

Recommendation Concerning the Development of Profiles in the Higher Education Area

The Austrian Higher Education Area has seen dynamic development in recent years and has thus also undergone radical change. The specific missions, profiles and unique features of the different tertiary education sectors are no longer so clear-cut, so also resulting in redundancy and subcritical mass which is no longer sufficient to fully compete with others. Examples here are a stronger focus on teaching by the universities (to the detriment of research) or the development of research infrastructure at universities of applied sciences with their own funds, which then remain subcritical.

The effect of this process is to erode the unique characteristics of the different sectors, which after all were motivating factors in their establishment and which must form the basis for sharpening their profiles. The institutions thus lose some of their distinctive character, so impeding strategic further development. There is also the problem that the institutions of the Austrian Higher Education Area are still suffering from insufficient funding, in particular the universities, notwithstanding the positive trend seen over the last few years (one recent example being the cash injection of a billion euros for Austria's higher education system).

If the universities are to face up better to the international competition and the associated challenges, they will however need to stand out from the rest and raise their profile. The creation of a more distinctive profile and contemplation of their unique features will boost efficiency in terms of teaching and research and so improve their ability to compete at an international level. Scarce resources cannot however provide the sole impetus here.

Any university that wishes to successfully sharpen its profile will have to consider and reinforce the unique features of the individual institution (and thus also of the sectors). This can be illustrated by the example of the universities, referred to below as the traditional universities, and the universities of applied sciences.

Research-led teaching at the traditional universities is the most important unique feature they have to offer. This also includes training young scientists in the field of research. Universities are not first and foremost

educational establishments which also carry out research: research and participation in this process as part of a university education is the key constituting element of a traditional university. And this also depends on the existence of an appropriate research infrastructure at the relevant university.

Universities of applied sciences on the other hand offer teaching which is more practical and vocational in nature and generally have better staff-to-student ratios than the traditional universities. These universities of applied sciences are appealing successfully to target groups who do not traditionally opt for higher education and so fulfil important regional tasks in relation to training and applied research.

Reflecting on the unique features offered by the different types of higher education institution will secure them a competitive advantage and boost efficiency – this is not solely dictated by the need for economic efficiency. However, if all institutions then develop an ambition to resemble each other as closely as possible, this will undermine all the efforts to sharpen their distinctive profiles and dilute the available resources to the point where they become unusable.

In the public debate the same misunderstandings such as “monopolisation” of research or “prohibition of research” constantly crop up. It therefore seems important to emphasise that, where a university manages to reflect on its unique features and achieve a more distinctive profile, this does not constitute monopolisation or prohibition.

Recommendations

The Austrian Council for Research and Technology Development thus makes the following recommendations in the interest of encouraging the development of profiles in the Austrian Higher Education Area:

The development of distinctive profiles is a strategic objective, not an end in itself.

The creation of distinctive profiles is not a quick fix that can be achieved without careful planning, but should be pursued with the necessary tact and sensitivity over a lengthy period of time. The objective here is not to save money but to make efficient use of infrastructure and human resources and so ensure that investments meet their targets more accurately.

The statutory provisions are perfectly adequate.

The Austrian Council considers the type-based distinctions made between universities, universities of applied sciences, private universities and teacher-training universities in the Higher Education Area to be meaningful and recommends that they are maintained. There seems to be no apparent need for tighter regulations, standardised individualisation of these profiles or the introduction of new types of higher education establishments. Greater and more exacting restriction of the activities of the different types of university is also not advisable here given that there is now major differentiation

within the sectors One exception here involves the teacher-training universities, which are striving to reposition themselves in the university landscape. What is true of other sectors, applies here too: Autonomy reinforces the development of profiles and makes this process easier. It should not be accomplished through intervention in the teaching syllabus, content of research and orientation of the institution but by determining the qualification profiles of graduates.

Greater flexibility within sectors and cooperation beyond their boundaries.

Differentiation within the sectors should be seen in a positive light. The Austrian Council recommends permitting greater variety within these sectors in the interest of self-governance by the institutions. The core identity in terms of affiliation to a specific university sector should however always be maintained. Hybrid formats and opportunities for cooperation between sectors should increasingly appear on the agenda, as this enables every institution to develop its own special profile.

Creation of institutional clarity regarding the issues of “PädagogInnenbildung NEU” (new system of teacher training) and research by the universities of applied sciences.

In the Austrian Higher Education Area research activities at the universities of applied sciences and the positioning of the teacher-training universities have at present not been solved in a satisfactory manner.

The universities of applied sciences should – where expedient at the individual locations – be placed in a position where they can intensify their research work by taking full advantage of proven sources of finance on a competitive basis. Furthermore, they should work in close cooperation with industry and the traditional universities (above all in relation to doctorates) to develop additional capacity. The Austrian Council recommends concentrating on collaboration here. The development of costly research infrastructure from the core budget of a university of applied sciences is not consistent with the mission of this type of university.

In the case of the teacher-training universities the Austrian Council recommends the bold continuation of the reforms underway in this sector in the interest of improving quality, in addition to the development of a clear-cut institutional solution for “PädagogInnenbildung NEU”, so bringing together the strengths of both the teacher-training universities and the universities.

Communication of a “big picture” of the Higher Education Area.

There is sometimes confusion about the positioning of the individual types of university, a factor that makes debate about this issue more difficult. The Austrian Council therefore recommends communicating more forcefully and consistently the positioning of the different types of university as they are envisaged under the legislation. This would thus amount to a sort of “commentary” on the relevant laws and outline the framework for the

Austrian Higher Education Area with its general and more specialised objectives and responsibilities in the form of a big picture.

The coordination necessary in this regard could most likely be best accomplished at the present time via Universities Austria. This overview could then also provide the basis for further consideration (for example, as to whether individual specialist areas would not be better served in other university sectors).

The creation of distinctive sector profiles should be achieved by sharpening profiles at the institutional level.

A big picture of the Higher Education Area should provide the framework for this process to take place at the individual autonomous university institutions. Implementation of the individualisation process must – in keeping with the principle of autonomy – be carried out at the level of the individual institutions and cannot be prescribed ‘top-down’. The Austrian Council therefore recommends that all means necessary should be used to support the autonomous institutions in developing their own distinctive profiles and setting priorities.

The universities are already paying greater attention to creating more individualised profiles and should be consciously striking out on innovative paths in terms of their positioning. This involves reinforcing their strengths in the field of research and the range of subjects they offer. The universities should remain functionally broad-based centres of research and education with key focal areas. Care must be taken that the development of distinctive profiles and other strategy papers are closely coordinated. The development plans for the universities deserve greater attention. The process of developing distinctive profiles at Austrian universities, if conceived as a strategic management process, offers significant potential for a more differentiated Higher Education Area.

In accordance with their statutory remit, traditional universities in particular should sharpen their academic-scientific profile in this manner and accentuate the link between research, teaching and the transfer of knowledge. They must focus their efforts on attaining an international standing as centres of research in the key areas.

In this context, the universities of applied sciences should focus more on offering high-quality Bachelor’s courses and emphasise their more vocational nature, backed up by cooperative applied research, including at Master’s level. Collaboration with the traditional universities is particularly appropriate at doctoral level and these universities should retain their well-founded exclusive right to award doctorates.

Effective development of distinctive profiles depends on the attainment of full autonomy and political support.

The development of profiles is accomplished with the help of university-based strategies, stimulus from competitors and appropriate financing flows. University policy is challenged insofar as it is really only self-governing universities that can effectively develop distinctive profiles. This

process likewise depends on the ability of a university to select its own students. The introduction of autonomous admission management is therefore indispensable for meaningful profile development.

Profile development processes require support, stimulus and incentives, naturally without additional red tape and without eroding self-governance. The Austrian Council recommends that the path of mission-based funding is pursued further in a consistent manner and that clear incentives in respect of profile development are offered in the performance agreements.