

Statement regarding “Amendment of the Austrian Universities Act 2002”

The Federal Government of Austria drew up a proposal for regulating access to higher education and submitted this for evaluation. The Austrian Council for Research and Technology Development issued a statement regarding the existing draft of the Federal Government in the framework of the evaluation procedure for Amendment of the Austrian Universities Act 2002. The final version was published by the Federal Government in the Austrian Federal Law Gazette I No. 13/2011 on 30.3.2011.

The Austrian Council for Research and Technology Development welcomes engaging with this issue at a fundamental level. The universities are vastly oversubscribed in certain subjects, and it is no longer possible to guarantee high quality in relation to the conditions for study, teaching and research, particularly on courses admitting huge numbers of students. The sometimes unsatisfactory conditions in higher education can be above all attributed to an insufficient staff-student ratio and inadequate infrastructure.

Excerpt from the statement dated 16.12.2010 in translation:

The draft of the Federal Act dated 6 December 2010 contains two additions to the version of the existing Austrian Universities Act 2002 last amended by the Austrian Federal Law Gazette I Nr. 18/2009.

- *In § 63 para. 1 inclusion of subpara. “6. proof that the applicant has sought study counselling prior to the beginning of the studies in the case of initial admission to a bachelor’s or diploma degree programme” ;*

The Austrian Council for Research and Technology Development fundamentally supports this measure, which will help to ensure that prospective students are better informed. The Council would however like to point out that this can only be realised if all potential degree applicants have adequate access to information and study counselling throughout Austria. The aim here is to ensure that the decision of each individual is not unduly influenced by such counselling.

- New regulation with a supplementary provision relating to capacity-oriented admission with unusually high demand included in § 124c. The Austrian Council for Research and Technology Development considers that the Federal Government’s option of restricting Bachelor and diploma

degree programmes without consulting the universities according to para. (1) restricts the right of autonomous governance enjoyed by the latter.

The Council recommends preceding the option defined in para. (2) of limiting the number of university places for first-year students with an objective estimate of capacity at the relevant university. The aim here should be the optimisation of infrastructure and staffing levels. By introducing a capacity-oriented admission it is hoped to improve conditions for students, although this must not conflict with the call for raising levels of education. An increase in capacity based on the requirements of society should be determined in the framework of performance agreements.

It must at all events be ensured that the introduction of restrictions on admissions still preserves the existence of equal opportunities and conditions for all potential students, whatever their social background.

It is in this context that the impact of the debated tuition fees should also be seen. The Council recommends that special attention is given to ensuring that socially disadvantaged groups are not excluded from the education system due to increased charges. This depends on the introduction of an adequate system of student grants which target those in need. It is counterproductive for a country's economy to hinder access to higher education for certain sectors of the population on financial or social grounds.

Given the inadequate conditions for study and research at the universities, particularly in the case of courses admitting huge numbers of students, the Council calls for an increase in funding to improve unsatisfactory conditions by optimising student-teacher ratios and upgrading infrastructure.

The passage in para. (2) of the draft stating that “... *The minimum number of study places shall not be below the average number of students of this study programme in the five years prior to the determination of the number*” would constitute a continuation of the status quo and as such, is not expedient.

Suitable admission procedures in the introductory study phases should be defined by the universities. The selection procedures laid down in paras. (3) and (4) do not reflect the need for objective selection of the most suitable first-year students. Calling for specialist knowledge alone, particularly with the possibility of performing such selection prior to admission does not pick out the “best”, but at most the “keenest” applicants. The main objective of the introductory study / orientation phase is to offer a guiding hand to first-year students. In the Council's view optimum organisation of the introductory phases is the best way of managing an “influx of students” in a manner that serves their interests.