

## Recommendation Regarding Selected Areas of the Humanities, Social and Cultural Sciences

### Background

The humanities, social and cultural sciences make a key contribution to preserving our intellectual and cultural heritage and shaping our future. They reflect social development, sometimes build bridges between different cultures and offer guidance in relation to current values. Moreover – a factor that is of special significance for our future – it will not be possible to master the *grand challenges* we face (e.g. ageing, migration, demographics, the environment, etc.) by merely developing new technologies. We need the humanities, social and cultural sciences, particularly when trying to find solutions to such problems.

Furthermore, certain disciplines and research institutions/teams from the humanities, social and cultural sciences contribute to the strengths of the Austrian science and research landscape. This is how the University of Vienna managed to come in at No. 46 in the latest Times Higher Education Ranking<sup>1</sup> in the category of Arts and Humanities (corresponds to No. 15 within the EU). It holds a similar position in the QS World University Rankings by Subject<sup>2</sup>, where both philosophy and linguistics were rated 46th.

The strengths of the humanities, social and cultural sciences in Austria are also demonstrated by its successful participation in the framework programmes of the EU:

- As regards the thematic priority “Citizens and governance in a knowledge-based society” of the 6th EU Framework Programme, Austrian research institutions engaged in the field of the humanities, social and cultural sciences participated in 37.2 percent of all funded projects and were responsible for coordinating 6.9 percent of these

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/world-university-rankings/2012-13/subject-ranking/subject/arts-and-humanities/institution/university-of-vienna>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.topuniversities.com/university-rankings/world-university-rankings/2012/subject-rankings/arts-humanities>

projects (in comparison: in the 6th Framework Programme as a whole Austria was involved in 13.5 percent of the projects funded, with 3.3 percent being coordinated by Austria).<sup>3</sup>

- The 7th EU Framework Programme paints a similar picture. By May 2012 Austrian institutions engaged in the field of humanities, social and cultural sciences took part in 27.4 percent of all projects funded under the priority “SocioEconomic Sciences and Humanities (SSH)” (with Austrian participation averaging 10.2 percent for the Framework Programme as a whole) and also coordinated 6.3 percent of SSH projects (in comparison to an Austrian average of 3.4 percent in the Framework Programme as a whole).<sup>4</sup>

The humanities in particular are also extremely successful at securing funding on a competitive basis following international peer-review. Compared with other organisations for financing scientific research (e.g. German Research Foundation – DFG, or the European Research Council – ERC), the Austrian Science Fund (FWF) reports that humanities-related projects account for a significantly higher share of the overall budget. The rates of approval for the majority of humanities-related disciplines are also well above the FWF average.<sup>5</sup>

In acknowledgement of the importance and need for the humanities, social and cultural sciences to ensure the development of society, the Austrian Council for Research and Technology Development has in the past made a number of recommendations<sup>6</sup> in an attempt to help improve the structural framework conditions for the humanities, social and cultural sciences in Austria. The recommendation given below reinforces these efforts by addressing selected challenges in this field, particularly at the universities.

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<sup>3</sup> Proviso (2009); 6. EU-Rahmenprogramm für Forschung, technologische Entwicklung und Demonstration (2002-2006). PROVISO-Bericht. November 2009. Vienna. pp. 122, 124.

<sup>4</sup> Proviso (2012); 7. EU-Rahmenprogramm für Forschung, technologische Entwicklung und Demonstration (2007-2013). PROVISO-Überblicksbericht. May 2012. Vienna. pp. 92, 94.

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.fwf.ac.at/de/downloads/pdf/FWF-Erfolgswahrscheinlichkeit\\_P-99-08\\_15-12-2010.pdf](http://www.fwf.ac.at/de/downloads/pdf/FWF-Erfolgswahrscheinlichkeit_P-99-08_15-12-2010.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Previous Austrian Council recommendations regarding the humanities, social and cultural sciences:

- 15 January 2001: Recommendation Regarding the Further Development of the Humanities, Social and Cultural Sciences in Austria.
- 3/4 July 2002: Measures to Strengthen the Humanities, Social and Cultural Sciences.
- 16 September 2003: Recommendation Regarding the Humanities, Social and Cultural Sciences
- 30 March 2006: Recommendation Regarding the Austrian Academy of Sciences
- 2 April 2008: Recommendation Regarding the Further Development of the Humanities, Social and Cultural Sciences in Austria.

The FWF provided a commentary to the recommendation made in 2008:  
[http://www.fwf.ac.at/de/downloads/pdf/FWF-RFTEEmpfehlungen\\_2008.pdf](http://www.fwf.ac.at/de/downloads/pdf/FWF-RFTEEmpfehlungen_2008.pdf)

## Subject area 1: Oversubscribed subjects of study

The number of students has greatly increased in recent years, and in certain subjects it has more than doubled. This rise in numbers has however not been followed by a corresponding augmentation in teaching staff and has meanwhile resulted in untenable student-to-staff ratios in certain disciplines of the humanities, social and cultural sciences. The findings of the Swiss Science and Technology Council regarding the situation in Switzerland are no less true of Austria: *“This [i.e. the poor student-to-staff ratios] does not merely have an adverse effect on the quality of teaching (...), but also make it largely impossible for faculty members to carry out appropriate research through a lack of time. As a result, the goal of acquainting students with research work in the course of teaching in the academic environment cannot be realised to the desired extent.”*<sup>7</sup>

The repeatedly debated call to manage this situation by restricting admission to the most popular subjects of study entails the risk that prospective students then opt for closely related subjects, and the problem is merely shifted elsewhere. It is also above all in the field of the humanities and cultural sciences that the question arises as to which selection methods and criteria are suited to differentiating at the outset between the “right” and the “wrong” students for each degree. A more precise understanding of the motives involved in the selection of a course of study is required if students are to be *“successfully steered away from oversubscribed subjects and diverted towards others, for which greater popularity among students would be desirable in terms of the national economy and science policy (...)”*<sup>8</sup>. However, there is in fact a lack of systematic studies to indicate how a preference for or dislike of certain degree courses comes about when students are selecting a subject for study. It thus appears more expedient to bring about corresponding reform of the education system in order to capture the interests of school-age children and to nurture their talents across the entire breadth. In addition, a comprehensive, high-quality advisory system should be set up to cover the wide selection of subjects available for study and the associated possibilities.

If we also assume that it is relatively easy with demographic trends to forecast the numbers of youngsters graduating successfully from school and consequently the number entering higher education<sup>9</sup>, it is likewise possible to calculate the financial resources that will in future be required by the universities.

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<sup>7</sup> Swiss Science and Technology Council (2006); Perspektiven für die Geistes- und Sozialwissenschaften in der Schweiz. Lehre, Forschung, Nachwuchs. SWTR Schrift 3/2006. Bern. p. 49.

<sup>8</sup> Swiss Science and Technology Council (2006), p. 55.

<sup>9</sup> There is a certain degree of uncertainty arising from the difficulty of predicting the number of new students arriving from abroad.

## **Subject area 2: Structured careers with greater long-term perspectives for researchers**

In addition to the problematic conditions for teaching and research found in certain disciplines, another major difficulty involves the position of the next generation of academic staff, an issue which cannot be disregarded any longer. Junior scientists are confronted with factors such as the scarcity of financial resources, uncertainty of employment due to short-term contracts and the trend towards project-based research funding. As a result, highly gifted young scientists are thus increasingly either finding themselves in precarious employment, (are obliged to) leave Austria to improve their career prospects or give up the plan of a scientific career altogether, often dropping out before taking their doctorate – particularly in the case of the humanities, social and cultural sciences.

The 2002 Austrian Universities Act has brought about far-reaching changes in the contracts of employment held by academics and has altered the status of all mid-level academic staff. The most significant change was abolition of the status of civil servant for newly recruited academic staff, so that all mid-level university recruits are now only offered fixed-term employment contracts. Under the provisions governing “consecutive fixed term contracts”<sup>10</sup> these contracts can no longer be extended after a maximum of six years in the case of full-time employment (eight years for part-time staff), regardless of how well employees have performed during this time!

Although there exists a theoretical possibility of offering non-time-limited contracts of employment, the universities vary widely in the way they take advantage of this course of action, and overall very little use is made of the option.

The collective bargaining agreement which came into force on 1 October 2009, should improve the situation here in as much as it provides for a performance-related career model based on qualification agreements. This ultimately leads to an unlimited contract of employment in the fullness of time, i.e. once the qualification agreement is satisfied. However, very few of the “tenure-track positions” required here have in fact been created to date, with the result that there has been little improvement in the situation of academic staff at the universities.

In this context it will not come as a surprise that the number of doctoral students is relatively low, with this being even more true for the numbers of graduates in the humanities, social and cultural sciences. The cost and effort involved in earning a doctorate thus appear to many as not really worthwhile where there is a lack of financial support during such a course of study, slim prospects of a scientific career, and a growing risk of failure to find employment due to ever-increasing specialisation, “overqualification” and competition from younger applicants.

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<sup>10</sup> See also: § 109 (“Term of Employment Contracts”), Universities Act 2002, Status: Federal Law Gazette I No. 134/2008; as amended on 1 January 2009.

### **Subject area 3: Employability of graduates from the humanities, social and cultural sciences**

The issue of employability is anchored in the Bologna Declaration as a key objective of European reform of the higher education system. Even if this was initially only mentioned in conjunction with the comprehensibility and comparability of university degrees, improving the employability of Europe's students is meanwhile seen as one of the key drivers behind the Bologna process.<sup>11</sup> The cycle-based "Bachelor's" and "Master's" degrees are the outcome of a new understanding of qualification. Ideally, BA courses should lay the basis for both lifelong learning and employability by offering key theoretical and methodological tools, while MA courses allow students to increasingly specialise in their chosen field.<sup>12</sup>

Even if there is huge variation between the individual courses on offer for the humanities, social and cultural sciences, graduates of most of these courses are however particularly characterised by having acquired a broad-based, generalised education rather than specific professional qualifications. Degrees in the humanities, social and cultural sciences revolve around analytical skills in dealing with complex relationships (between structures, principles and rules) and involve networked, non-linear and systematic thinking. The broad base of a qualification, which also ensures greater versatility, is seen as offering a solid foundation for a successful career. At the same time however, a lack of specialisation is frequently cited as a hindrance when these graduates try to step onto the first rung of the career ladder.

The Swiss Science and Technology Council has thus called for more part-time degree courses in the field of the humanities, social and cultural sciences in order to offer students the opportunity of acquiring professional experience while still a student – including (increasingly) at an international level.<sup>13</sup>

In Austria the rate and average extent of employment is already very high, particularly where students of the humanities, social and cultural sciences are concerned.<sup>14</sup> This double burden of study and employment generally

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<sup>11</sup> Pasternack, Peer, et al. (2006); Die Trends der Hochschulbildung und ihre Konsequenzen. Wissenschaftlicher Bericht für das Bundesministerium für Bildung, Wissenschaft und Kultur der Republik Österreich. HoF Wittenberg – Institut für Hochschulforschung an der Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg. Wittenberg. p. 64.

<sup>12</sup> Swiss Science and Technology Council (2006), p. 64.

<sup>13</sup> Swiss Science and Technology Council (2006), pp. 65, 68.

<sup>14</sup> In the humanities, social and cultural sciences the proportion of students who undertook work during term time amounted to 66.2 percent, working an average of 19.2 hours per week. In the social and economic sciences, 65.4 percent of students were in employment, working an average of 21.1 hours per week. More than three quarters of working students (76 percent) cited the need to earn their living as their main motive for taking up employment; just over half (51 percent) of working students cited "vocational orientation" as their motive. See also: Unger, Martin, et al. (2010); Studierenden-Sozialerhebung 2009. Bericht zur sozialen Lage der Studierenden. Study by the Institute of Advanced Studies (IHS) on behalf of the Ministry for Science and Research. Vienna. pp. 141, 151, 158

has an adverse effect on the amount of time available for study – with the result that students are rarely able to graduate within the period envisaged for completion of their degree.

This situation is further aggravated by the circumstance that, contrary to the original intention of creating a professional university qualification with the Bachelor's degree, a BA is frequently not recognised as being a 'proper' academic qualification<sup>15</sup> and students are therefore obliged or opt to undertake a Master's degree as well.

#### **Subject area 4: Access to research data and publication infrastructure**

Like all other fields of science and research, the humanities, social and cultural sciences require suitable infrastructure, in particular access to research materials / data, which are available from publicly financed institutions such as museums, libraries or statistical offices. Scientists however often only have limited access to such information<sup>16</sup>, or it is only available for purchase at high cost from these institutions in the form of publications<sup>17</sup> using their research funding. This means that data and materials which are publicly financed then have to be paid for with public resources if reliable scientific information is to be made accessible to the general public.

In addition, it has been shown that the internationalisation of science also makes greater demands on scientific publications. This above all includes quality standards such as the peer review procedure or specialist / foreign-language proofreading for publications in the form of books but also involves taking advantage of the potential offered by open access, i.e. free access to scientific literature and other materials available on the Internet. The international assessment procedures of the FWF and other funding agencies (such as the ERC) show that evergreater importance is being attached to such factors in the evaluation of scientific publications by scientific communities in the field of humanities, social and cultural sciences.

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<sup>15</sup> It is not just the private sector that has reservations about Bachelor's degrees. It was not until December 2011 that the public sector was able to bring itself to recognise the B.A. in civil service salary law, by creating a new salary grade to take effect on 1.1.2012 for BA graduates who had already been employed in the public sector prior to obtaining their degree. For further information see: <https://www.help.gv.at/Portal.Node/hlpd/public/content/340/Seite.34060717.html#Bachelor>

<sup>16</sup> See also the very limited access to micro-data in Austria:

[http://www.noeg.ac.at/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=11&Itemid=12&lang=de](http://www.noeg.ac.at/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=11&Itemid=12&lang=de)

<sup>17</sup> See for example, the prices of the Austrian National Library, which are still comparatively moderate but increase exponentially as a result of online use:

[http://www.onb.ac.at/ben/gebuehren\\_verwendungsentgelte.htm#a14932](http://www.onb.ac.at/ben/gebuehren_verwendungsentgelte.htm#a14932)

## Recommendation

The Austrian Council for Research and Technology Development recommends the following measures to deal with the above challenges facing the Austrian universities, and the humanities, social and cultural sciences in particular:

- **Funding for the universities:** Austria's universities are the backbone of its tertiary education system and a major part of its research and innovation system. Ensuring financial security for higher education is thus of vital importance to the future of the country and must be anchored in the federal budget in the interest of secure long-term planning. Here the natural sciences and engineering must not be played off against the humanities, social and cultural sciences or vice versa, as society requires both for further development. The Austrian Council therefore recommends that following detailed examination of international models for research funding, tax incentives should be stepped up for industryfunded research in the humanities, social and cultural sciences, in addition to explicitly supporting the setting-up of foundations dedicated to this field. However, such a measure should not belie the fact that *“under no circumstances is it possible to compensate for a lack of basic facilities with funding acquired through a competitive process, i.e. resources which are only ever available on a temporary basis.”*<sup>18</sup> The Austrian Council therefore also recommends that the statutory provision of “two percent of GDP for the tertiary sector” is enshrined in legislation governing research funding.
- **Relieving the pressure on oversubscribed subjects of study:** The pressure on these subjects could be relieved by improving the system of credits for other courses beyond the individual boundaries of each subject or by relaxing the criteria for acceptance of such credits. This might additionally offer greater scope for cooperation within the humanities, social and cultural sciences by including the so-called “minor” disciplines. The Austrian Council therefore recommends introducing corresponding measures at the universities.
- **Doctoral programmes:** As regards funding levels for doctoral programmes, the humanities, social and cultural sciences in particular still have a long way to go if they are to catch up with other disciplines. This is key to ensuring young scientists are supported and encouraged to good effect. The Austrian Council therefore once again recommends stepping up systematic, structured and fully funded doctoral programmes, not only by offering additional courses at this level, but also by increasing the availability of doctoral fellowships (including at leading institutions based abroad) in conjunction with performance-related rules for admission and international standards for professional doctoral programmes.

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<sup>18</sup> Swiss Science and Technology Council (2006); p. 37.

- **Outlook for young academics:** It is not only science and research that require continuity: young academics also need realistic prospects which are based on transparent selection procedures and allow them to carry out independent research at an early stage and plan for their future life and career. The current situation is characterised by a growing lack of job security, unsatisfactory regulations as regards consecutive fixed term contracts and a scarcity of career positions in higher education. And this is not just a problem for the individual scientist, but also for Austria's science and research landscape overall, as a huge amount of talent is currently lost to the system. This is not a difficulty solely affecting the humanities, social and cultural sciences, although it has been shown to be particularly acute in this field. One of the consequences here is that young scientists fear they will be faced with even fewer opportunities following a temporary absence and then become highly immobile, so making little use of fellowship formats such as the FWF's Schrödinger Fellowship programme.<sup>19</sup> As it is both important and desirable for highly qualified scientists to remain at the universities in the framework of stable employment, this once again calls for an improvement, i.e. an increase, in the basic funding available to the Austrian higher education system if there is to be any significant rise in the number of tenure-track positions on offer. In the view of the Austrian Council, it is also necessary for the Federal Ministry for Science and Research and the universities to jointly analyse the application in practice of the current provisions governing consecutive fixed term contracts and the collective bargaining agreement and to come up with improvements that would offer a balanced solution going beyond the issue of "full-tenure vs. consecutive fixed term contracts". Where this concerns third-party funding for individual scientists, the Austrian Council also recommends the involvement of the FWF here.
- **Greater scope for research:** Time is the most important requirement for people employed in science and research. At the same time, it is in the oversubscribed fields of study that the resource of "time for research" is often in very short supply – if available at all – due to the extensive obligations of the teaching staff vis-à-vis their students. In the medium to long term, this involves the risk that key scientific disciplines will miss out on international developments. The Austrian Council therefore recommends the creation of framework conditions conducive to the development and funding of an initiative which would offer greater scope for research in the humanities, social and cultural sciences through a new form of support and broad-based exemption from university obligations for a specific period of time. This initiative should be developed and implemented by the FWF to subsequently award

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<sup>19</sup> [http://www.fwf.ac.at/de/public\\_relations/printprodukte/info/info76-11-01.pdf](http://www.fwf.ac.at/de/public_relations/printprodukte/info/info76-11-01.pdf)

funding on a competitive basis to individuals who excel in the humanities, social and cultural sciences.

The Austrian Council furthermore recommends reducing the level of bureaucracy at the universities. If red tape were scaled down and, above all, scientific staff relieved of their administrative duties, this would create more time for highquality teaching and research, so significantly reducing the need for programmes designed to free up such staff for research. If the separation between research and teaching is too great, this also entails the risk of losing the connection between the two that Humboldt deemed necessary for academic instruction in his ideal of education. For this reason, the Austrian Council additionally advises against the creation of professorships solely devoted to research and those to teaching, as is sometimes envisaged.

- **Measures for the structuring and improvement of options relating to income from “external sources”:** In the past, national priority programmes were an important precondition for the further development of scientific skills and quality assurance. However, despite their positive evaluation, the two successful programmes “NODE”<sup>20</sup> and “TRAFO”<sup>21</sup> have been discontinued and not replaced by new measures. While in the last ten or so years, a relatively large amount of money has flowed into ICT and the Life Sciences and thus into the development of outstanding research centres and institutions<sup>22</sup>, there have been no remotely comparable initiatives in the humanities, social and cultural sciences or any influx of funds into this field. The Austrian Council therefore first of all recommends implementation of the “NIKE – Network Initiative Cultural Heritage” programme<sup>23</sup> devised by the FWF in 2008 and secondly, the development of incentives designed to bring about structural improvement for the humanities, social and cultural sciences.

One option here would be to extend COMET, Austria’s centre of excellence programme, in terms of the eligibility of applicants modelled on the example of Australia’s “Cooperative Research Centres Programme (CRC)”. Here the CRC specifically provides for participation *“from all industry and community sectors and all research*

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<sup>20</sup> The research programme NODE – New Orientations for Democracy in Europe of the Ministry for Science and Research had a term of five years (with three calls between 2002 and 2006) and a total budget of 5.8 million euros for some 30 research projects.

<sup>21</sup> The research programme TRAFO – Transdisciplinary Forms of Research in the Humanities, Social and Cultural Sciences of the Ministry for Science and Research was carried out between 2004 and 2007.

<sup>22</sup> For example, the founding of IMBA (Institute of Molecular Biotechnology), the GMI (Gregor Mendel Institute), CeMM (Centre for Molecular Medicine of the Austrian Academy of Sciences), and IST-Austria.

<sup>23</sup> [http://www.fwf.ac.at/de/downloads/pdf/NIKE\\_Programmkurztext.pdf](http://www.fwf.ac.at/de/downloads/pdf/NIKE_Programmkurztext.pdf)

*disciplines including humanities, arts and social sciences*” and thus stipulates that project participants must be involved in cooperation with an “end-user (either from the private, public or community sector)” and “higher education institution (or a research institute affiliated with a university)”<sup>24</sup>. In the COMET programme, however, it is currently only consortia consisting of one scientific partner and at least three / five partners from industry that are eligible to apply, so automatically restricting cooperation within the framework of the centres of excellence to research allied to business or industry. The Austrian Council thus recommends extending the COMET programme, both in terms of areas of science and research and also as regards the eligibility of applicants in line with Australia’s Cooperative Research Centres Programme.

- **Improvement in employability of graduates in humanities, social and cultural sciences:** The Bachelor’s (BA) degree is frequently not recognised as being a ‘proper’ academic qualification, and for this reason it is necessary to facilitate the transition to Master’s (MA) courses for students. The Austrian Council therefore recommends suitable measures should be introduced to avoid delays in enrolment on Master’s degrees. In addition, the number of places on MA courses should not be restricted either – indeed, the universities should ensure that they do not just offer MA degrees which follow on from a BA, but also that students are increasingly allowed to transfer from a programme which is not consecutive. Furthermore, those graduates of the humanities, social and cultural sciences who are not interested in pursuing a scientific career should be increasingly able to acquire qualifications (e.g. by means of additional university courses) which will ease their entry into the world of work.  
This includes for example dealing with information and communications technology as well as obtaining an understanding of law and business administration (e.g. project management and project work, budgeting and cost structures, as well as the different types of business organisation).  
This way the flexibility offered by graduates from the humanities, social and cultural sciences can be supplemented to good effect by specific industrial skills and knowledge.
- **Access to research materials / data:** To facilitate and/or guarantee access to research data and materials which have been financed with public resources, the Austrian Council recommends coordination of existing statutory provisions and – where necessary – creation of the relevant legal framework conditions.
- **Investment in an internationally visible publication infrastructure incorporating quality assurance:** To satisfy the more exacting demands made on scientific publications as a result of

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<sup>24</sup> Commonwealth of Australia (2012); Cooperative Research Centres Program – Program Guidelines, Canberra 2012, pp. 1, 2.

the internationalisation of science, the Austrian Council recommends the creation of appropriate framework conditions. The aim here is to establish an internationally visible publishing sector in Austria and to brand it the “Austrian University Press” or “Austrian Academic Press” to target the premium market for scientific publications.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> [http://www.fwf.ac.at/de/public\\_relations/oai/pdf/info83\\_austrian-univ-academic-press.pdf](http://www.fwf.ac.at/de/public_relations/oai/pdf/info83_austrian-univ-academic-press.pdf)