense that these documents carried little importance or relevance. This underscores how formalism dominates governance in Catalan universities, shaping responses to policy mandates in a manner that is predominantly procedural and ritualistic (Peters, 2021). These dynamics result in—and reproduce—what Hibou (2015) describes as a ‘bureaucratic production of reality,’ which underpins how these policies are enacted. This bureaucratic production leads to a pronounced decoupling between the formal and the factual spheres, giving rise to a somewhat ‘shadow institution’—an informal domain within institutions governed by shared, unwritten rules that embody the logic of appropriateness (Alonso & Diz, 2022; Azari & Smith, 2012). In other words, while certain changes are enacted at the bureaucratic level, this informal dimension remains largely disconnected from the formalism that dominates institutional governance.

In conclusion, the findings point to a ‘bureaucratization of the gender perspective’ within Faculties of Education in Catalonia. While the formal and factual spheres are not entirely independent—in fact, the study highlights how changes in the formal sphere are fostering increased awareness among some actors and legitimizing feminist advocates who have long worked to advance gender perspectives in education—this bureaucratization risks trivializing and flattening the concept. If the enactment of policies aimed at introducing gender perspectives in teaching is confined primarily to formal changes, there is a significant risk of reducing these perspectives to a depoliticized buzzword, euphemistically and vaguely applied, and often disconnected from the feminist demands that originally inspired these policy mandates—which connects to broader debates on the tensions inherent in the institutionalization of social justice issues

(Cornwall, 2007; Mason, 2019; Smyth, 2007; Foulds, 2014; Kunz & Prügl, 2019; Ylostalo, 2020). Moreover, this trend risks creating an illusion or mirage of progress, fostering demobilization, complacency, or even providing an alibi for sectors reluctant to feminist approaches. Although grounded in the Catalan context, by unpacking these processes, this article provides analytical lenses that may be relevant for other Southern European contexts on the risks and tensions of bureaucratization, thereby contributing to ongoing reflections among feminist advocates and institutional actors on possible strategies to move beyond symbolic compliance. At the same time, further research is needed to explore more systematically the outcomes of these policies in the factual sphere, the struggles of feminist actors to sustain momentum in this direction, and the resistances and obstacles they continue to face.

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