

Equality Diversity and Inclusion for
Research Enhancement in Bosnia Herzegovina



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Deliverable abstract

D2.3 outlines key findings and recommendations to support the implementation and sustainability of EDI policies in Bosnia & Herzegovina, the Western Balkans, and the EU.

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Documents availability

All documents mentioned in this deliverable are available at the project website www.edire.eu and the participants will be given access to it by the Project Coordinator.

Glossary of abbreviations

BiH: Bosnia & Herzegovina

EDI: Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

EIS: European Innovation Scoreboard

ERA: European Research Area

EU: European Union

GEP: Gender Equality Plan

NGO: Non-governmental organisation

R&I: Research and Innovation

SSST: Sarajevo School of Science and Technology

WB: Western Balkans

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1. Presentation

This Deliverable builds on the project's preliminary research findings (D2.1), initial guidelines and recommendations on Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) developed through a structured consultation process (D2.2), and subsequent research conducted throughout the project. The latter focused on identifying key enablers and barriers to the implementation of EDI policies and practices within Sarajevo School of Science and Technology (SSST) and, more broadly, across Bosnia & Herzegovina.

It provides practical guidelines and strategic insights for national and international institutions to support the uptake and long-term sustainability of project outcomes. In addition, it offers targeted policy recommendations to advance and embed EDI approaches within the Western Balkans (WB) and the European Union (EU).

2. Policy context

In his 2017 State of the Union address, President Jean-Claude Juncker underscored a strategic imperative for the EU: *“There is a need to build research capacity and to better integrate the Western Balkan countries into the European Research Area (ERA) in order to accelerate their EU accession processes”* ([European Commission, 2017](#)). This call to action reflected a broader vision of fostering scientific excellence, innovation, and institutional alignment across Europe. But nearly a decade later, how far have the Western Balkan countries progressed toward this goal, and what obstacles remain?

Bridging the R&I Investment Gap

One of the most persistent challenges lies in the disparity of national investment in research and innovation (R&I) between EU Member States and Candidate Countries. According to the latest figures, Western Balkan economies continue to allocate significantly less of their GDP to R&I activities, resulting in lower research intensity and innovation performance ([Eurostat 2024](#)). These gaps are clearly reflected in the European Innovation Scoreboard (EIS) 2024, which categorizes most Western Balkan countries as “Emerging Innovators,” with performance below 70% of the EU average ([European Commission 2025](#)). Similarly, the ERA Scoreboard 2024 highlights uneven progress across ERA priorities, particularly in areas such as research infrastructures, open science, and gender equality ([European Commission 2024b](#)).

ERA Association: A Catalyst for Progress

Despite these challenges, association with the ERA has proven to be a powerful vehicle for transformation. It has enabled Western Balkan countries to align their national R&I strategies with EU priorities, modernise legislation, and access cutting-edge scientific networks. Participation in EU Framework Programmes such as Horizon 2020 and Horizon Europe has steadily increased, with success rates in some cases matching or even exceeding the EU average ([Policy Answers, 2024](#); [SCiDEV 2025](#)). This growing engagement signals a strengthening of institutional capacity and a deepening integration into the European R&I ecosystem.

Horizon Europe’s WIDERA Programme: Targeted Support

Under Horizon Europe’s WIDERA programme (2021–2025), four targeted calls were launched to support R&I development in the Western Balkans:

- Teaming for Excellence – supporting institutional building through Centres of Excellence.
- Support for R&I Policy Making – enhancing evidence-based policymaking in the region.
- Excellence Hubs – fostering regional innovation ecosystems.
- Twinning Western Balkans – promoting collaboration between Western Balkan and EU research institutions.

Among these, the [EDiRE project](#) (Equality, Diversity and Inclusion for Research Enhancement in Bosnia and Herzegovina) stands out. By placing Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) at its

core, EDIRE aims to strengthen research excellence in Bosnia and Herzegovina while embedding inclusive gender equality principles into the R&I landscape.

Inclusive Gender Equality: A Cornerstone of Research Excellence

Since 2012, gender equality has been a strategic priority of the European Research Area (ERA), with the European Commission advancing three core objectives: (1) gender equality in research careers, (2) gender balance in decision-making, and (3) integration of the gender dimension in research and innovation content. These objectives aim to foster institutional change and promote inclusive excellence across European R&I systems.

Evidence from Gender Action ([Wroblewski, 2020](#)), [Burher et al. \(2020\)](#), and [Lee & Jung \(2024\)](#) demonstrates a positive correlation between gender equality metrics—such as the [Gender Equality Index](#)—and indicators of research excellence and innovation performance. This reinforces the imperative to embed inclusive gender equality in efforts to build resilient and competitive R&I ecosystems.

In line with these priorities, Horizon Europe has introduced a landmark requirement: since 2022, public bodies, research organizations, and higher education institutions from EU Member States and Associated Countries must have a Gender Equality Plan (GEP) in place to be eligible for funding. These GEPs must meet a set of minimum standards, including formal commitment, dedicated resources, data collection and monitoring, training, and addressing key thematic areas such as work-life balance, leadership, and gender-based violence. This policy shift has elevated gender equality from a recommended practice to a structural prerequisite for participation in EU-funded research.

Yet, Bosnia and Herzegovina's progress in this domain remains underexplored. As a newly designated EU Candidate Country, BiH faces both opportunities and obligations in aligning with EU standards - including the Horizon Europe GEP requirement. While not yet mandatory for Candidate Countries, the expectation to develop and implement robust gender equality frameworks is increasingly shaping the landscape of R&I reform.

The EDIRE project seeks to address this knowledge gap by examining how inclusive gender equality principles are being integrated into national efforts to boost research excellence and by identifying the barriers that persist. In doing so, EDIRE not only contributes to the advancement of ERA objectives but also supports BiH's broader accession process by fostering institutional readiness and alignment with EU values.

Knowledge Gaps and Network Isolation

One reason for the limited understanding of gender equality in R&I within Candidate Countries is the focus of EU-funded research on Widening Countries—those already within the EU but with lower R&I performance. Candidate Countries, with the exception of Türkiye, have received comparatively little attention ([Krzaklewska et al., 2023](#)). Moreover, Western Balkan R&I institutions remain relatively disconnected from European gender equality networks ([Burher et al, 2019](#)), a structural isolation that exacerbates knowledge gaps and hinders institutional learning.

Toward Inclusive Excellence

While the [ERA Scoreboard 2024](#) reports general progress across ERA priorities and growing interest among researchers in the region, systematic research on how EDI principles are being embedded in efforts to enhance research excellence remains patchy. This is precisely the gap that EDIRE set out to fill—by generating new insights, fostering institutional change, and promoting inclusive excellence in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

As BiH continues its journey toward full EU membership, embracing ERA principles (including gender equality and EDI) is not merely a requirement but a strategic opportunity. Building a resilient, inclusive, and innovative R&I system will be essential not only for accession, but for shaping a sustainable and competitive future within the European Union.

3. Summary of key issues emerging from the research

Research conducted at SSST as part of the EDIRE project - including institutional data analysis, a survey, and two focus groups reveals that staff and students are broadly satisfied with the university's work environment and its commitment to Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI). Positive aspects include a strong sense of collegiality, openness to new ideas, the benefits of teaching in English, and the diverse student body. SSST's small size was seen as conducive to close student-staff connections and creative exchange.

However, the research also identified persistent gendered inequalities and structural barriers:

- **Support gaps:** Women reported less support from superiors and colleagues, especially regarding career advancement and caregiving needs.
- **Discrimination and reporting:** Women experienced more unfair treatment and felt less comfortable reporting it.
- **Networking exclusion:** Limited access to informal networks reinforced a male-dominated culture.
- **Confidence and recognition:** Women felt undervalued and perceived confidence as a greater barrier to career progression.
- **Bias in evaluation:** Discrimination in task allocation, recruitment, and performance evaluation was reported exclusively by women.
- **Pay equity concerns:** Perceived salary discrimination suggests potential gender pay gaps requiring further investigation.

To validate and expand these findings, a national consultation meeting was held, bringing together 15 stakeholders from academia and research across BiH. The meeting introduced the EDIRE project, shared preliminary results, and explored their relevance to the broader national context. Participants discussed priority equality grounds, legal and data gaps, societal and institutional resistances, and proposed key recommendations for advancing EDI in research.

Two critical issues emerged:

- **Limited access to research funding:** SSST's private status excludes its researchers from many public funding opportunities, hindering collaboration with public universities. Access to EU funding is also constrained by limited professional networks and insufficient support for conference participation. Discretionary funding for networking and publishing especially in costly open access journals - raises EDI concerns due to unequal access and opportunity.
- **Lack of gender-disaggregated data:** While institutions report gender data on staff and students, there is a notable absence of such data in research funding processes. Available evidence suggests gender disparities in funding outcomes, yet public access to this data remains limited despite stated interest from funding bodies.

Together, these findings underscore the need for systemic reforms to improve access to funding, enhance transparency through data collection, and embed EDI principles more deeply in research policy and practice across BiH.

Following the preliminary recommendation on EDI - based on survey and focus group research at SSST and a national consultation two critical issues were explored in depth to better understand the conditions shaping inclusive research in Bosnia and Herzegovina: work-life balance in academia and the integration of gender+ dimensions in research. These studies, conducted as part of the EDIRE project and grounded in qualitative interviews and stakeholder consultations, reveal how institutional, societal, and political factors intersect to shape researchers lived experiences and the broader inclusivity of the research landscape.

Work-Life Balance in Academia

Initial survey data at SSST suggested that work-life balance was not widely perceived as a major obstacle to career advancement. However, follow-up qualitative research based on twelve semi-structured interviews with academics across universities in Sarajevo, Tuzla, Banja Luka, and Mostar revealed a more complex and layered reality.

Respondents described work-life conflict as a routine and expected part of academic life.

Long hours, weekend work, and the absence of clear boundaries between professional and personal time were seen as inherent to the profession. Many shared the belief that success in academia requires personal sacrifice, and that managing work-life balance is an individual responsibility rather than a structural concern. This internalisation of academic expectations was particularly evident in how respondents spoke of “luck” in receiving support from family or colleagues framing informal help as fortunate rather than acknowledging the absence of institutional support structures.

Barriers to achieving balance were numerous. The **lack of formal support systems** such as onsite childcare, hybrid work options, and equitable access to funding for networking and publishing was repeatedly cited. These gaps disproportionately affect women, who often perform a “double shift,” balancing paid academic work with unpaid domestic responsibilities. This was illustrated by respondents who described working evenings and weekends to “top up” tasks they couldn’t complete during the day while still making time for family obligations.

The **societal context in BiH** marked by patriarchal norms and familialism - further compounds these challenges. Childcare is often delegated to grandparents, and flexible work arrangements are not universally available. Several respondents noted that institutional support is not only lacking but unevenly distributed, often dependent on informal relationships or discretionary decisions. This creates inequities in access to career-building opportunities such as conference participation and publication support, which are essential for advancement in academia.

Integration of Gender+ in Research

The second strand of research examined how gender and broader Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) principles are understood and integrated into the research and innovation (R&I) landscape in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Interviews with twelve stakeholders including civil servants, NGO staff, and university employees from Mostar, Sarajevo, and Republika Srpska

revealed a range of conceptual and structural challenges that hinder the development of inclusive research practices.

A recurring theme was the narrow interpretation of inclusivity, often equated with gender parity in research teams. Gender equality was frequently reduced to numerical representation, with little attention paid to the content of research or the broader implications of intersectionality. The concept of gender+ which recognises the interplay of gender with other inequality grounds such as ethnicity, disability, and socioeconomic status was largely absent from the discourse.

Many respondents expressed a sense of “gender fatigue” viewing gender equality as a “solved” issue due to balanced team composition. This perception was compounded by “**training fatigue**” where EDI-related workshops were seen as symbolic exercises designed to satisfy external requirements, particularly those linked to EU funding. As a result, gender elements in research proposals were often tokenistic, undermining the transformative potential of inclusive research.

These conceptual limitations are reinforced by structural constraints. The decentralised governance system in BiH creates **fragmented funding mechanisms and inconsistent policy priorities across cantons and entities**. What is valued and prioritised in research is often shaped by political and institutional silos, making coordinated action on EDI difficult. This fragmentation not only affects access to funding but also influences the visibility and legitimacy of inclusive research agendas.

Underlying these challenges is a broader disconnect between institutional frameworks and everyday research practice. The belief that gender equality no longer requires attention, combined with limited understanding of intersectionality and performative approaches to training, reflects a research culture that is not yet equipped to engage meaningfully with EDI. Addressing these issues will require a shift in both mindset and infrastructure—toward a more coherent, context-sensitive approach that embeds inclusivity into the core of research policy and practice in BiH.

4. Policy implications

Together, these findings highlight the urgent need to move beyond individual coping strategies and symbolic gestures toward comprehensive, systemic reform. Addressing work-life balance and embedding gender+ dimensions in research requires coordinated action at institutional, policy, and cultural levels. The evidence gathered through institutional data, surveys, focus groups, and the national consultation underscores that meaningful inclusion in BiH's academic and research environments cannot be achieved through isolated initiatives or superficial compliance with external expectations.

Policy implications are clear and multifaceted:

- **Universities must develop and implement formal support structures to address work-life balance** such as flexible working arrangements, transparent and equitable access to funding for conferences and publications, and institutional childcare solutions. These measures should be embedded in institutional policy, not left to discretionary practices that reinforce inequality. National-level policies should incentivise and support these reforms, recognizing the structural nature of work-life conflict, particularly for women who continue to bear disproportionate caregiving responsibilities.
- **The integration of gender+ in research must be reframed.** Current understandings of inclusivity often reduced to gender parity in research teams fail to capture the complexity of inequality and the transformative potential of inclusive research. Policy frameworks should promote a deeper engagement with intersectionality, encouraging research that considers multiple inequality grounds (e.g., ethnicity, disability, socioeconomic status) and their interactions. This requires capacity-building efforts that go beyond performative training, fostering genuine understanding and institutional commitment to inclusive research design and content.
- The decentralised governance structure in BiH presents a significant barrier to coordinated action. **Policy responses must address fragmentation in research funding and agenda-setting by promoting harmonised standards for EDI across cantonal and entity-level institutions.** This includes mandating the collection and public reporting of gender-disaggregated data; not only on staff and students, but also on research funding applications and outcomes to enable evidence-based policymaking and accountability.
- **National and institutional stakeholders must confront the widespread perception that gender equality is a “solved” issue.** This narrative undermines progress and masks persistent disparities in support, recognition, and access to opportunity. Strategic communication, leadership engagement, and inclusive policy development are essential to shift cultural attitudes and embed EDI as a core value in BiH's research and academic systems.

In sum, the **EDIRE findings call for a paradigm shift**: from reactive, individualised responses to proactive, structural change. Only through sustained, multi-level reform can BiH build a truly inclusive and equitable research environment one that not only meets EU standards but also reflects the lived realities and aspirations of its academic community.

5. Recommendations

To advance inclusive research and institutional equality in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the following recommendations are proposed for universities, research institutions, policymakers, and funding bodies:

1. Institutionalise Work-Life Balance Measures

- Introduce formal policies for flexible working arrangements, including hybrid and remote work options.
- Establish institutional childcare support, such as onsite facilities or partnerships with local providers.
- Ensure transparent and equitable access to funding for conferences, networking, and publishing, avoiding discretionary practices that reinforce inequality.

2. Reframe and Deepen the Integration of Gender+ in Research

- Move beyond gender parity as a sole indicator of inclusivity by embedding intersectional approaches in research design and evaluation.
- Develop guidelines and training that address multiple inequality grounds (e.g., ethnicity, disability, socioeconomic status) and their intersections.
- Promote inclusive research content across disciplines, especially in fields where gender+ dimensions are underexplored.

3. Strengthen Capacity Building and EDI Literacy

- Replace performative training models with sustained, reflective, and discipline-specific capacity-building programmes.
- Engage leadership and senior staff in EDI training to foster institutional commitment and cultural change.
- Support peer learning and communities of practice to share inclusive research strategies across institutions.

4. Mandate and Standardise Gender-Disaggregated Data Collection

- Require all higher education and research institutions to collect and publicly report gender-disaggregated data on staff, students, and research funding applications and outcomes.
- Ensure data collection includes other relevant inequality grounds to support intersectional analysis.
- Use this data to inform institutional planning, monitor progress, and guide funding decisions.

5. Address Governance Fragmentation

- Develop national-level coordination mechanisms to harmonise EDI standards across cantonal and entity-level institutions.

- Create inter-institutional platforms for dialogue and collaboration on inclusive research policy and practice.
- Align funding criteria and evaluation frameworks with EU standards on gender equality and EDI.

6. Challenge the “Solved Problem” Narrative

- Launch strategic communication campaigns to raise awareness of persistent inequalities in academia and research.
- Highlight lived experiences and evidence from BiH to counter the perception that gender equality has been achieved.
- Encourage institutional leaders to publicly commit to EDI goals and report on progress transparently.

These recommendations aim to support BiH’s alignment with ERA priorities and Horizon Europe requirements, while fostering a research culture that is inclusive, equitable, and responsive to the diverse realities of its academic community.

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