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From crisis to campus:

A study on gender experiences in higher education in the context of the Balkans' post-crisis environment.

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Table of Contents

Abstract

This paper examines the post-crisis environment of Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and Albania. More closely, it delves into how leadership structures within higher education and wider society affect gender dynamics and how they can be utilised to support gender equality. We focus on the impact of the post-conflict environment within Croatia and BiH, and the post-communism period of Albania. Through interviews conducted with Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) officers, gender equality experts, and university senior management professionals, our research highlights narratives, perceptions and memory as key in the transfer of views regarding gender across generations. Within higher education and wider society in the aforementioned countries, our data suggest that gender roles and equality, and gender-based violence (GBV) are important issues which need to be addressed. Additionally, institutional governance and leadership, and bottom-up approaches are found to be the most valuable interventions when addressing gender inequalities. Our findings demonstrate the importance of studying gender experiences in the Balkans — due to the discordance between the narratives in our findings and current literature — and highlight the need for further study to more deeply understand the student perspective.

Introduction

Crises have the power to permeate and impact society through a multitude of avenues, yet the direct impact on gender is not often the focus of post-crises discourse. This paper aims to draw links between how the post-crisis environment of the Balkans is woven into gender and gender experiences in wider society, and more specifically, students and faculty in higher education. Problems within higher education institutions often mirror wider societal struggles, and implicit gender inequalities can be addressed more closely within these institutions where there is a clear governance structure.[1] EDI professionals focused on gender issues can create gender-focused interventions to support students, faculty and wider university staff; policies can be developed and adapted in a contained environment, and later adapted for outside the university setting and national leadership.[2]

We have chosen to focus our research on Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and Albania to understand the broader impact of crises on three Balkan countries with differing experiences of hostility. Croatia and BiH were both affected by the 1990s Yugoslav wars to differing extents with approximately 14,000 killed in Croatia and over 100,000 in BiH.[3] Contrastingly, following the fall of Communism in Albania, the nation has had a huge brain drain with approximately 40% of the population leaving the country.[4] As a result, we are classifying the post-crisis environment as post 1990s Yugoslav Wars in Croatia and BiH, and the years which follow the

[1] John Brennan, Roger King and Yann Lebeau, "The Role of universities in the transformation of societies: an international research project," *Centre for Higher Education Research and Information/Association of Commonwealth Universities*, (2004): 1-72, https://oro.open.ac.uk/6555/.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Mirna Flogel and Lauc, Gordan, "War Stress - Effects of the War in the Area of Former Yugoslavia," (1998): 4, https://www.nato.int/du/docu/d010306c.pdf; "The Conflicts," United Nations International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, accessed July 30, 2024, https://www.icty.org/en/about/what-former-yugoslavia/conflicts.
[4] "Albania's ghost towns: the crisis that caused the exodus," Andi Hoxhaj, accessed July 30, 2024, https://theconversation.com/albanias-ghost-towns-the-crisis-that-caused-the-exodus-194003.

fall of Communism from 1991 in Albania. Conflict and gender are intertwined: violence has been associated with increased gender-based violence (GBV), the weaponisation of traditional gender roles, and reinforcement of patriarchal ideas.[5] Furthermore, the economic and political turmoil as a by-product of conflict further shapes gender experiences and exacerbates gender issues prevalent within society.

Delving into gender experiences, we investigate perceptions and perspectives of overt and covert gender issues. Overt gender issues explore GBV, sexual violence, and harassment. Comparatively, we defined covert gender issues to encompass gender stereotypes, lack of opportunity, implicit bias, and denial of the presence of gender inequality within society. Centring on the higher education setting, we focus on understanding the views of Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) officers, gender equality experts, and university senior management professionals. The common denominator among our interviewees was their leadership responsibilities in relation to gender experiences. Their current views and personal recollections of past student life offer an insight into the experiences of students, teaching staff, and the wider university community over time. Additionally, they offer an understanding of current gender-focused policies and initiatives which can be furthered in the continuously evolving and increasingly interconnected higher education sphere.

Our research illuminates five key themes:

- Crises' narratives, perceptions and memory
- Gender roles and equality

[5] Sara Arvidsson and Roza Nermany. "The Gendered Dimensions of Identity Wars - The Case of the Former Yugoslavia" (Bachelor's thesis, Linköping University, 2007), 16.

- Gender-based violence (GBV)
- Institutional governance and leadership
- Bottom-up interventions.

The first three themes encapsulate the anecdotal and empirical evidence that fortify the link between how the crises have shaped gender experiences. We found that the narratives, perceptions, and memories of the crises shared by our interviewees acted as a carrier of history and cultural views. These shape how gender roles and equality manifest today, and on a more aggravated level, perpetuate gender-based violence (GBV).

Institutional governance and leadership, as well as bottom-up interventions, dominate our interviewees' visions of progress, and thus also inform our key propositions. We garnered an understanding of the merits of the top-down interventions; however, we were also able to critically examine their shortcomings in empowering meaningful and tailored change, specific to our chosen countries.[6] This paved the way for our proposal of bottom-up change through the medium of higher education. The nature of creating progress at a grassroots level allows for more nuanced and subtle alternations of existing mindsets.

[6] Rachel Palmén and Angela Wroblewski, *Overcoming the Challenge of Structural Change in Research Organisations – A Reflexive Approach to Gender Equality* (Leeds: Emerald Group Publishing, 2022), chap. 9, https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/978-1-80262-119-820221010/full/pdf?title=structural-change-towards-gender-equality-learning-from-bottom-up-and-top-down-experiences-of-gep-implementation-in-universities.

Literature Review

There has been limited academic or governmental research concerning the experience of gender in the context of the Balkans' post-crisis environment. The post-war period has had a sustained impact on the Balkans' contemporary societies, manifesting in increased instances of gender-based violence (GBV).[7] In addition, low levels of gender equality have been perceived to undermine social cohesion.[8] This review will draw upon literature concerning alternative methods of post-war reconstruction, particularly focusing on the way that changing gender experiences leads to sustained recovery and how the arena of higher education has the potential to include and engage differing identities in open dialogue, reducing social fragmentation.

This literature review is comprised of four parts to address the experience of gender in higher education in the context of the Balkans' post-crisis environment. The first part focuses on a conceptual framework that links gender to conflict. It focuses on the equalisation of women's bodies to physical territory.[9] The second part demonstrates the realities of gender inequality and how historical narratives and legacies influence the daily lived experiences of gender. This involves the perpetuation of stereotypes and the constraints on women's autonomy through traditional patriarchal structures, amidst the backdrop of ethnonationalism.[10] The third section highlights the role of gender equality as a means of post-crisis recovery.[11] Education has been a neglected aspect of reconstruction, though it has the potential to drive meaningful and sustained

[7] NATO, "Deep Dive Recap: The Balkans and the Gender Perspective," NATO, 2024.
[8] Nataša Vučenović, "Gender Equality and Social Cohesion in the Western Balkans" (Youth, Inclusion, Equality & Trust, 2024), 13.
[9] Huma Haider, *Gender and Conflict in the Western Balkans*, K4D Helpdesk Report (Brighton, UK: Institute of Development Studies, 2017).
[10] Zilka Spahic-Siljak, *Gender Equality Barometer of Bosnia and Herzegovina* (Sarajevo: University of Sarajevo, 2024).
[11] Marie E. Berry and Mili Lake, 'Women's Rights After War: On Gender Interventions and Enduring Hierarchies | Annual Reviews', *Annual Review of Law and Social Science* 17 (2021): 459.

recovery.[12] Overall, this literature review aims to highlight the neglected role of higher education as a tool to reduce gender disparities and drive meaningful post-crisis recovery.

The gendered nature of nationalism

The first aspect of gender experiences concerns the theoretical framework between gender and nationalism. Violent conflict is often accompanied by a strong gendered narrative. For example, the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia illustrates the dynamics of ethnic wars and highlights how gender can be weaponised. From a nationalist perspective, which fundamentally seeks the preservation and continuity of the nation, ethnicity and gender are intimately linked as noted by Arvidsson and Nermany.[13] Within this framework, men are often relegated to the roles of violent warriors, tasked with the defence and expansion of the nation, while women are primarily viewed as biological reproducers and caretakers of the nation's future generations. Therefore, simplistic and binary gender stereotypes are placed under the nationalist spotlight. Gender-based violence is frequently exacerbated by gendered narratives that equate women's bodies to territory. A territory that can be, simultaneously, the location to be "protected" by "their" men and "conquered" by the "enemy."[14] In war, a male victim emerges as hero and martyr, whilst a female victim is not afforded the luxury of herodom and becomes instead reduced to a wasted and stigmatised good.[15] The construction of nationhood relies on the feminine entity of the nation that is in need of male protection.[16] Thus, an attack on the women of a nation carries

[12] Sansom Milton and Sultan Barakat, 'Higher Education as the Catalyst of Recovery in Conflict-Affected Societies', *Globalisation, Societies and Education* 14, no. 3 (2 July 2016): 403.
[13] Sara Arvidsson and Roza Nermany, *The Gendered Dimensions of Identity Wars - The Case of the Former Yugoslavia* (Linköping University, 2007), 16.
[14] Haider, *Gender and Conflict in the Western Balkans*.
[15] Patricia Albanese, 'Nationalism, War, and Archaization of Gender Relations in the Balkans', *Violence Against Women* 7, no. 9 (1 September 2001): 1018.
[16] Sara Arvidsson and Roza Nermany, *The Gendered Dimensions of Identity Wars - The Case of the Former Yugoslavia* (Linköping University, 2007), 16.

immense symbolic implications. The physical subjugation of women emasculates the men and is perceived as an attack on the nation itself.

Despite prescriptive gender narratives, the Yugoslav wars induced collective action and the leadership of women. Women across the Balkans created transnational networks to counteract nationalism and militarism. Although, since the codified end of armed conflict across the region, such feminist movements have lost momentum. Without the visibility of violence, there is nothing to unite various feminist movements among southeastern Europeans. Hence, the efficacy of women's rights activism has been stunted by general backlash and the decrease in the mobilization of women's networks addressing wartime sexual violence.[17] Overall, the experiences of women lack widespread recognition, and the absence of unified leadership structures means that systematic issues in society face little checks and balances.

The contemporary status of gender equality

The second aspect of gender regards daily lived experiences in the post-crisis environment across the Balkans. The improvement of gender equality in the Western Balkans has faced significant obstacles, especially regarding the legacy of civilian conflict during crisis in the 1990s. Gender equality has been undermined by stereotypes, gender role expectations, internalised misogyny, unequal division of labour, and enduring power dynamics in both public and private aspects of life.[18] The post-crisis environment, particularly in BiH, impacts gender dynamics. Deep-rooted patriarchal power dynamics has limited the agency of women and existing legal and institutional frameworks have been tainted by ethno-nationalism, re-traditionalisation and a resurgence of

[17] Haider, *Gender and Conflict in the Western Balkans*, 2.
[18] Spahic-Siljak, *Gender Equality Barometer of Bosnia and Herzegovina*, 15.

conservatism.[19] Younger and well-educated women opt to define their own understanding of female roles. However, they acknowledge that resisting the nationalistic and patriarchal traditions of public life is futile, which means that there is little appetite to change the current state of gender experiences.[20]

During the 1990s war in BiH, traditional gender role expectations gained prominence. Antagonistic narratives and nationalist polarisations emphasised a "return" to the "original" traditions of the past. Whilst a regression to the "original" state of social organisation was a goal of nationalist ideologies, the contemporary landscape of everyday life, influenced by global economic conditions and cultural, involves many interlocking factors which cannot accommodate such a "return".[21] Therefore, there is a discrepancy between the ideals of gender equality and the enduring legacies of traditional gender roles, as women recognise the futility of activism and slip into complacency to the dominant patriarchal culture.[22]

Post-war reconstruction

The third section of this literature review discusses the role of higher education and gender as a means of post-crisis reconstruction. Higher education is typically a low priority in terms of post-war reconstruction. Though, if addressed properly, the higher education sector has the potential to facilitate meaningful recovery in crisis-affected areas, such as the Western Balkans.[23] Various post-crisis recovery agendas, including stabilisation, reconstruction, state building, and

[19] Ibid., 17.
[20] Hannes Grandits, 'Gender Relations in Post-War Social Life: The Example of Multi-National Herzegovina', *Anthropological Yearbook of European Cultures*, Gender and Nation in South Eastern Europe, 14 (2005): 139.
[21] Ibid., 113.
[22] Jovanka Stojsavljevic, 'Women, Conflict and Culture in Former Yugoslavia', *Gender and Development* 3, no. 1 (1995): 36.
[23] Sansom Milton and Sultan Barakat, 'Higher Education as the Catalyst of Recovery in Conflict-Affected Societies', *Globalisation, Societies and Education* 14, no. 3 (2 July 2016): 403–21.

peacebuilding, can benefit from the proliferation and refinement of higher education institutions. The main contribution of higher education is that it provides avenues of discussion through teaching and research goals and fosters positive socialisation effects. Notably, mistrust across the Balkans has led to a break down in effective communication and consensus building.[24] Educational institutions offer a space to mediate between differing identities and can foster long-term civic development. Higher education is the first opportunity for young people to "meet the other" as university is a fundamentally heterogenous environment.[25] Therefore, the higher education sector provides multiple avenues for recovery in the aftermath of conflict.

The inclusion of women – as a feature of post-war reconstruction – is key to the consolidation of more liberal democracies.[26] High levels of intra-state armed conflict have been associated with gender inequality in higher education, measured by the male-to-female enrolment ratio.[27] Moreover, there is substantial literature which argues that war presents a critical turning point in social arrangements and has often catalysed more progressive periods of social and political change. Post-crisis environments are conducive for upheavals in the gender status quo. Whilst gender inclusionary policies have made important gains in women's representation, the siloing of gender from ethnicity, class and religion relegates the inclusion of women to symbolic progress.[28] Therefore, the higher education setting, where many identities cooperate, is crucial to establishing long-term recovery.

[24] Nataša Vučenović, 'Gender Equality and Social Cohesion in the Western Balkans' (Youth, Inclusion, Equality & Trust, 2024), 13.
[25] Milton and Barakat, 'Higher Education as the Catalyst of Recovery in Conflict-Affected Societies.'
[26] Berry and Lake, 'Women's Rights After War: On Gender Interventions and Enduring Hierarchies | Annual Reviews.'
[27] Milton and Barakat, 'Higher Education as the Catalyst of Recovery in Conflict-Affected Societies.'
[28] Berry and Lake, 'Women's Rights After War: On Gender Interventions and Enduring Hierarchies | Annual Reviews', 460.

EU accession and international pressure

The final section of this literature review identifies the conditionality process of accession to the European Union (EU) and its implications for gender equality. Often the adoption of gender inclusion policies is a result of international influence and not a result of solely domestic legislation. Gender equality is a fundamental tenet of accession to the EU, and the inclusion of sufficient gender equality plans is desirable among potential candidate countries as it supports their integration into the EU.[29] This can also be observed in the case of Croatia, which developed gender equality plans parallel to their accession to the EU.[30] Gender equality is considered a core EU value and a human right, and inclusion policies are aimed to prepare potential candidate countries for the rights and obligations of membership.[31]

However, former Yugoslavia previously established a progressive constitution that promoted equality as a key pillar of socialism.[32] This means that EU accession feels reminiscent of the past and the accession criteria parallels Socialist Yugoslavia. The promotion of women's rights can be seen as a cornerstone of supranational-state-building as the overarching identity of being a "Yugoslav" includes the participation of women.[33] Top-down interventions initially focused on the economic position of women.[34] Consequently, deeper structural and cultural factors have been neglected, leading to the persistence of inequalities. EU accession conditions, such as

[29] Patrycja Szarek-Mason, ed., The European Union's Fight Against Corruption: The Evolving Policy towards Member States and Candidate Countries, Cambridge Studies in European Law and Policy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 135.
[30] Jill Irvine and Leda Sutlović, "Gender Equality in Croatia: Closing the Compliance Gap' in *Gender (In)equality and Gender Politics in Southeastern Europe: A Question of Justice*, ed. Christine M. Hassenstab and Sabrina P. Ramet (London, 2015), 68.
[31] Velina Lilyanova, 'Women in the Western Balkans, Gender Equality in the EU Accession Process' (European Parliamentray Research Service, July 2018).
[32] Dragoljub Durović et al., *The Constitution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia* (Ljubljana, Parmova 39: Dopisna Delavska Univerza, 1974), 40.
[33] Ana Masklan, 'Place of Women's Rights in Supranation-Building: Comparison of Socialist Yugoslavia and the European Union', *Croatian Political Science Review* 59, no. 2 (2022): 56.
[34] Ibid., 41.

addressing gender inequality, highlight the similarities between the EU and former Yugoslavia as supranational organisations. Therefore, the post-crisis environment across the Balkans impacts the trajectory of gender experiences as the socio-cultural pendulum swings back to gender equality policies, in response to EU accession conditionality.

In conclusion, this literature review highlights the need for further study to address gender experiences in higher education in the context of the Balkans' post-crisis environment. There are knowledge gaps concerning the use of higher education as a tool to sustain post-crisis reconstruction. Higher education has the potential to foster civic engagement and provides opportunity to mediate differing identities.[35] Alongside higher education, the active inclusion and participation of women is a fundamental aspect of sustaining social cohesion in a post-crisis environment. Considering the traditional patriarchal structure, present in societies across Croatia, BiH and Albania, there are deeper cultural barriers that have created divisions.[36] Thus, the relationship between the post-crisis environment, gender experiences and higher education as a medium for reconstruction is an area of research which we have explored.

[35] Milton and Barakat, 'Higher Education as the Catalyst of Recovery in Conflict-Affected Societies.'
[36] Spahic-Siljak, Gender Equality Barometer of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 15.

Data & Methods

Research Focus and Data Collection

Our research was focused on selected countries in the Balkans, specifically Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), and Albania. The three countries allow for varied regional representation based on different experiences of conflict. Specifically, they allowed us to delve into the different experiences of the fall of Yugoslavia in Croatia and BiH, as well as the fall of communism in Albania. Data was collected exclusively from people with ties, relationships, and lived experiences in those countries.

Research Methodology

Data collection was based on qualitative interviews, which are useful in engaging, describing, and identifying cross-cultural lived experiences. For example, the format allowed us to detect and respond to body language and mannerisms, thus adapting the interview and more effectively unpacking the interviewees' complex social experiences. [37]

Participant Recruitment

To recruit interview participants, we researched the faculty of universities in cities across the three countries. We utilised a purposive sampling method by contacting a diverse group of EDI officers, gender equality experts, and university senior management professionals via email. This sampling method was chosen to allow for in-depth exploration of perspectives of under-

[37] Ahmed A. Alhazmi and Angelica Kaufmann, "Phenomenological Qualitative Methods Applied to the Analysis of Cross-Cultural Experience in Novel Educational Social Contexts" Front Psychol. 13 (2022): 2 doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2022.785134.

represented social phenomena within the Balkans.[38] The sample gave us detailed insights on the governance of higher educational institutions, and opinions from those with expertise on gender dynamics and gender equality issues.

Interview Process & Structure

We conducted ten key informant interviews: eight conducted in person and two via Zoom. The online interviews were provided as an alternative where an in-person meeting was not possible, retaining some of the benefits of an in-person meeting (e.g. being visible, providing opportunities to build rapport, creating a space for follow-up questions).[39] A semi-structured interview guide was developed informed by existing literature in the field. The interview guide included questions about the interviewee's role within the university or their professional field. It covered their personal experiences studying in the country, if applicable, and their perceptions of gender dynamics then compared to now. Additionally, the interview explored the emergence, development, or persistence of problems in the post-crisis environment. Finally, it addressed the identification of current issues, barriers, and potential interventions. In most interviews, a set of further questions were asked, pertaining to the key discussion points and the interviewees' expertise. Each interview was attended by two researchers, one responsible for conducting, and the other for taking notes.

[38] Anthony J. Onwuegbuzie, and Nancy L. Leech, "Sampling designs in qualitative research: making the sampling process more public." *Qualit. Rep.* 12 (2007): 238–255. doi: 10.46743/2160-3715/2007.1636

[39] Paul Hanna, "Using internet technologies (such as Skype) as a research medium: A research note." *Qualitative Research*, 12, 2 (2012): 239–242, https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794111426607.

Data Analysis

The data was analysed thematically to identify meaningful and recurrent patterns across interviews, thus furthering our insights into the topic.[40] In coding the interview transcripts, we initially created a list of tags using an inductive approach, assigning multiple relevant tags to each interview response. We then categorized these tags into five key themes to filter and conduct the thematic analysis. Using the inductive approach, namely deriving themes directly from the data, proved to be more insightful than relying on previous literature. Thematic analysis was particularly beneficial due to its flexibility in interpreting large data sets, as well as its suitability when investigating something as subjective as gender experiences, which is the cornerstone of our research question.[41]

Participant Information, Consent, and Ethical Considerations

Given the potentially sensitive nature of the research due to political and conflict related themes, steps were taken to ensure the welfare of the participants. Prior to the data collection, those interested were informed that participation was voluntary, of their right to withdraw, and that their data would be managed according to the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), ensuring their anonymity. All the names used throughout are pseudonyms for the interview participants. The sensitive content of the interview was also explicitly acknowledged, and participants were assured of the ability to skip specific questions. Before commencing, all those

[40] Virginia Braun, and Victoria Clarke. "Using thematic analysis in psychology." *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3, 2 (2006): 80. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa.
[41] Jack Caulfield, "How to Do Thematic Analysis | Step-by-Step Guide & Examples," Scribbr, September 2019, accessed July 30, 2024, https://www.scribbr.com/methodology/thematic-analysis/.

interested had to give their informed consent. Lastly, participants received no incentive for taking part.

The study adhered to the ethical guidelines established by the Ethics Committee of the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) and received approval from the Laidlaw Programme Supervisors.

Limitations and Challenges

This study has certain limitations which we have looked to mitigate as far as feasibly possible. Firstly, English was not the first language of many participants. This may have posed obstacles in effectively conveying semantic nuances. However, interviews were recorded, which enabled additional analysis of these nuances at a later stage. A further limitation is that of recall bias as participants were asked to reflect on past events and experiences. Responses could have been influenced by current perspectives, memory limitations, or post-traumatic omissions of memories.[42]

Furthermore, the sample was predominantly female, and a more diverse sample might have enhanced the diversity of the experiences shared. Additionally, although the research necessitated that the sample size mainly consisted of individuals with ethnic, national, or familial ties to the countries investigated, that also meant that their recollections could be biased towards and from personal perspectives. A final limitation is that participants from Republika Srpska (RS) were not included. This is important, as RS is a federal entity, which often conflicts

[42] Rodrigo, Moreno-Serra, Misael Anaya-Montes, Sebastián León-Giraldo, et al. "Addressing recall bias in (post-)conflict data collection and analysis: lessons from a large-scale health survey in Colombia." *Confl Health* 16, 14 (2022):1-14. https://doi.org/10.1186/s13031-022-00446-0.

politically with the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH).[43] Thus, the regional representation of BiH is limited.

Country	**Number of interviews conducted**
Croatia	3
Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH)	5 (including 2 Zoom interviews)
Albania	2

The above table shows the number of interviews conducted in each country of interest. With the 1990s Yugoslav Wars having a sustained and pervasive impact throughout BiH, five interviews were conducted across Sarajevo and Mostar to understand the lived experiences of the conflict and the experiences of gender across the two cities given the varying ethnic diversity in BiH.

[43] Helena Touquet, "The Republika Srpska as a strong nationalizing state and the consequences for postethnic activism," *Nationalities Papers*. 40, 2 (2012): 203-220. doi:10.1080/00905992.2011.652609.

Findings

Narratives, perceptions, and memory of the post-crisis environment

When analysing the post-crisis environment of the Balkans, the role of narratives, perceptions, and memory emerges as crucial, especially in how they influence gender experiences. This section delineates the function of narratives, analyses their symbolism, explores the relation of gender and conflict, and highlights the potential of higher education to reshape these narratives in a constructive way.

Crises' narratives

Firstly, narratives carry a normative dimension - they are used as a retention and recollection tool of the crises. It is noted that "society does reflect and remember what happened [in the 1990s Yugoslav Wars]," (Alex) implying a pattern of recollection and remembrance. Notably, it was further claimed that people experience "war fatigue" (Alex). This raises an interesting point, as the dictionary definition of 'war fatigue' refers to 'a mental condition in which a person suffers severe anxiety and depression caused by the stress of fighting in a war'.[44] It was then, however, clarified that the interviewee meant that "[people] had enough of talking about the past" (Alex). This implies that many are exhausted from references to the war. Taking a different stance, it was noted that the 'culture of memory' which surrounds the 1990s Yugoslav Wars is highly problematic (Danielle). They note that "if there is no teaching related to peace, there will be

[44] "Combat Fatigue" Cambridge Dictionary, accessed July 14 2024, https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/combat-fatigue#google_vignette.

conflict again". From this we can deduce that narratives can also be constructed as an educational tool, instead of merely a reminder of traumatic events.

The two perspectives can however be reconciled. With the current perception of narratives pertaining to the crises as repetitive, tiresome, and purely based on memory, there is a need to create and construct new ones. There is support for such practices, as the potential of new narratives in the region has been labelled as 'emancipatory' in its empowerment of local voices and the breaking of generational trauma.[45] The value of these narratives was appreciated but was also viewed by apprehension, given that there are "three different truths," derived from ethnicity, namely those of the "Bosniaks, the Croats, and the Serbs." (Danielle). Fairey notes that the 'lack of a shared narrative' is 'viewed as a challenge' among scholars and practitioners in BiH specifically but argues for "collaborative story-telling" as a strategic tool for post-crisis reconstruction.[46] Therefore, the importance of open dialogue in education is even more acutely emphasised.

In comparison, our data regarding narratives in relation to the fall of communism in Albania did not indicate such a pattern of society-wide recollections of the crisis. Memories were limited to communist policies restricting free movement but were followed by the note that "after the early 1990s, the policy was completely abolished" (Harvey). This could indicate that the fall of communism in Albania was marked by a clear and swift transition, and thus less tumultuous than the collapse of Yugoslavia.

[45] Asja Mandić, "The emancipatory potential of the Yugoslav socialist narratives of the Second World War," *Memory Studies*, 15,3 (2022): 563. https://doi.org/10.1177/17506980221085525.
[46] Tiffany Fairey. "Peace is possible: The role of strategic narratives in peacebuilding." *Media, War & Conflict*, *17*(1), (2024): 3. https://doi.org/10.1177/17506352231160360.

Moreover, it was noted that when "the communist regime came in power [it made] a lot of reforms to promote their equality ideology" (Jasmine). Similarly, it was noted that there were "no grassroots nor feminist movements such as those in Yugoslavia" and that "policies came from top-down institutions' (Harvey). This indicates that, similarly to Yugoslavia, the narratives surrounding the communist Albania painted it as a progressive regime with regards to gender equality policies, although it relied more on state-driven action.

However, Ypi's (2021) memoir on the fall of communism in Albania offers a more nuanced perspective. While she recalls how she similarly perceived communism as a place of 'community and hope', her narrative regarding the fall describes an environment where 'amid civil unrest, shootings were a daily occurrence'.[47] This juxtaposition necessitates the importance of open dialogue within educational institutions about the crises, which can subsequently enable the exchange of perspectives and reshape the narratives.

Amidst the discordant narratives across Croatia, BiH, and Albania, post-crisis reconstruction remains elusive. Therefore, we affirm the value of education in initiating discussions about the crises, sharing a range of perspectives, and rebuilding the narratives.

Perceptions of gender issues

An important link to identify and analyse is how these discordant narratives influence the perceptions of gender experiences. The predominant observation is that perceptions, like narratives, are discordant.

[47] Lea Ypi, *Free: Coming of Age at the End of History* (London: Penguin Books, 2021); Han Zhang. "How Lea Ypi Defines Freedom" *The New Yorker*, July 18, 2024. https://www.newyorker.com/culture/persons-of-interest/how-lea-ypi-defines-freedom.

When discussing gender issues across countries in former-Yugoslavia, it was noted that "some people do not consider the issues to be important" and that they "believe [equality] has already been achieved" (Fionnula). This 'discordance' was further corroborated, argued by the fact that there is a "lack of understanding on what issues are perceived [as important] by different generations." (Alex). Therefore, the narratives of these interviewees' show that views are not cohesive and some view gender equality issues as non-existent at that point in time.

The lack of consensus further complicates solutions to gender mainstreaming, hindering the progress of gender policies. This links to the perception of Yugoslavia as a progressive regime. It was claimed that Yugoslavia was, "more advanced than most capitalist countries" (Bobby). Moreover, it was noted that, "gender equality [reached' accomplished levels in Yugoslavia," (Bobby) which reveals that certain people had a positive perception of the regime. However, in another interview it was noted that, "even the good things that come from the past have a red mark," indicating that socialist policies are received with apprehension retrospectively. Indeed, it was appreciated that a positive perception of Yugoslavia is "subject to perspective" and that the "contrast in beliefs" (Bobby) also existed between families during the war. These anomalous perceptions pose a challenge, which can be mediated through open dialogue and education bringing to light the reality of gender experiences. These examples further corroborate the claim that education becomes a crucial tool in shaping the narratives.

Therefore, the exchange of crisis narratives and more specifically, perceptions of gender experiences, is an important step in enabling more in-depth discussions, which can then be developed into constructive open dialogue in higher education.

Gender Equality

While examining the insights from interviewees on the gender issues faced by students and faculty, this investigation explores how these issues are influenced by the historical context and gender roles within different countries. The recurring gender issues can be categorised into three areas: higher education, the workplace, and inequality denial.

In higher education, gender parity in terms of enrolment was fair across the three countries.[48] In Albania, female students "dominate higher education, accounting for up to 62-65% of students" (Jasmine). Evidently, gender inequalities arise not only from explicit discrimination or enrolment statistics, but from implicit forms of gender discrimination such as language, sexual harassment, and hidden biases. Notably, women are underrepresented "in STEM fields at around 20-25%" (Danielle), but this is a wider global issue not limited to the countries studied.

Regarding the second major issue, the Balkans still face workplace inequality. Several interviewees claimed that women struggle to reach higher management positions and leadership roles despite having sufficient qualifications, partly due to the "old men's circles" (Bobby) that are reluctant to hire women. Even when women attain higher roles, there is a lack of visibility and representation, which leads to underrepresentation of these women and the younger generation, as "seeing is believing" (Danielle).

The third and most pertinent issue is inequality denial. A significant proportion of interviewees denied facing any discrimination and did not view gender equality as an issue at all. Danielle stated in context to gender, "there was no issue that bothered us in university". Deloitte's

[48] Zilka Spahić Šlijak and Dino Đipa, "Gender Equality Barometer of Bosnia and Herzegovina," UNDP, April 2024, https://www.undp.org/bosnia-herzegovina/publications/gender-equality-barometer-bosnia-and-herzegovina.

research on the perception of gender equality in Croatia among young people found that they do "not consider gender equality an issue."[49] They are more focused on "existential concerns or finding jobs" (Bobby), implying gender disparities are not their priority meaning equality is held back. Moreover, Jasmine expresses that there are "no formal barriers, only psychological barriers," with Danielle stating that "it is a woman's choice whether she wants to progress professionally". Thus, systemic issues are prevalent with even those at the top believing that women have autonomy, and structural barriers are not to blame.

Examining the factors that contribute to inequality denial, we can point to the progressiveness of Yugoslavia, and its "significant leap in gender equality in Yugoslavia post WW2" (Gary), leading to the belief that equality had been achieved. Women at the time were encouraged to take their place professionally and in public life.[50] However, during wartime, this progress shrank as women tended to stay and nurse the family, while men went to fight, "illustrating a problem rooted in biology", according to Bobby. Furthermore, the crisis of the 1990s deprioritised gender equality, as wartime shifted focus away from social causes.[51]

The professional advancement of women continues to be hindered by the persistent barrier of the "double duty of care" (Ioanna): managing household responsibilities while maintaining a professional career. In socialist Yugoslavia, under Tito's leadership, women were encouraged to join the workforce to help revitalize the economy.[52] Clare states that the influence of "figures

[49] Deloitte, "Women in the Boardroom a Global Perspective," 2021. https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/global/Documents/Risk/gx-risk-wob-europe-180222.pdf.
[50] Iva Jelusic, "Gender and War in the Yugoslav Media," *Central European University*, 2022, https://www.etd.ceu.edu/2022/jelusic_iva.pdf.
[51] Sinduja Raja, Marie E.Berry, and Milli Lake, "Women's Rights After War." *FBA Research Brief*, December 2020, https://fba.se/contentassets/7a174aaa585e41038daee227e12d9907/womens-rights-after-war.pdf.
[52] Marie Černá, Women under socialism : what degree of emancipation?: Cahiers du CEFRES N° 30, Le communisme à partir des sociétés - Communism from the viewpoint of societies. Cahiers du CEFRES, 2006, Communism from the viewpoint of societies, 30, pp.7, ffhalshs-01160412f.

like Mother Mary and Catholicism depicted women as strong," promoting the dual role of working and child-rearing—a notion that persists today. Although the statistics show some improvements in women's rights, the lived experience show that women are still viewed as inferior to men. As ethnonationalist elites in power advocate for traditional values, gender roles continue to be reinforced.

Gender-Based Violence (GBV)

During and following the 1990s Yugoslav Wars, both Croatia and BiH experienced increased instances of gender-based violence (GBV) with women being used as weapons of war.[53] When there is a crisis domestic violence worsens as, "people are sensitive from PTSD and lose it at their spouse" (Clare). Conflict heightens emotions and when there are existing gender inequalities within a region, GBV is exacerbated and can manifest through sexual harassment and femicide.[54] Violence within a country can lead to, "higher rates of domestic violence and there is a huge problem of femicide (within BiH)" (Danielle). Moreover, within Croatia there has also been increased instances of femicide with, "nearly 100 women killed in Croatia," within the past five years.[55] In the post-conflict context, social and economic factors contribute to the persistence of GBV within society. During reconstruction, economic turbulence increases strain

[53] Jovanka Stojsavljevic, "Women, Conflict, and Culture in Former Yugoslavia," *Gender and Development* 3, no. 1 (1995): 40, http://www.jstor.org/stable/4030423.
[54] "Tackling Gender Based Violence in Fragile Contexts," World Bank Group, accessed July 17, 2024, https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2023/03/07/tackling-gender-based-violence-in-fragile-contexts.
[55] "Femicide as a Separate Criminal Offense: A Milestone in Croatia," Women Against Violence Europe, accessed July 17, 2024, https://wave-network.org/femicide-criminal-offense-croatia/#:~:text=In%20the%20last%20five%20years,occurred%20within%20the%20victims'%20homes.

on households, leaving women vulnerable in a patriarchal society where domestic violence is pervasive.[56]

Whilst there appears to be gender parity within higher education institutions with roughly equal proportions of men and women enrolled (or in some instances a larger proportion of women), disparities appear through more covert avenues. University and Gender Mainstreaming (UNIGEM) — a five-year project involving 19 universities to promote gender mainstreaming and funded by the UK government — has recognised GBV at universities, however EDI representatives from universities highlight that, "most cases are verbal such as inappropriate jokes" (Danielle). Despite this, there are still reported instances of sextortion (where sexual favours are granted for higher grades). Indeed, research conducted by the TPO Foundation from Sarajevo found that 80% of students and staff at universities are aware of occurrences of sexual misconduct within their institutions.[57] Furthermore, technology paired with heightened GBV has changed how sexual violence occurs within higher education institutions. "Technology has made issues more visible and more violent," with a larger number of cyberbullying cases reported (Eleanor). With the rise of social media and 'alpha male' narratives promoted in certain social circles, female partners are at increased risk of domestic violence compared to when steadfast traditional gender roles are not perpetuated.[58]

In the post-communism period in Albania, there has been increased awareness of domestic violence and the negative impact of imposing stereotypical gender roles on women. Previously,

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[56] Denisa Kostovicova, Vesna Bojicic-Dzelilovic, and Marsha Henry, "Drawing on the Continuum: A War and Post-War Political Economy of Gender-Based Violence in Bosnia and Herzegovina," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 22 no. 2 (2020): 255, doi:10.1080/14616742.2019.1692686.
[57] "Gender- based Violence at Universities: Experienced by Many, Reported by Few," The University Gender Resource Centre (UNIGeRC), accessed July 17, 2024, https://unigerc.unsa.ba/en/gender-based-violence-at-universities-experienced-by-many-reported-by-few/.
[58] Dennis E. Reidy et al, "Man enough? Masculine discrepancy stress and intimate partner violence," *Personality and individual differences* 68 (2014): 160-164, doi:10.1016/j.paid.2014.04.021.

domestic violence was kept secret and, "perceived as an internal family issue" (Harvey). This narrative is now changing with greater social activism on gender issues and positive developments in national policy.[59] However, the term 'feminism' is still not widely used — both in and out of universities — with it being perceived as too radical and potentially "militant" (Harvey). Moreover, the term feminism was rarely mentioned by interviewees with it being brought up only once across all ten interviews. Although there has been significant progress in Albania with regards to female representation in universities and leadership positions — as is the case in Croatia and BiH — there is still headway to be made with regards to subliminal gender dynamics between men and women within the education system.[60]

Institutional Governance and Leadership

The post-crisis environment across the Western Balkans underscores the complex relationship between the former states of Yugoslavia and the current European Union (EU). Simultaneously, EU accession has rendered gender inclusion a bureaucratic process. In Yugoslavia, there were attempts to achieve the emancipation of women because it was a key feature of a socialist society.[61] Despite the progressive attitudes, aspects of Yugoslavia's agenda have been tainted by the "red mark" (Bobby) of socialism. Hence, the gender equality aspect of EU accession

[59] "16 Days of Activism Unites Communities Against Gender-Based Violence in Albania," UNDP Albania, accessed July 17, 2024, https://www.undp.org/albania/news/16-days-activism-unites-communities-against-gender-based-violence-albania; "Proud to have Rights: Promoting equality, social inclusion, and non-discrimination in Albania," Delegation of the European Union to Albania, accessed July 17, 2024, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/albania/proud-have-rights-promoting-equality-social-inclusion-and-non-discrimination-albania_en?s=214.

[60] "UN in Albania advocates for review of the Gender Equality Law," UN Women, accessed July 17, 2024, https://albania.unwomen.org/en/stories/interview/2023/03/un-in-albania-advocates-for-review-of-the-gender-equality-law.

[61] Zsófia Lóránd, 'Socialist-Era New Yugoslav Feminism between "Mainstreaming" and "Disengagement": The Possibilities for Resistance, Critical Opposition and Dissent', *The Hungarian Historical Review* 5, no. 4 (2016): 861.

conditionality is reminiscent of former Yugoslavia. The same values that existed under Socialist Yugoslavia are dressed in a different costume under the EU and gender inclusion policies from the past are experiencing a cyclical reintroduction. Danielle claimed that the progressive attitudes from Yugoslavia have "lost momentum". However, these similar attitudes were incorporated into key pillars of EU conditionality and have gained momentum within the EU.

Furthermore, EU models of gender equality have influenced policy within higher education across existing member states, like Croatia, and potential candidate states, such as BiH and Albania. The experience of Croatia serves as a practical example of the process and implications of EU accession. Bobby recalled that EU membership meant that "[Croatian] society opened." EU membership conditions are set out in the Copenhagen criteria, which includes stable institutions that promote democracy, the rule of law and human rights [62]. The conditionality within the EU's pre-accession process was orchestrated so that member states shared a unanimous set of values and ensure that accession would not destabilase the EU [63]. This means gender inclusion has been implemented through a one-size-fits-all approach, to join the EU, rather than promote gender equality suitable and applicable to each specific country and their local needs.

The case of Albania shows the influence of EU accession on domestic policy. Albania is currently an EU candidate country, and hence is trying to make their gender policy compliant with EU policy. For example, Gender Equality Plans (GEPs) form a part of the EU conditionality policy, which means that sufficient implementation of GEPs becomes a requirement for Albania

[62] 'EU Enlargement - European Union', accessed 16 July 2024, https://european-union.europa.eu/principles-countries-history/eu-enlargement_en.
[63] Patrycja Szarek-Mason, ed., *The European Union's Fight Against Corruption: The Evolving Policy towards Member States and Candidate Countries*, Cambridge Studies in European Law and Policy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 135.

to join the EU. Jasmine identifies that comparatively to the Balkans, "Albania and Kosovo have the highest percentages of support for the EU, which are around 80%". Harvey asserted that the general practice within universities across Albania involves adopting policy templates from other institutions that have demonstrated greater success, particularly those from neighbouring countries or the EU. These templates are then integrated into their own practices. This means that the European model has been used as an example, which has aided the progression of gender inclusive policy within higher education. These strategies aim to mitigate perceptions that countries across the Balkans are "backwards" (Ioanna). Overall, gender inclusion policies are undermined by bureaucratic top-down implementation and political opportunism. Therefore, refining bottom-up implementation counteracts limited institutional gender equality policies.

Bottom-Up Interventions

We were able to draw out three key interventions from the interviews that can be instigated via a bottom-up approach, using higher educational institutions as a medium for this implementation.[64] These interventions are: institutional change across higher education, using student voice and action as a catalyst for increasing open dialogue, and improving gender experiences through the teaching syllabus.

Institutional change refers to the introduction and implementation of Gender Equality Plans (GEPs) within universities (which all interviewees from higher education institutions referenced). GEPs are strategic frameworks implemented by organisations to ensure equal opportunities and treatment for all genders, fostering an inclusive environment that enhances

[64] Palmén and Wroblewski, *Overcoming the Challenge of Structural Change in Research Organisations – A Reflexive Approach to Gender Equality*.

diversity, equity, and overall societal progress.[65] Programmes such as UNIGEM have been linked to an increase in the number of GEPs being proposed within universities. Multiple interviewees praised the importance of UNIGEM and many expressed dissatisfactions with the approaching end of the project. It was asserted that after the completion of UNIGEM, they would continue with their GEP as an internal plan (Fionnula). However, as mentioned in the previous section, modelling the GEPs directly from EU policies does not consider the post-crisis environments of Croatia, BiH and Albania. Rather, there is a 'one-size-fits-all' approach where templates from the EU and UNIGEM are generalised to various institutions and countries, as told by Jasmine. Challenging the unconscious bias which is present within institutional actors is pivotal (Gary). Hence, an approach focused on bottom-up interventions – which fosters empowerment within education – has more potential for meaningful change.

Our second proposed intervention, which builds on a key proposal many of our interviewees brought up, focuses on the increased promotion of open dialogue as it is critical to, "create an environment where [open dialogue] is accepted and encouraged" (Alex). Furthermore, an outcome of enhancing open dialogue is raising awareness, which was cited by Bobby as being the most important aspect of their job. Outside of educational institutions, this has been exemplified by Ioanna, when they discussed the prominent Serbian actress, Milena Radulović. who had testified against cases of sexual harassment. Ioanna further exemplified how this inspired a huge movement within BiH where many other prominent actresses within theatre spoke out.[66]

[65] "Gender Equality Plan," accessed July 28, 2024, https://euricse.eu/en/gender-equality-plan/.
[66] Milica Stojanovic, "Serbian Actress Testifies Against Drama Teacher in Sexual Assault Trial," *Balkan Insight,* September 19, 2023, https://balkaninsight.com/2023/09/19/serbian-actress-testifies-against-drama-teacher-in-sexual-assault-trial/.

However, even the greater open dialogue within wider society does not seem to be enough to bring about meaningful change, with Ioanna commenting that "issues and perspectives haven't changed," from the past to the present day. Eleanor mentioned how technology has been a "key driver" behind pursuing open dialogue while also noting that dangers regarding cyberbullying must be carefully monitored indicating that there are platforms which are misused (Danielle). Hence, within higher education, there is more scope for promoting active and equitable discussions. Alex stated that "students [are] now more vocal," and "[they] respond to issues," such as the lack of free provision of menstrual products. However, from our other interviews, there was no further references to student activism demonstrating that there is still progress to be made to empower students to voice their ideas and concerns.[67]

Our third proposed intervention draws on the shared opinion of many of our interviewees and looks at the role of the education system to improve gender experiences. There were multiple references to using education as a tool to challenge unconscious biases which children hold from a young age. Bobby claimed that women believe the narrative that they are less analytical. A solution is the integration of a civic education programme – which can be extended to primary school –and was cited as a key aspect of the education syllabus to counteract unconscious bias.

Looking at BiH, introducing peace pedagogies (educational activities that aim to reduce inter-personal conflict based on prejudices) were cited by Danielle as an area that requires focus within the post-conflict environment. This comes with the challenge of the "three different truths," (Danielle) which was mentioned in the Narratives, Perceptions and Memory section of the paper. Clare stated that promoting open dialogue is also achieved through university

[67] James Garry Stewart, "A Study of Modern College Student Activism: The Relationship to the School and How Groups Form," (PhD diss., College of Education Theses and Dissertations, 2021), https://via.library.depaul.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1215&context=soe_etd.

workshops which tackle issues such as sexual harassment. These workshops are typically directed towards members of the faculty in response to cases of sextortion, such as in the University of Tuzla concerning two law professors.[68]

Within education institutions, these interventions aim to change the culture both within universities and wider society. The evolving atmosphere of higher education institutions allows for the proposed interventions to thrive and develop into the wider society. Specifically for Croatian, as it is a gender sensitive language, Eleanor mentioned that a certain type of language can "perpetuate inequalities," and that it is important to teach university staff these nuances. This can be applied to the Bosnian language due to the strong similarities between the two.[69] These interventions aim to adapt the culture which, "can only change through education" (Clare). This change is likely to occur over several years and to trickle through the populace, as gender norms and behaviours are deeply rooted in society (Bobby). Our proposed interventions use the rapidly changing setting of higher education as an incubator to further develop these ideas into wider society.[70]

[68] Eldin Hadzovic, "Two Bosnia Sex Abuse Professors Banned till 70," *Balkan Insight,* June 30, 2011, https://balkaninsight.com/2011/06/30/sarajevo-sex-abuse-professors-banned-until-the-age-of-70/.
[69] Ranko Bugarski, "'The Declaration on the Common Language': A View from the Inside," *Aegean Working Papers in Ethnographic Linguistics* 2, 2 (2020): 23-29 https://doi.org/10.12681/awpel.22595.
[70] Petronella Olsson, "Changing the Gendered Mindset – A Qualitative Study on Engaging Young Men in Mumbai to Achieve Gender Equality," (Bachelor's diss., Malmö University, 2019), https://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:mau:diva-24835.

Conclusion

Analysing the post-crises environment in the Balkans has shed light on its sustained impact on gender experiences within higher education institutions. We have emphasised key focus areas which link past hostilities with gender issues today. Our paper has covered how narratives, perceptions and memory influence how people see and experience gender roles and equality in the present-day. When exploring institutional governance and leadership as a possible intervention, we have found that it needs to be supplemented with bottom-up approaches and a more contextualised approach.

Drawing from our analysis, higher education institutions act as the ideal incubators for gender-related interventions. The concentrated and dynamic environment, as well as the collaborative governance structure, allows for ideas and projects to be tested, refined, and developed efficiently. We argue that their development within higher education institutions offers a blueprint pioneering wider societal application.

However, within the Balkans, the dialogue surrounding gender is still nascent. This is evident through a reluctance to use the term ‘feminism’ and in some cases a strict denial of the existence of gender inequalities. Within the literature, the progressive gender measures being taken in Balkan higher education were emphasised, such as UNIGEM. Consequently, certain responses were unexpected, and the existing literature does not fully capture the reality of their varied lived experiences. This reinforces the importance of exploring our research question within the context of the Balkans.

Further research is needed on student perspectives within the three countries that have been studied. Conducting additional interviews with students will allow for a richer narrative and for

faculty and students' perspectives to be reconciled when understanding gender experiences more broadly in higher education. Furthermore, to assess the applicability of our interventions on a wider scale, additional research can be completed in other former socialist republics of Yugoslavia, for example, Serbia and North Macedonia. This will build on our findings and provide additional alternative perspectives with regards to how the 1990s Yugoslav Wars are perceived within various nations.

One of the rationales for using higher education as a medium for interventions is due to the parallels between the accountability-oriented structure of higher education institutions and broader, national governance structures. We therefore invite further research on how to precisely map this blueprint from universities to government.

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