

Gender equality through assimilation or recognition of plurality?

Reflections on gender equality, equal opportunity and diversity policies at Swiss universities¹

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¹ I would like to thank Liisa Husu for her valuable and extensive work in this area, many inspiring discussions and her helpful literature suggestions for the research that this chapter is focusing on. I would also like to thank her very much for her warm welcomes, kindness and extraordinary support during my research visits at the Centre for Feminist Social Studies, Örebro University.

INTRODUCTION: PLEA FOR A PROBLEM-CENTRED APPROACH

In this contribution I would like to offer some reflections and insights that were gained from a small contract research on which I have been working since spring 2018 on the implementation of gender equality, equal opportunity and diversity policies in Swiss universities. The head of the commission for equal opportunity of the philosophical-historical faculty at the University of Basel, Brigitte Röder, asked for this research in order to decide on the newly founded commission's use of terminologies and policies.² My task was first to present the meanings of the terms used and to make a suggestion on which ones to use. Second, I was to investigate how gender equality, equal opportunity and diversity policies had been implemented at Swiss universities so far. Specific questions included: What solutions are presented for which problems? What policies would I recommend? In order to answer these questions, I analysed the action plans the gender equality and equal opportunity offices at the Universities of Basel, Bern, St. Gallen, Geneva, Lausanne, Lucerne, Neuchatel and the Università della Svizzera italiana in Lugano handed in for governmental funding they received in 2013 and 2017 for the project "Equal Opportunity for Women and Men at Universities".

This analysis and according suggestions are specifically situated in my perspective as a gender researcher. This investigation seeks to strengthen knowledge exchange between gender research and gender equality work by shaping the professionalisation of gender equality work with gender theoretical knowledge (as suggested by Riegraf & Vollmer 2014: 45; Hearn & Louvrier 2016). In order to grasp the complexity of diverse forms of discrimination, it would be necessary to also include research on racism, migration, age, capitalism/class and disability. This study hopefully serves as a tool to turn legal promises of gender equality, equal opportunity and diversity into reality in our academic everyday life (Baer 2018: 16).

In the following, I will *first* share some reflections on strategy. After presenting my research in different university commissions, I reconsidered how to best frame goals and how to confront doubts: equality and justice in the eyes of some seem to threaten academic quality, rationality

² Since spring 2018 I have been representing doctoral and postdoctoral researchers in the commission.

and excellence. *Second*, I will present my results concerning the used and proposed terminology. *Third*, I will share some conclusions and resulting policy suggestions.

One of the main insights of this research is that the analysed policies are hardly ever framed in a problem-centred way. But how should we address a problem that we haven't even clearly defined in a sense that goes deeper than 'counting women', that is: checking if there are 50 percent women in every area? It is important to ask and clarify the long-standing feminist questions: "What is the problem of gender in/equality? What could be a solution to the problem? Should the goal be equality? Or difference? Or diversity?" (Verloo & Lombardo 2007: 22).

The question underlying the current attempts and debates on gender equality and diversity is one that has been raised in feminist debates on equality and difference for a long time: Should gender equality be achieved through assimilation to the male norm – e.g. of academic excellence – or by recognising gender difference and the plurality of modes of living? Andrea Maihofer (2013: 31) analyses how reasons for gender inequality are explained in feminist debates and differentiates between approaches focussing either on sameness or on difference. In the sameness position the social inequality of women is the cause of hierarchical gender difference. The solution is thus seen in achieving gender equality by assimilation to the male norm, or in other words, by "achieving equality as sameness" (Verloo & Lombardo 2007: 23)³. In the difference position social inequality and discrimination are seen as the result of the devaluation of women's otherness (Maihofer 2013: 31). Accordingly, this view results in the demand for social recognition of difference. Women and other 'others' will only really be equal if they are recognised in their difference and plurality. For this, it is necessary to overcome the mechanism of self-affirmation as superior and of

³ Translation of these terms from German to English is challenging due to different meanings and connotations. The German word "Gleichstellung", which I translate to gender equality, describes a process of setting something to become equal. "Angleichung an den männlichen Massstab", translated as assimilation to the male standard or norm, refers to the process of aiming for identity with the male norm, which serves as measurement stick. Also, equal and same both translate to "gleich" in German. For helpful discussions, concerning the challenge of translation, I am very grateful to David Allison.

'othering' others as inferior, which is constitutive to bourgeois male subjectivity and its self-stylisation as White, Western, heterosexual, able-bodied, etc. The goal is then to enable non-hierarchical recognition of difference and plurality. This requires both valuation of devalued people and knowledge and a self-critical transformation and a pluralisation of the norm.

Following the difference approach, this paper focusses both on justice and on knowledge practices and argues that in order to guarantee gender equality and freedom from discrimination, as granted in the Swiss and many other constitutions, *and* to secure high academic quality, recognition of the plurality of modes of living (with involved parenthood, political engagement, another employment, taking sufficient care of others and oneself etc.), of intersecting relations of domination (gender, 'race', class, sexuality, disability, age, gender identity, nationality, ethnicity and religion) and of academic practices (for example natural or social sciences) is crucial.

This chapter offers insights into the status quo and some discussions on these issues in the Swiss academic context. Due to internationally widespread developments for gender equality and diversity as well as the neoliberal transformation of academic institutions and specific 'excellence' requirements, these thoughts may be useful for other contexts as well. The focus on Swiss academia may also highlight local specificities.

STRATEGIC CONSIDERATIONS: FOR GENDER EQUALITY, PLURALITY AND HIGH ACADEMIC QUALITY

The plea for gender equality, plurality and diversity is not always shared. Rather, it often triggers a number of doubts and rejections: it would make science less efficient, less excellent, produce less output, lower quality standards and wasn't compatible with the ideal of an academic who will commit 150 percent of his (!) time and energy to academia.

A member of the Swiss National Science Foundation, who was interviewed for the project "Excellence and/or Equal Opportunities for Men and Women" holds this position and states: "I would never say that research can be done in part-time, say 80%" (quoted in Nentwich et al. 2016). In this view it is "simply not realistic" (ibid.), if academics would like to be present parents, take care of others, be politically active, follow

another employment or if they simply wanted to live a healthy and balanced life. The solution was to sacrifice these other aspects of life: “No pain, no gain” (ibid.). Legal obligations such as the constitution or Swiss university law concerning gender equality rights and freedom of discrimination are thereby rejected and the wish that members of academia voice concerning a recognition of the plurality of their modes of living is ignored. Rather, this interview partner further stresses that universities were no “social welfare office” (ibid.). The relevance of non-academic engagement, which is sometimes necessary for research, especially in the social sciences, is ignored.

In this logic, gender equality and diversity policies are seen as threat to excellence (Nentwich et al. 2016). Women and other marginalised groups – including some men, such as involved fathers – can only participate in academia if they are ‘fixed’, which means enabling them a traditionally male mode of living, as far as possible. In contrast, a different understanding of excellence has been developed, based on questioning the ‘male’ norm in order to enable scientific quality in a broader sense. As the European Commission states: “the supposition of attributing ‘excellence’ mainly and mostly to male scientists becomes problematic for all scientists” (European Commission 2004: 12).

Following these insights, I propose a different approach: to insist on the relevance of both rights and social justice *and* on the quality of science. Rather than seeing them as mutually exclusive, I argue that they have to go together. Gender equality and diversity are not negligible wishes, but rights guaranteed by the Swiss Constitution: “The law shall ensure their equality [of men and women], both in law and in practice, most particularly in the family, in education, and in the workplace” as well as protection against discrimination based on origin, ‘race’, gender, age, religion and disability (Federal Constitution of the Swiss Confederation 2020, article 8; adding sexual orientation has so far been refused). It is therefore very questionable if, as in the above quote, SNSF employees simply reject this legal claim and constitutional mandate and disregard the need of university members for the recognition of diversity – despite the fact that universities, as governmental institutions, are particularly obliged to implement the constitutional mandate of gender equality and anti-discrimination. The legal basis is also quite elaborate at the level of Swiss university law and in parts

of the SNSF. Equal opportunity and actual gender equality are defined as requirements for institutional accreditation in the Federal Act on Funding and Coordination of the Swiss Higher Education Sector (2015, article 30) and in the Ordinance of the Higher Education Council on Accreditation within the Higher Education Sector (2015, article 22). Some high-ranking individuals in German and Swiss academia now emphasise the necessity to treat the question of gender equality above all as a question of justice and not, as so often, as an attempt to increase efficiency, performance and prestige. At least not primarily. While the constitution and university law acknowledge this aspect, there is still work to be done for its implementation and the generalisation of the knowledge and insights arising.

I propose to combine this focus on rights with an orientation towards the quality of science, which – as I will argue – includes the promotion of diverse scientific practices. A further mandate in the Swiss constitution (article 20) guarantees academic freedom, which means that science must not be limited by usefulness and political expediency. As the professor of law and judge of the Federal Constitutional Court in Germany Susanne Baer states: It is important to “promote gender equality requirements that do not structurally endanger science”, as is the case with narrow standards of excellence and the neoliberal restructuring of universities, “but to enable the scientific adventure” (Baer 2018: 17; transl. AT). If science is to do justice to the diversity and complexity of its research objects, it needs to promote diverse, creative and innovative approaches. Feminist and postcolonial studies have long shown how the scope of knowledge is narrowed when it is voiced from only one perspective, e.g. the bourgeois-male, White, heterosexual, Eurocentric perspective. Furthering the quality of science therefore also implies the promotion of diverse individuals, biographies and kinds of scientific knowledge.

Some people fear, the pluralisation of accepted academic standards would question rationality and the quality of research. On the one hand, I suggest we insist on the feminist critique of the male gaze in academic practice (cf. Haraway 1988). The bourgeois male concept of ‘rationality’ is a specific one that goes hand in hand with understanding the world by dominating and appropriating it. Questioning it does not imply questioning rational approaches to knowledge production more broadly. On the other hand, this

questioning of academic knowledge practices is an opportunity to debate again and for the current context, what scientific knowledge is – in contrast to opinions, everyday knowledge, fake news, but also concerning the new positivism dispute. Especially against the background of the irrationality of some attempts to quantify the quality of knowledge (such as focusing on the number of articles published, rather than quality), this discussion can help to reformulate and sharpen scientific standards. The frequently expressed concern that the promotion and acceptance of diverse modes of living and scientific practices was necessarily associated with a deterioration in quality and performance is thus unjustified. It does however question a certain understanding of excellence, rationality and meritocracy. Namely that which is based solely on one mode of living and one dominant scientific practice. The concern is therefore conservative: it clings to habits and certain privileges without questioning them and without openness to think beyond them.

Some, like another SNSF employee, insist on committing 150 percent of their time and being to academia: “What is needed is a sacred fire burning and fully committed dedication. Research as calling, that is excellence” (quoted in Nentwich et al. 2016). As shown in many studies, working full time is not enough in academia and overtime the norm (cf. Bürgi et al. 2016; Liebig 2008). However, neurologists have shown that excessive work intensity and stress massively reduce performance and lead to an increased risk of mental and cardiovascular diseases (Breit & Redl 2018). Efforts by Amazon or Toyota to reduce the workday to six hours result in increased profits and more satisfied employees (ibid.). A reduction in working hours can also increase satisfaction in science, enable academics to shape their individual lives and provide a framework for high-quality research. As many stress, high-quality, creative and innovative research requires enough time and calm to do so (Slow Science Academy 2010). Academics often have a high intrinsic motivation and the assumption of the *homo economicus* that humans are fundamentally lazy and must therefore be encouraged to perform at their best – turns out to be not only wrong, but also counterproductive.

Some have an elitist understanding of excellence and propose according education policies. The idea of the “excellent scientist as lonely hero at the top” (Benschop & Brouns 2003: 194) is based on an elitist

understanding of education, which determines quality relationally. One is on top compared to the many who are below. Others however propose a democratic-egalitarian education and academic system and try to provide large sections of society with high education. They assume that democratic societies, especially information and knowledge societies require more and more knowledge and competences and therefore further an egalitarian education politics. Different countries choose different policies which imply either little spending for an elitist model, or larger governmental spending in democratic-egalitarian approaches (Maihofer 2009: 47f.). Switzerland follows a rather elitist education policy, despite the country’s self-understanding as particularly democratic. Here, I suggest we insist more on a democratic education policy, which might enable turning the competitive culture into a more collaborative one.

The starting point of this research is thus the insight into the problem of the prevailing understanding of equality, which aims to achieve equality through assimilation. Recognition is only granted to what is equal (in the sense of sameness), while difference is devalued. This logic has long been a constitutive element of Swiss politics, for example as reason to deny women the right to vote until 1971 due to their (legally prescribed) different modes of living (Maihofer 2016: 282). Suffrage was only granted after women were present enough in the labour market, so that this argument could no longer hold. This understanding of equality and its inherent devaluation of difference is an often implicit, but important element in current gender equality and diversity policies. A difficulty is that this understanding of equality, which relies on accepting the male norm as standard, is often invisible and is not itself seen as a particular standard. A challenge is therefore, to make this problem visible.

TERMINOLOGY: FOR GENDER EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY/PLURALITY

The terms gender equality, equal opportunity and diversity are used quite differently in the field and there is no common understanding on what they mean (cf. Nentwich et al. 2016; Callerstig 2014: 115). Therefore, one important task for gender equality work seems to be, to maintain and promote the discussion on what they mean and what goals they aim at.

In the action plans written by the different equal opportunity and gender equality offices at Swiss universities for government funding for “Equal Opportunity for Women and Men at Universities” the terms gender equality and equal opportunity generally refer to the fact that the starting points and opportunities for an academic career are unequally distributed in our society with regard to gender, ‘race’, class, sexuality, disability, age, gender identity, nationality, ethnicity and religion. They aim on the one hand at enabling negative freedoms (freedom from) such as protection against discrimination, harassment and assault. On the other hand, they are concerned with enabling positive freedoms (freedom to), like offering conditions for the compatibility of family and work, making spaces accessible and providing trainings to acquire competencies necessary for an academic career. In a neoliberal context, where the emphasis lies on negative freedom, and the dominant rhetoric is: ‘more freedom, less state’, it is useful to stress the importance of positive freedom. Freedom is based on requirements that need to be provided – for example by the state. Therefore, to some degree, more state is necessary for more freedom, for example concerning paternal leave, which is currently still granted only for one day to fathers in Switzerland.

There also lies an important difference between the terms gender equality and equal opportunity: In contrast to the concept of equal opportunity, gender equality implies a critique of social inequality, not only of the unequal distribution of opportunities. Equal opportunity usually aims at performance fairness, while gender equality aims at social justice. For this reason, the term gender equality was deliberately avoided in the German Basic Constitutional Law, because they did not want to promise equality of outcome, only equal opportunities (Bericht zur Verfassungsreform 1993: 50). The concept of gender equality in the Swiss constitution is therefore more far-reaching concerning social justice. These terms and their goals have implications for the according elitist or democratic education policies. In order to consider the aspect of social justice and the task to realise the Swiss constitutional mandate, the term gender equality seems more adequate.

With both terms, equal opportunity and gender equality, there remains a risk that equality is merely being sought in orientation and assimilation to a narrow male, White, heterosexual etc. standard. In order to combine the aspect of social justice and equality with recognition of difference, it

is productive to combine the term gender equality with diversity and to insist on the recognition of a plurality of modes of existence and of living. Diversity management often ignores the aspects of social justice and class (Gotsis & Kortezi 2015: 71). While critical diversity management does include these aspects, using the term plurality instead and/or combining it with gender equality helps to counteract a merely profit oriented or meritocratic understanding of the term diversity. Furthermore, the term inclusion stresses the need for valuing individuals “for their unique attributes” and including them in a way so they belong to the group or organisation (Shore et al. 2010: 1271).

Challenging questions also are, what diversity means, which categories are relevant for the university context and what that implies for diversity policies. My current suggestion is to focus on gender, ‘race’, class, sexuality, disability, age, gender identity, nationality, ethnicity and religion. Thereby, it is crucial to take into account the different logics and dynamics of each relation of domination and how different the solutions to each problem are: some differences need to be valued; others need to be overcome. A person in a wheelchair will mostly need infrastructure to have access, queer people may focus on rights and recognition, poor people on financial support and so on. An additive naming of different categories often hides the different logics and their complex interrelations.

To draw a first conclusion on terminology: in order to implement the Swiss constitutional mandate and to ensure equality not through assimilation but through non-hierarchical recognition of diversity, I propose a combination of the terms *gender equality and diversity/ plurality*. They are, in my view, the best terms when working towards the goal of fully implementing the constitutional mandate. Using the term diversity alone would tend to hide the democratic aspects of gender equality.

When analysing the use of terms and strategies in the action plans for equal opportunity at Swiss universities within the framework of the federal programme for equal opportunities, there were some insightful tendencies: *First*: only a few institutions refer directly to the constitutional mandate, although it stresses the importance of these issues as constitutional rights and mandate to realise actual and not only legal gender equality. Some however make this link to the constitution very explicitly and consequently use the term gender equality rather than equal opportunity. *Second*: some

action plans are oriented towards international, especially EU requirements and thus emphasise the importance of human rights, democracy and ethical responsibility for social development. Such larger institutional frameworks can be used to strengthen these aspects. *Third*: universities that focus more on equal opportunity and/or diversity are more likely to operate with a narrative of competition and an elitist understanding of excellence. The University of Zurich seems to follow a new approach, focuses on ‘promoting – living – using diversity’, which combines aspects of meritocracy and social justice and uses the terms diversity and plurality. *Fourth*: the role privileged people may play in a transformation to gender equality and diversity, which I consider to be crucial, is seldomly mentioned. *Fifth*: the focus lies on organisational development and rarely on research that promotes gender equality and diversity or teaching that is sensitive to diverse students. *Sixth*: concerns of university groups are taken into account differently. While increasing the number of female professors (group I) and supporting female PhD and postdoctoral researchers (group III) are included in programs, other groups are not often mentioned: especially private lecturers, assistant professors without tenure track and titular professors (group II), scientific, technical and administrative staff (group IV) and students (group V).

How the priorities are set in each case and whether and in what way the constitutional mandates are implemented is always a political decision for terms and strategies. A tension lies between concerns for social justice and performance fairness and the question what role education should play for society.

CONCLUSIONS

FOR POLICY SUGGESTIONS:

CONSIDERING THE BROAD PICTURE

The academic system and its disciplines as we know them today were established with the patriarchal bourgeois capitalist societies in the 18th century (Maihofer 2014). It is constitutively based on inclusions, exclusions and hierarchies that run counter to gender equality and the recognition of plurality. Gender research on the establishment of academia allows us to broaden the focus on what is considered when drafting gender equality and diversity policies and to take into account the academic system as a whole

and its historical genealogy. Such a perspective shows, how the academic system is gendered in a constitutively masculine way on multiple levels.

Concerning the goals of the Swiss government programs Equal Opportunities, these insights have consequences. The goals of the programs are: institutional anchoring of equal opportunity, increase in the proportion of female professors, supporting female doctoral and postdoctoral researchers in their careers so they will stay, family friendliness, the reduction of horizontal (fewer women enter certain subjects) and vertical segregation (e.g. few women in STEM subjects, that is Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics), and now also the promotion of diversity competence.

In order to achieve these goals, I would like to emphasise some aspects that are seldomly mentioned in the action plans: The implementation of the constitutional gender equality mandate requires a departure from the ‘male’ norm of excellence and science and an orientation towards equality through non-hierarchical recognition of diversity and plurality (not only equality through assimilation). A family-friendly university thus implies the acceptance of present, engaged parenthood of academics as an equal form of academic practice. Policies then should not only aim at supporting parents to realise a traditionally ‘male’ career path. Rather, it requires acceptance of multiple life trajectories, modes of living and therefore permanent and part-time employment options.

Overcoming horizontal and vertical gender segregation concerning the choice of studies (e.g. in STEM subjects) will only be successful, if the gendered and hierarchical distinction between the so called hard natural sciences with a masculine connotation and the so called soft social sciences and humanities with a female connotation is overcome (Maihofer 2014). Here, gender equality policies are required on the level of gendered disciplines. Hierarchies and segregations can be counteracted by promoting a critical self-reflection, situation of one’s standpoint and the inclusion of ethical and societal aspects in the natural sciences. Social sciences and humanities could expand their openness to the different quality of research objects and methods in the natural sciences. Both could promote skills for inter- and transdisciplinary collaboration. This is challenging, as interdisciplinarity is in itself marginalised in the current system of ‘masculine’ disciplines that strive for hegemony and not recognition of difference.

Furthermore, gender equality and diversity work also concerns knowledge production itself and therefore includes the promotion of diverse knowledge and of knowledge production that explores and questions relationships of domination concerning gender, sexuality, 'race', ethnicity, class, migration and age, as well as possibilities of overcoming domination. Competences to teach diverse knowledge to diverse students is another important field of gender equality and diversity work. One more crucial field of gender equality policy is funding agencies themselves (Husu & Callerstig 2018; Husu & de Cheveigné 2010).

Finally, national and international education policy is also a question of gender equality policy, because it plays a role whether it advocates equal opportunities within the framework of elitist promotion of excellence or represents a democratic claim to gender equality and diversity in the field of education. How gender equality and diversity efforts will develop in the future, will be – at least to some extent – up to us.

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on gender, science and academia

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EDITORS: Sofia Strid, Dag Balkmar,
Jeff Hearn & Louise Morley



DOES KNOWLEDGE
HAVE A GENDER?

PHOTO
Ulla-Carin Ekblom

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Dag Balkmar,
Jeff Hearn and
Louise Morley

P R E F A C E

It is a great pleasure for me to honour Liisa Husu on her official retirement. As the first Professor of Gender Studies at Örebro University and leader of the multidisciplinary Centre for Feminist Social Studies (CFS), I was very happy to welcome Liisa to both positions, when I retired at the end of 2009. To put it simply: I can hardly think of a better successor.

When Liisa came to Örebro we were in the middle of the GEXcel project, the Gender Excellence Centre and the five-years visiting scholar programme we were running together with Linköping University. I continued as a Senior Professor to work with GEXcel and lead the Örebro part of it, now together with Liisa. From that time of intense collaborative activities and ever since – as I continued to be active part-time in the doctoral programme and the research milieu – we have been working as colleagues in a mutually supportive and genuinely good spirit.

Liisa's academic career is a very successful combination of research merits and femocratic work; and her Alma Mater has awarded her prizes for excellence in both, the University of Helsinki Gender Studies award in 2002 and the University of Helsinki Gender Equality Prize in 2009. In Finland, she was the National Co-ordinator for Women's Studies for 15 years and served as Senior Adviser on Gender Equality Policy for the government before she went back to full-time research; she completed her PhD at the University of Helsinki in 2001. Then, for the next decade, followed a Research Fellowship, EU research projects, and national research project leadership at the University of Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies, and at Hanken School of Economics, Helsinki.

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Liisa's PhD thesis, *Sexism, support and survival in academia: academic women and hidden discrimination in Finland*, laid the ground, on one hand, for her future research interests: gender in science, academia and knowledge production, and her special focus on gender dynamics and inequalities in scientific careers, organisations and science policy. On the other hand, her research, enriched by her long femocratic work experience in Finland and internationally, made her also highly qualified for the many kinds of evaluative and other expert activities she has taken on after 2001. Clearly, her qualifications speak for themselves given the high demand for her expertise, as shown by the various educational and expert commissions she has been involved in Sweden and internationally; and she has been invited to speak and present her research in many, over 30 I gather, countries in all parts of the world.

At Örebro University, as in most other universities, the initiation and development of Gender Studies was – and still is – a struggle on several fronts. Besides the never-ending hard work Gender Studies teachers and students have in common with colleagues in other disciplines, a kind of gender-oriented struggle for academic legitimacy has been with us all along. But if anyone Liisa Husu knows that without “support” no “survival” in Academia, and in 2018 we celebrated the 40 years anniversary of teaching Women's Studies/Gender Studies at Örebro University.

I want to thank you, Liisa, for how successfully you have navigated our discipline and the CFS through periods of sometimes fair wind and sometimes stormy weather against us, and always acting in a professional manner. I am also happy to be around now when your successor on the professor's chair has joined the Gender Studies group, although, sadly, it is in the time of the corona pandemic.

However, and finally, it might be good, in these troubling times, to recycle the imperative which the early 1980s Women's Studies Conference in Umeå, Sweden, directed to us feminist academics: *Gråt inte – forska!* (Don't cry – do research!)

Anna G. Jónasdóttir,
Professor Emerita

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