

# ACADEMIA IN THE MIRROR: METHODS AND TOOLS FOR PROMOTING ACADEMIC REFLEXIVITY IN THE UNIVERSITY POLICIES FOR GENDER EQUALITY. THE CASE OF THE EUROPEAN ERASMUS+ PROJECT SMILE (SOCIAL MEANING IMPACT THROUGH LLL UNIVERSITIES IN EUROPE).

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**Keywords:** *Inclusive policies, reflexivity, equity and diversity, gender equality, academia*

## ABSTRACT

The objective of aligning their policies for the promotion of gender equality and diversity with the European guidelines, starting with the adoption of a gender equality plan, is engaging higher education institutions (HEIs) in a self-reflective effort to identify their current critical issues and key areas to improve through positive actions. The availability of scientifically valid tools for self-assessment, training and the definition of a sustainable strategic action plan constitutes valuable support in this process. This paper aims to highlight the positive impact linked, in general, and in the specific case of the University of Cagliari (Italy), to the European Erasmus+ project SMILE (*Social Meaning Impact through LLL Universities in Europe*), by developing, testing and implementing a set of innovative tools that improve the way HEIs deal with diversity in the field of inclusive learning.

## THE TRIGGER POINT: AN “INDUCED” DIVERSITY AND GENDER EQUALITY PROMOTION

Within the general framework of adapting to the European Commission’s directives with an operational architecture and policies against all forms of discrimination and (horizontal and vertical) gender-based segregation, HEIs have been called to urgently rethink their strategic plans. This urgency began with the recommendation to adopt a Gender Equality Plan by 2022. This recommendation was codified in the General Annexes to Horizon Europe 2021-2022 work programme<sup>1</sup> as an essential requirement for all public bodies, universities and research organisations from Member States and Associated Countries wishing to submit applications for funding calls with deadlines in that year and onwards (European Commission, 2021a).

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<sup>1</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/docs/2021-2027/horizon/wp-call/2021-2022/wp-13-general-annexes\\_horizon-2021-2022\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/docs/2021-2027/horizon/wp-call/2021-2022/wp-13-general-annexes_horizon-2021-2022_en.pdf)

Although this shift in orientation is broadly welcomed, the process of "induced" and accelerated adaptation has often not allowed adequate time for shared reflection by both top governing bodies and the populations that make up the university community (Cellini et al., 2022). In other words, teaching and research staff, technical administrative staff, students and others associated with universities have often lagged behind in generating sufficient awareness of the relevance of the issues of promoting diversity and social inclusion. This hinders the ability to initiate a cultural and organisational change at a structural level that could be sustainable and continuous, and not just superficial. Although progress has been made in widening diversity in many European universities, substantial inequalities persist in terms of measurable outcomes from higher education, where a student's race and ethnicity, in particular, has been found to negatively affect their degree outcomes (Universities UK & National Union of Students, 2019). Moreover, the impact of gender on female students is still evident. This can be seen not so much from a performance perspective in terms of success and speed in obtaining a degree, but rather in available opportunities to use these qualifications to access and achieve stable positions as researchers in an academic career, especially in leadership roles on equal terms with their male colleagues (Cois et al., 2023; Naldini and Poggio, 2023).

This scenario is demonstrated very effectively in Italy, where 6 out of 10 graduates are women. On average, girls have better academic performance: they graduate with a higher grade (103.9 vs 102.1 out of 110), a higher percentage finish their studies on time (60.2% vs 55.7%), and they participate more frequently in educational experiences, whether curricular internships (61.4% vs 52.1%), study periods abroad (11.6% vs 10.9%) or work experiences before graduating (66.0% vs 64.0%) (AlmaLaurea, 2022). When they decide to undertake an academic path, however, their proportion decreases drastically as they move from the almost equal first phase of recruitment as precarious researchers (50.13%), to that of tenure-track assistant professors (46.77%) and associate professors (38.41%) up to the top position of full professors, where they represent just 23.74% of staff, even less than the European average of 26.18% (European Commission, 2021b).

This stubborn persistence of the so-called "glass ceiling" in the Italian academic sector requires an equally strong commitment to the implementation of inclusive policies in HEIs. Furthermore, gender biases continue to significantly mark even the entry phases in this career, so much so as to make it necessary to resort to the metaphor of the "glass door" (Picardi, 2019). In their fight against gender asymmetries, HEIs cannot ignore an intersectional approach (Showunmi, 2020), which considers the cumulative effect of different factors of potential inequality on individual biographies, both in the practice of the right to education and in career prospects in the academic field. In this perspective, the possibility of counting on scientifically valid tools – devised through documented expertise in the field of education and scientific research at an academic level – constitutes valuable support for self-reflection on ways of addressing and enabling diversity in terms of organisational wellbeing. Accessing this kind of expert knowledge also gives a comparative advantage over the competition in the HEIs market in terms of accountability, ranking, and attractiveness for researchers and students.

This paper aims to highlight the support provided by such an opportunity in the specific case of the University of Cagliari-UniCa (Italy) in the 'anything-but-linear' translation of the general strategic objective of promoting diversity (addressed in its Gender Equality Plan since June 2020) into concrete practices for structural and sustainable institutional change. This opportunity has been represented, from the end of 2020 to 2023, by the participation of UniCa in the European Erasmus+ project SMILE (*Social Meaning Impact through LLL Universities in Europe*), within the KA3 "Social Inclusion and Common Values Program" (621433-EPP-1-2020-1-BE-EPPKA3-IPI-SOC-IN)<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://smile.eucen.eu/>

## AN EFFECTIVE TOOLBOX FOR CULTURAL AND ORGANISATIONAL GENDER-SENSITIVE CHANGE

The SMILE project was coordinated by EUCEN (a multidisciplinary association for university lifelong learning in Europe), and developed by a large network of partners from all over Europe<sup>3</sup>. Throughout its almost three years of life, SMILE's objective has been to respond to HEIs' growing need for reflexivity and know-how in the field of inclusive learning, by developing, testing and implementing innovative tools that improve the way they deal with diversity and social inclusion.

The project focused, in particular, on three main areas of potential disadvantage in higher education, as the "pillar" of gender equality (with a specific emphasis on the dimension of women and leadership within HEIs) works closely with two other factors that uphold intersectional inequality: migrant background and low socioeconomic status. In this sense, the objective of refining methods and techniques for diversity management in order to address the need for equal access to leadership positions works in close connection with the search for practicable solutions to another double issue: reduced HE access, participation and attainment in 1st or 2nd generation immigrants and in learners of lower socioeconomic status. The strategy developed by this project aimed to adequately train the university staff (both academic and non-academic) in relation to these three dimensions, involving both students and alumni concurrently.

To make this strategy applicable in any HEI, the SMILE project has produced and made freely available three main tools, which have been tested throughout its life cycle, first and foremost by the partner universities. They gradually refined their structure and contents up to the final version, now translated into all the main European languages. In this process, the feedback collected thanks to the involvement of numerous academic and non-academic stakeholders was crucial, with the aim of harvesting the expertise of civil society organisations and individuals and including their experiences in the SMILE tools.

The first tool is a Diversity Audit Model, which appears useful in supporting universities in self-reflecting and assessing how they are addressing and enabling diversity and social inclusion, identifying the obstacles, existing models, strategies for implementation, etc. This tool (and the related user guide) has been tested and continuously improved through a peer audit process that involved a total of 20 universities, both in the consortium and external institutions (Hörr et al., 2023).

The second tool is composed of a set of three continuous professional development (CDP) courses, one for each SMILE pillar, that is targeted at university staff, both academic and non-academic. This set has been developed and tested through a bottom-up approach (involving role models, representatives of indirect beneficiaries, NGOs and community groups), with the aim of giving voice to the extensive experience of professionals, volunteers, and parents, as well as to current and potential learners (Borg et al., 2023; Barbieri et al., 2023; Lappalainen et al., 2023).

The third tool is a set of policy recommendations based on the perspectives and experiences collected during the project to serve as a guide to support universities in fulfilling their commitment to diversity and social inclusion. It specifically provides an action plan targeted

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<sup>3</sup> The SMILE Consortium, coordinated by [eucen](#) (BE), includes the Johannes Gutenberg Universität in Mainz (DE), the Maynooth University (IE), the University of Turku (FI), the University of Malta (MT), the University of Cagliari (IT), the Gheorghe Asachi Technical University of Iași (RO), the Fundació Solidaritat at Universitat de Barcelona (ES), Notus (ES), the European Students' Union (BE) and the Solidar Foundation (BE).

to three different and complementary categories of stakeholders: HEI top management, national and local policymakers, and civil society organisations (Royo et al., 2022).

One of the most distinctive strengths of these tools is the fact that they are standardised on a European scale and, therefore, methodologically reliable for comparative purposes from a lifelong learning perspective. At the same time, they are also flexible enough to adapt to the peculiarities of national and local contexts against which the transformative impact of the HEIs' performances can be measured, in terms of social justice and inclusiveness.

As a partner of the SMILE project, UniCa has been able to benefit from both elements. On the one hand, it took advantage of constant comparison with other European universities for the purposes of researching good practices but also of sharing the resistance and critical issues encountered in testing the tools with each other's staff. On the other hand, it could extend its strategic purposes beyond the strictly academic perimeter, interacting with other relevant stakeholders and institutions at local, regional, and national levels within the scope of its public engagement function.

## **A CASE-GROUNDED ANALYSIS: THE IMPACT OF THE SMILE TOOLS ON SELF-REFLEXIVITY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CAGLIARI**

The contribution of UniCa in the development of the SMILE tools and their subsequent adoption generated an impact in encouraging self-reflection regarding the effectiveness of its policies for gender equality and, more generally, for the promotion of diversity. First of all, the need for constant self-observation throughout the three-year duration of the project improved the knowledge of the current situation and helped finally shed light on its features and grey areas. At the same time, it also contributed to noticing the signs of change, the barely perceptible yet promising progress, and perhaps even another image that is still being defined: that of an achievable improvement from the point of view of a more equal, diverse, and balanced educational and research environment.

Specifically, UniCa tested one of the first versions of the SMILE Diversity Audit Model in June 2022 using focus groups involving both top governance and representatives of teaching and research staff, technical-administrative staff and students. The tool was then subsequently tested in a more advanced version, in March 2023, in two other Italian universities, the University of Sassari and the University of Trento, following the same participatory technique of peer consultation. On all three occasions, UniCa collected valuable feedback both for the improvement of the tool itself, in its formal articulation and its substantial contents, and with respect to the effectiveness of its impact on the implementation of better policies for inclusion and promotion of equity and diversity. The self-reflective aspect of the SMILE Diversity Audit Model has been *informative* and allowed a diagnosis of both the critical issues to be solved and the promising strengths to focus on within its organisational architecture. At the same time, it proved to be a relevant opportunity to raise widespread awareness about persistent biases and inequalities from an intersectional perspective among all the populations who work and study at the university. It also solicited a collective and bottom-up reflection about the paths to be taken in the immediate and medium term. In a nutshell, the experimental application of the Diversity Audit Model has made it possible to refine three main policy directions already included by UniCa among the actions of its Gender Equality Plan and Plan for Positive Actions. The first has been the updating of the regulation for activation and management of "Alias Careers" for people in gender transition, which was approved by the Academic Senate in September 2023 and became fully operational in January 2024. The new regulation has been extended not only to students but also to teaching and technical-administrative staff, with a view to a more complete investment in organisational well-being. The regulation will also apply to non-binary people, without the preliminary obligation to

obtain a medical certification of their condition, according to principles of self-determination and balance between equal treatment and promotion of diversity. The second impact has been a more intersectional definition of the statute of the first Interdisciplinary Center for Studies and Research on Gender Issues at UniCa, called CEING. This new equality body was formally established in June 2023 and will operate fully in 2024, in order to correspond to the European recommendation for the integration of the gender dimension in all research and teaching activities, in any disciplinary field, on the basis of the cumulative and combined nature of this factor with other potential parameters of even epistemic inequality, like socio-economic status and migratory background. The third action facilitated by the Diversity Audit Model tool concerns the upcoming introduction of a “trusted advisor,” a confidential expert figure that will guarantee all those who study and work at the university the right to be protected from any act or form of discriminatory behaviour, especially of a sexual or morally harassing nature.

As regards the second innovative tool developed by the SMILE project, i.e., the set of continuous professional development courses mentioned above, UniCa first contributed to defining and then, between September and October 2022, specifically testing the course dedicated to the pillar “Women in leadership in HEIs,” entitled “*The Glass Ceiling ain't broken.*” The self-reflective opportunity, in this case, was expressed through its *training effect*. In fact, the combination of the foundational theoretical contents on the relationship between gender and power, on the one hand, and the concrete experiences of the participants in the CPD course, on the other, made it possible to provide effective interpretative keys to recognise the deep roots of inequality also at play within academic organisational culture. Regardless of the focus – be it the horizontal and vertical segregation between men and women, or the implicit and explicit sexism experienced on a daily basis in educational and professional careers, or the intersectionality crossing the whole range of gender identities – in all cases, the recurrence of practices, constraints and obstacles revealed by the participants demonstrated that they should no longer be confined to just personal and individual occurrences. Instead, the well-established structural mechanisms in which they operate need to be questioned. Many suggestive metaphors describe this scenario of institutionalised gender-based inequalities, ranging from the ceiling to the door to an entire glass labyrinth, not to mention the so-called “sticky floor” (Shambaugh, 2007), which tends to slow down female career progression, and the “leaky pipeline,” which reveals the significant exit of women from the academic market under conditions of persistent precariousness or impossible work-family balance (Gaiaschi, 2022). In terms of concrete practices, the impact of this tool has so far led to three main results at UniCa. The first has been the inclusion, since April 2023, in the syllabus of a specific inter-doctoral course for all PhD students of every disciplinary field, entitled “Gender equality in the academic context and research: Policy tools and strategies,” specifically to train younger researchers from the beginning in these academic policy issues. The second impact concerned its use as a leverage for the proposal of a mentoring program for newly hired researchers and those in the early stages of their career. The last effect has been a proposal for its inclusion, from January 2024, as part of the training and capacity-building activities envisaged by the European Universities' alliance EDUC-European Digital UniverCity, which includes UniCa as a partner.

The third and final tool provided by the SMILE Project, i.e., a template for a policy action plan, accompanied by a set of strategic recommendations, was presented and discussed at UniCa in May 2023, within the Guarantee Committee for equal opportunity, employee wellbeing, and non-discrimination in the workplace (CUG). In this case, the self-reflective framework took on an *operational and projective* meaning. In fact, it aimed to configure the image that UniCa would like to embody in the near future as an outcome of its commitment to dealing with all forms of discrimination and promoting a broadly inclusive approach. Its relevance will include not only an improvement of UniCa's reputational capital and accountability, but above all, will work as a source of best practices that can serve as a

benchmark on a regional, national, and international scale. From this perspective, the effectiveness of the tool was tested on at least two occasions: a) as inspirational guidelines for the drafting of UniCa's successful application for the European Commission *Human Resources Strategy for Researchers* (HRS4R) Award, which is addressed to the institutions which make progress in aligning their human resources policies to the 40 principles of the EU Charter & Code, based on a customised action plan/HR strategy; b) as food for thought in a series of workshop activities provided from November 2023 onwards in favour of the Third Sector Forum of Sardinia Region, which includes the main civil society associations that operate in the field of promoting diversity and combating all sorts of inequalities affecting substantive citizenship.

## CONCLUSIONS: FIVE ACADEMIC MYTHS AND SYNDROMES THAT NEED TO BE DEBUNKED

Closely connected to its current placement in the strategic path for improving equity and diversity policies, the potential scope of the tools developed during the SMILE project extend beyond the specific experience of UniCa. This scope also intercepts a more theoretical and general self-reflective process that is taking place in contemporary HEIs (O'Connor and White, 2021).

The participatory nature and the transformative rationale underlying the three tools, in fact, question five "myths" and "syndromes" that need to be debunked once and for all in the way academia, as a social world (Strauss, 1982) and a hierarchical institution, tends to think of and reproduce itself.

As regards the persistent under-representation of women in top positions, the first enduring myth is that of the eternal "*first woman ever*" (to reach a prestigious role, to gain a leadership assignment, to be awarded an eminent prize). Not infrequently, this lonely woman in power remains a unique case that becomes even more isolated as she advances, rather than the pioneer of a process of rebalancing the gender gap (Anzivino et al., 2023). In Italy, the first woman president of the National Research Council and the first Prime Minister have recently been appointed; in the whole country, there are only 13 female rectors out of 85 universities and, in general, we still talk about the first women who became Nobel Prize winners in STEM fields and so on. In 2024, it should be time to move from the asymptotic unreachability of a heroic female "role model" to the operational practice of gender mainstreaming, also and especially in HEIs. The synergistic chain defined by the three SMILE tools constitutes valid support for moving from the usual "celebration of the exception" to the "normality of the rule" of gender symmetry in the academic field. In fact, the diagnosis of internal critical issues provided by the audit diversity tool finds an effective gender-balancing strategy thanks to the awareness-raising and capacity-building mechanisms activated by the CPD courses, and to the adoption of a corresponding operational set of policies. In particular, a meaningful impact could be derived from the comparison of the personal and professional biographies of female PhD students and early-stage researchers and those of full professors. This is the focus of the CPD course on the promotion of gender equity, which introduces a *mentoring* mechanism fully aligned with the principle of "*learning through experience*" underlying the university lifelong learning approach.

The second myth that the application of SMILE tools can challenge is *the trade-off between merit and positive actions*, especially in relation to the fight against gender inequalities in academic career progression and retention. As argued well by Addis (2008, p. 201), "Excellence is not a variable given in nature, which only needs to be measured, and who the excellent men and women are depends on the relationships between the sexes in the scientific community and in society. It is possible to work to change the judges, and above all to adopt different selection criteria and different parameters." Being able to count on valid

tools, like those offered by SMILE, can help fight effectively the reproduction of inequalities in an environment strongly marked by a different speed and percentage of success in achieving top positions, (also) due to the social expectations on which moral gender careers are nourished. These practices, in turn, can undermine the belief in a dichotomy between achieving equity and excellence. Consider, for instance, the ambiguous use of bibliometrics in evaluations (Bhalla, 2019). As stated by the National Conference of the Italian Universities Equal Opportunities Bodies during the annual meeting at the Polytechnic University of Milan in December 2020, “while on the one hand bibliometrics seem to reduce the discretion of the evaluators and therefore also the distortions due to gender stereotypes or discrimination, on the other hand, the choice of indicators to use is never neutral, and can lead to direct or indirect discrimination: for example, there are obvious differences in age (think of the h-index), number of authors, topic (think of mainstream versus frontier and interdisciplinary research), but also less obvious *a priori* differences based on gender, in particular on the number of publications and the consequent number of citations” (Counipar, 2021, p. 112). In Italy, these differences are reflected, for example, in the indicators of the National Scientific Habilitation (ASN) and the Research Quality Assessment (VQR), showing how the repeated application of criteria that favour even small gender differences can lead over time to strong distortions (Montorsi, 2021). A valid strategy for deconstructing this myth can derive from the introduction of tools for recognising and combatting unconscious gender-based biases in evaluation mechanisms in the academic field. In this sense, the SMILE CPD courses offer training tools to bring out deep-seated gender stereotypes and prejudices. In addition, the SMILE action plan proposes specific measures for the production of gender-sensitive guidelines for selective commissions in all recruitment and career promotion phases. The impact of more balanced evaluation mechanisms acts in the long term, from a lifelong learning perspective, because it implements *renewed self-motivation*, especially in early and middle-stage female researchers, preventing them from losing interest in their careers over time, and protecting their confidence in the connection between work commitment and the achievement of corresponding improved results, on a personal and professional level. Renewing evaluation mechanisms in a gender-sensitive way also means preventing women’s academic work from losing its spark of creativity and critical thinking, which motivated its choice in the first place, and becoming routine, mindlessly tied to the same boring tasks day after day.

The third myth that is weakened by the intersectional philosophy underlying the SMILE tools is the axiomatic socio-biological foundation of gender inequalities. According to this approach, the rigid distinction between gender roles would not be the result of a consolidated social construction, made of persistent stereotypes and prejudices, but would correspond to a “natural” complementarity of the duties attributed to males and females. This was demonstrated by the recent Covid-19 pandemic emergency, when the lockdown at home would have represented a sort of inevitable “*return to nature*” in the asymmetric distribution of family care tasks and work obligations between women and men, even within the academic sector (Filandri and Pasqua, 2021). Especially in the presence of dependent children, this sort of binary “re-essentialisation” between the functions required of mothers and fathers, although labelled in public discourse as a temporary emergency management strategy, has translated into a medium-term widening of the gender gap in academic careers. In fact, there is a disproportionate rise for women compared to men in the dilemma of choosing between investing time in scientific production or in social reproduction tasks, even more so when work and private spaces and times have ended up colliding and overlapping (Abdellatif and Gatto, 2020). What in Italy has been defined as “smart-working” – meaning “remote” work – has not proven to be so smart for women and has often been a Trojan horse for reproducing traditional gendered functions. Among the now widely documented consequences, women recorded a smaller proportion of research projects and scientific publications in the pandemic period than before (Vincent-Lamarre et al., 2020), with a relevant impact in terms of their performance evaluation. Understanding the conventional nature of this unequal distribution of tasks between men and women, which the application of

SMILE tools aims to provide, constitutes a safeguard to counter the risk of slipping into yet another gender-based automatism in the next possible crisis. In particular, the recommendations that accompany the SMILE action plan appear very useful. They aim to improve university policies for work-life balance and for the continuous updating of the professional skills of all teaching and technical-administrative staff, on the basis of a repository of well-documented good practices. Furthermore, having a solid organisational structure in terms of gender equity in all career positions not only generates institutional resilience with respect to the uncertainties of the academic labour market, but also tends to produce, particularly for women, a perception of greater job security on a personal level. This counteracts the pressure to stay ahead throughout their careers. An example might be the guarantee of training and research experiences abroad, which a female researcher does not have to give up due to the absence of institutional support, in case she has family responsibility. After all, the HE lifelong learning approach is based exactly on the *permanent development of professional skills*, precisely to keep up with the changing times and leave no one behind, as often otherwise happens due to the so-called "sticky floor" (Shambaugh, 2007), which slows down or blocks women's careers in academia.

The collaboration between many HEIs that led to the development of the SMILE tools, in view of their adaptability to different national academic contexts, contrasts with a fourth not infrequent attitude: the so-called "*ivory tower syndrome*." It is a false belief that each university constitutes a world apart (Fisher and Kinsey, 2014), a sort of citadel impenetrable by the local network of public and private actors, governed from the top down according to abstract logics that are detached from the ordinary socioeconomic and cultural context (Lipinsky and Wroblewski, 2021). The involvement of other stakeholders, in addition to HEI top management (and in particular national and local policymakers and civil society organisations), recommended by the SMILE project for the definition of an action plan, aims to free academic institutions from the risk of isolation, offering the chance to relate to the surroundings while maintaining a national and international scope. In this sense, SMILE tools constitute, for any university, an opportunity to access coherent guidelines and collect "best practices" on a European scale. This assists in defining valuable benchmarks and adopting effective indicators to measure their progress in promoting gender equity, with a *comparative and networking – rather than just competitive – aptitude*, as recommended by a lifelong learning approach. At the same time, these tools are meant to promote a participatory approach in the definition, implementation, and evaluation of inclusive policies, engaging all the populations that make up the university social body: teaching and research staff, technical-administrative staff, and students.

Finally, the self-reflection process stimulated by the SMILE project counteracts a fifth rather widespread trend: the so-called "*box ticking syndrome*", i.e., the risk of limiting one's apparent institutional commitment to a formal fulfilment of mandatory obligations (Lombardo et al., 2012). In fact, the availability of concrete tools could be of great support to overcome bureaucratic ritualism and *start a sustainable political strategy* for gender equity and diversity. First, this can allow any university to evaluate and measure *ex-ante* its fallacies in a self-critical and transparent way, for example, through the SMILE diversity audit tool, and invest on this basis dedicated financial, human, and infrastructural resources to implement truly inclusive policies. Secondly, it also means enabling HEIs to evaluate *ex-post* the actual impact of their strategic plans, embracing a long-term perspective due to a structurally innovative change. In this sense, the lifelong learning approach fully affects not only the individual professional biographies involved in the academic field, but the entire institutional mission of universities and constitutes an explicit political choice. After all, what good is knowledge if not to take a position?



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