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Sharing Good Practice – The EU Case Studies

Austria

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I cannot say whether the Austrian example is “good practice”, nor can I say whether it makes sense to learn from it. And I state this not only out of polite modesty but because, as someone involved in this area for many years, its weaknesses could not remain hidden from me. But there are a number of aspects that I find really excellent.

1. HE policy, pragmatic and with fantasy

In Austria the area of HE consists of

- universities
- universities of applied science (“Fachhochschulen”)
- private universities
- “Pädagogische Hochschulen”

The universities are the largest and longest-established area. The oldest university was founded in 1365, the youngest in 1970. The legal basis for the universities of applied science was created in 1993, for the private universities in 1999, and for the universities of education in 2007. The universities of applied science and the private universities are new foundations, the universities of education were developed from the former pedagogical academies, which were not tertiary institutions, and from other facilities.

The universities were reformed in the 1990s in a series of legislative steps, in 2002 they were granted autonomy, and this year the autonomy law was further developed in a number of points. There never existed an overall plan that determined the dimensions of the individual areas and the connections between different parts. The financing of the individual parts is also different. The admissions system, which is not harmonised, differs in the various areas, as do regulations about tuition fees. The accreditation of study courses and institutions is subject to different regulations, which are dealt with by separate organisations. All institutions are taking part in the Bologna Process in a committed way.

One may be amazed by these differences; one may perhaps see them as indicating a certain disorder or regard them as simply incomprehensible. But it was, mostly, good reasons that produced the HE situation that exists today. It was a pragmatic policy that at various times assures

- the most wide-ranging
- and yet still – despite ideological barriers or those presented by interest groups –feasible changes
- that reflected the main development trends in Europe and
- that are characterized by an independent fantasy

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Had there been a desire to work out an overall concept for the development of HE in Austria the university reform would not have taken place by 2002 nor would it have been so widely successful, and the universities of applied science would not be already running successfully for 15 years. But on the other hand perhaps there would no longer be different concepts (as is still the case today) and different institutions for the training of teachers for required schooling (who are trained in the universities of education) and for secondary school teachers (who train at university). But what use would a harmonized concept for the training of teachers be, if the universities were not yet free from state control?

2. Universities can perform if they are allowed to

The reform involves changing existing institutions with long, powerful and in part passionately upheld traditions. We have therefore to deal with legacies from the past. The new universities that are emerging from the transformation process are European and international in their orientation.

The reform objectives are:

- (1) enhancing the universities' research and teaching performance; and
- (2) improving their use of financial resources.

The aim is for the Austrian universities to remain European players in research and teaching where this is already the case, and for them to become internationally competitive as quickly as possible where it is not. Areas that are unable to meet this yardstick within the next few years will, at least in the medium term, forfeit their right to continued existence.

The recent reforms were the most sweeping in 150 years. The goal of the reform has been to enable the universities to become independent, efficiently run institutions which are accountable for their actions. There is no room for half-measures. The task of Parliament and the government was to establish new principles for the universities' development. They are responsible for that development — naturally with support from the state.

The mainspring of this reform model is a confidence in the ability of the universities to renew themselves, and to make full use of their autonomy under the new legal framework. Of course, they are to receive the necessary assistance in this, but not in the form of directives from state bodies. The guiding principle is voluntary cooperation.

Study law, i.e. the law governing degrees, the workloads associated with them, and the legal security of students, remains a sovereign responsibility of the state.

The backlash was fierce because on reflection it was quickly seen that lamenting one's lack of independence while pulling strings behind the scenes was far more comfortable than the freedom to take real decisions and accountability for their consequences.

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It also emerged that most university members regarded autonomy as synonymous with their own freedom rather than self-government by the university as an organisation. It was soon suspected that there would be little place in an autonomous university with a strong, independent management for the liberties that individuals had been able to take with the old bureaucratic system. To win such people over it has been vital to link the independence of the university as an organisation with a maximum of personal academic freedom.

Most of the funding for state universities continues to come from the taxpayer, and it is thus legitimate for the state to exercise a guiding role — but by acting as a partner, rather than dictating to the universities.

The reform legislation (the Universities Act 2002) replaced the traditional relationship between the government and the universities, based on the sovereign control of the state, with a collaborative model. The state, represented by the minister responsible for higher education, concludes performance agreements with the universities which specify the services to be rendered by the latter in return for government money. The state has a statutory obligation to fund its universities. The key point here is that, in contrast with the old system, the performance agreements are drafted not by the government but by the universities. The rector draws up the draft agreement, which must be approved by the university council, and it is this that serves as the basis for the negotiations with the Ministry.

New recruits to the system are now employees of the universities. They are no longer civil servants under the aegis of the Minister.

The reforms have transformed the Austrian universities not into businesses, but into “quasi-commercial entities”, the form of which takes account of the difference between a university and a commercial undertaking.

I can safely say that like many academic and political observers I have noticed major changes. The universities have responded to autonomy self-confidently, and are making the most of their new opportunities in terms of sharpening their academic profile, and of staff appointments and course offerings. However some have been more courageous than others, and the legacies of the past are still apparent in

places. Yet there is no mistaking the shift towards a new thinking — namely, a commitment to improved performance and better use of resources.

Fostering young research talent and increasing the number of researchers is one of the most important challenges facing the universities, and replacement of the old-style doctoral programme by the new PhD cycle in line with the Bologna follow-up process thus forms part of many development plans. The reform legislation expressly entitles all academic staff, regardless of age or status, to perform third-party funded or contract research without their superiors' consent, provided that they do not neglect their duties under the performance agreements.

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The transition from state controlled universities to independent entities has in no way meant the loss of the traditional right to academic freedom, as the critics feared. This right applies to all members of the university, be they new academic employees, civil servants, students or technicians. And there is a legal guarantee that there may be no compulsion to perform work that conflicts with a researcher's conscience.

An undoubted weakness of the new system is the lack of opportunities for the universities to accumulate assets. Ownership of federal land and buildings has not been transferred to the universities. They have become tenants of a profit oriented, federal government owned company.

Until recently Austria was one of the few countries to have had universal access to higher education. Admission was open to all holders of an Austrian higher secondary school leaving certificate. The verdict of the European Court of Justice in 2005 has put an end to this situation. All EU citizens must be accepted under equal conditions. However open university access is no longer tenable in the face of the large numbers of German *numerus clausus* (admission limit) evaders coming to Austria. An unfortunate situation has occurred which cannot be tolerated. It seems to me that open access to the universities, introduced at the start of the expansion phase, some 30 years ago, has had its day, yet it remains a political sacred cow. Some original thinking to come to European solutions is called for.

3. The non-university HE sector has become important

Austria did not follow the lead of the many European countries that created non-university tertiary sectors in the 1970s. At the time, the excellent vocational secondary schools, which were particularly welcome to small and medium enterprises, justified this decision. A start was finally made in 1994.

The 1993 Fachhochschule Study Act broke with Austrian educational traditions. The state dispensed with the usual detailed set of rules for degree programmes, organisational structures and employment matters, and stepped back from its role as a founder and operator of educational institutions.

The Act provides for an accreditation scheme for the recognition of “Fachhochschule” (university of applied science) degree programmes. The evaluation of course offerings is the responsibility of an expert commission especially established for the purpose, the “Fachhochschulrat”. Degree programme accreditations are valid for five years. The approval of extensions by the “Fachhochschulrat” is subject to positive evaluations.

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The “Fachhochschulen” are required to provide a practical training reflecting the current academic state-of-the-art in the discipline concerned; part of this training takes the form of mandatory work placements. The Bologna system has replaced the original diploma system in all areas. The qualifications conferred are university degrees. Admission is open to applicants who have successfully completed their secondary education or have obtained a relevant vocational training. A degree from a “Fachhochschule” entitles the holder to admission to doctoral studies at a university.

There is a “mixed financing model”, under which the state co-finances the operating expenses according to a formula based on the number of places. The state bears 90% of the normal operating cost of a place, which ranges from EUR 6,510–7,940. Federal funding to cover building and investment costs is excluded.

The “Fachhochschule” sector has been created by founding new institutions and not by upgrading existing sectors. The new degree programmes are innovative. For instance, there are degrees in biotechnology, automation engineering, new media, information management, environmental engineering, social work, public administration and tourism.

The first target for the “Fachhochschulen”, that of a 35% share of the overall higher education freshmen population, has already been reached, ahead of schedule. Today there are 20 institutions with 35.000 students. Private maintaining bodies, accreditation by the “Fachhochschulrat” and the new funding model have all shown their worth.

4. Private universities: few in number and small in size

Austria has a high density of state universities that cover almost all disciplines. Many disciplines are established at a number of universities. All teach and research. Career-oriented studies and application-oriented research are to be found in the universities of applied science, which are organised under private law but receive considerable financial support from the state. The private university segment is small. There are 12 private universities with 4,200 students. Some of the professors come from Austrian state universities or from abroad and work part-time in the private universities. In addition to teaching the private universities have to conduct research, in many cases this is research that the professors carry out at their home university.

The range of subjects offered tends to concentrate on business administration; however there are also private universities that teach medicine, psychoanalysis or music, for example.

The accreditation of the institutions and the study courses available has been regulated by law since 1999. The private university accreditation council, a body of experts, is the authority responsible here. Where national educational policy issues might be adversely affected by an intended decision the minister is empowered to question such decisions.

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The law prohibits the financing private universities with state funds. Tuition fees, private persons, contract research, and individual Austrian states are the sources of funding. Two federal states have had their former music conservatories upgraded.

5. The “Pädagogische Hochschulen” must be developed further

In 2007 the former pedagogical academies and a number of similar institutions, which were not universities, were combined by legislation and were upgraded. The responsible bodies are the state and, on account of the concordat, the Roman Catholic Church. Some elements of governance were adopted from the universities. However these institutions were not granted the autonomy enjoyed by the state universities. There is an extensive body of rules and regulations governing the operation of these institutions. Responsibility is in the hands of the schools minister rather than the minister who is responsible for higher education.

The purpose of these institutions is to train primary school teachers for 6 to 10-year-old children, and teachers for children between the ages of 10 and 14 who attend what is known as a “Hauptschule”. These Hauptschulen exist parallel to the “Gymnasien”, in which 10 to 18-year-olds are educated. There is no comprehensive school for the 10 to 14-year-old age group, but a number of experimental forms already exist.

Research does not play an important role. However, the number of obligatory teaching hours is considerably higher than that required from the university teachers.

There is an ongoing political discussion about combining the different teacher-training courses.

6. The dynamics of the Bologna Process

Supported by the ministries responsible the entire HE area in Austria is intensively involved in implementing all the measures required by the Bologna Process.

- the conversion of old diploma courses into bachelor and master degree courses has been completed almost throughout the country
- the Diploma Supplement has been introduced nationwide, in both German and English
- the introduction of PhD courses taking a minimum of 3 years is underway, in certain universities this has already been carried out, and it is regarded as obligatory in performance agreements
- the introduction of a national qualification framework has been completed; the national steering group has started work, a consultation paper is being prepared
- the ECTS had been introduced throughout the country
- legislation making joint study and double degree programmes possible has been passed
- ENIC-NARIC AUSTRIA has been created

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- financial aid for the mobility of Erasmus students has been introduced
- state grants can be awarded in full for study courses in foreign countries.
- the universities are legally obliged to set up a quality control management system
- legal measures have been introduced to ensure quality in the area of the universities of applied science and the private universities
- the Austrian quality control agency AQA has been established for the entire tertiary sector; it is independent and assists the institutions in conducting evaluations and implementing quality control measures
- the ministry recently presented a proposal for reorganising external quality control of the entire HE area to conform to the ESG (European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area)

Already one quarter of all graduates and those who completed a PhD has spent a subsidised study period abroad during the course of their studies. A quarter of the

core staff of the universities has worked abroad; a further quarter comes from foreign countries.