

Statement Regarding Cuts at Non-University Research Institutions

On 19 November 2010 the Austrian Council for Research and Technology Development issued a statement on the discussion concerning the abolition of core funding for non-university institutes which in the past had been supported by the Ministry of Science (BMWF).

The elimination of basic subsidies without replacement – where a negative response (also in the international media) could harm Austria as a knowledge location – should be replaced by a solution which preserves the efficient areas of non-university research. It should also be emphasised that this includes institutions which are subsidised by the BMWF. Non-university research is an important pillar of the Austrian research system. Historic developments have produced a host of institutes which carry out a wide range of activities within a differentiated structural and thematic framework. However, until now there have been almost no thorough empirical surveys of their role and impact in the Austrian innovation system. Although a certain degree of diversity promotes creativity and competition, it also leads to a largely compartmentalised structure with high fixed costs and sometimes inefficient parallel structures. Basic subsidies help consolidate these structures. It thus follows that institutes are maintained which could not survive in international scientific competition or if they had to compete for funding. The Austrian Council recognises the need to consolidate the budget – however, sweeping, undifferentiated cuts in this area would do more harm than good. The problem goes beyond the 74 institutes which will no longer receive core funding. In the humanities, social and cultural sciences alone, 306 institutes were identified (as of 2008) which are financed largely with regional funds and which will have to be incorporated into this process.

The Austrian Council notes:

■ A sweeping budget reduction in the nonuniversity sector would not be consistent with the government's declared ambition of joining the ranks of innovation leaders.

■ The sector should be subjected to a thematic and structural analysis before budgetary conclusions can be drawn.

■ The Austrian Council gives its unreserved support to the BMWF initiative to evaluate the work and reorganisation of the non-university sector.

■ Shared interests are to be clarified through personal contact with the institutions concerned. In those cases where solutions are already emerging (for example through mergers with the relevant institutions at universities), these should be implemented as quickly as possible.

■ The provinces should subsequently be involved in the discussion process, as otherwise federal funding will be replaced by a regional funding approach, which will merely shift the problem instead of solving it.

■ The Austrian Council suggests that an overall evaluation of the non-university research sector should be carried out under the auspices of the Austrian Council in order to evaluate the institutions concerned and their contribution to both the Austrian research system and Austria as a business location. This goal was also formulated in the as yet unpublished federal RTI Strategy.

■ In the wake of this evaluation, a concept can be developed for improving efficiency and making meaningful savings. Clearer roles and specific objectives can then be defined on this basis.