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INTERVIEW WITH GERT BACHMANN ON THE IMPACT OF THE UNIVERSITY REFORM IN AUSTRIA (JULY 13, 2005)

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What aspects of the previous university system most warranted a reform and did the reform successfully tackle these specific issues?

1. The strong dependency of structural and personal decisions on the often questionable criteria of the ministry of education.
- 2 The lack of positions for doctoral students.
- 3 The lack of funding of infrastructure.
- 4, Funding for teaching was not distributed appropriately according to the number of students.

The "reform" did tackle No. 1, but this was rendered worthless by:

- a) the complete destruction of democratic structures and decision boards; and
- b) funding that was too low (even reduced) to render the new structures effective of even operational.

No. 2: The inappropriate approach to boosting doctoral positions was to sacrifice permanent positions of system-maintaining university teachers instead of adding more non-permanent positions. This puts continuity of teaching programs at risk, because the non-permanent staff has no motivation whatsoever to devote time to teaching and

administration rather than to getting publications.

No. 3: Funding was cut dramatically, despite whatever defensive statements Mrs. Gehrler is spreading.

No. 4: Due to the poor funding, teaching is more neglected than ever, and has lowest priority along with the equally poorly funded research programs.

What are the major goals of the new structure? Are some short-term goals already attained? Can you give specific examples of how the reforms have positively (or negatively) impacted the Austrian universities?

The major goal was to give the universities "autonomy" (see goal No. 1). This was not achieved at all, as the only person now having autonomy is the president of the university, who is himself beleaguered by professors competing for the inadequate resources to guarantee the institutes some continuity. Thus, the development of the university has been reduced to a swamp of hostile takeover attempts by ambitious professors without any democratic guidelines. The humble teachers and researchers have no more say, and no options other than to make their bed with influential persons. Thus, an interdisciplinary and tolerant university is shifting over to competitive chaos. The marginalization of not easily marketable areas of science, so-called "orchid institutes" is only a matter of time.

How strong or weak should the influence of the government on Higher Education be? Which areas of Austrian universities should be regulated by the government in the future?

The government has responsibility for standards of education and research. This cannot be completely delegated to semi-private operators. A state university cannot be left to mechanisms of free competition, nor is this the case in the often cited English speaking states or "the rest of Europe." A private university is a different matter, but the Austrian government is now about to privatize the few state universities this country has, which is, in my opinion, a deplorable sell-out of cultural heritage and future opportunities. If a private university is wanted, the industry should fund it! Otherwise, the industry's research is funded by the state, which is against all reason.

Where do you see the benefits and where are the risks of the new University structure?

The new structure has, without a modicum of democratic framework and governmental control, no benefit at all. There would only be a benefit if the government had given the universities autonomy without rendering them autocratic, and if they were adequately funded.

Regarding equal opportunities in terms of gender, Austrian universities are sometimes criticized for an under-representation of women in tenured positions. Members of the equal opportunities committee have expressed concerns that the new university structure has further weakened their position. What is the long-term vision for how to arrive at equal opportunities in the new system?

The new system is without a model contract, and includes a tenure track very much hostile to women which will

keep them permanently out of the university. Thus, such a collective agreement (*Kollektivvertrag*) has utmost priority.

Have students and the junior faculty (so-called “Mittelbau”) embraced the reform? If not, what are the major points of criticism?

Students and the “Mittelbau” have been cut off from decision and information processes that were previously guaranteed by democratic, evenly-composed boards. The “Mittelbau” did and does the work, but anachronistic professors now gather in obscure places and lobby their dubious aims. This cannot be embraced by the outcasts, who are not likely to cooperate in such an autocratic framework.

In your opinion, what are the role and the potential of Austrian universities when it comes to basic and applied research? What impact, if any, has the reform had on that role?

Formerly, the broad range of issues and areas of science made the University of Vienna, especially, a global player in basic research. There is now a strong pressure for science to be “applied,” “innovative,” “excellent,” “outreaching,” and so forth. Phrases seem more important than facts. This favors applied research and puts basic research permanently on the defensive. Due to the previously mentioned lack of funding, basic research has been set back for several years to come.

Do you feel that the envisioned “University of Excellence” will benefit the existing universities? Is there even a need for such a university, if it is only to be an Institute of Advanced Studies?

The envisioned “University of Excellence” will obviously compete directly with the already inadequate funding of the existing universities, despite all denials by politicians. Some institutes may want to migrate to the University of Excellence, if they can, in order to survive at all, leaving the rest to get along under the stigma of non-excellence. There would be no need for such a university funded by state money, if the existing excellent institutes were properly funded. It would be a different matter if a consortium of private investors decided to “go for it.” As it now stands, the whole concept is a humiliation and a slap in the face of present university researchers.

If you could draw a picture of the Austrian university system in 2030, what would it look like? What are the greatest challenges for Austrian universities in the next 25 years and what are the lines along which Austrian universities will develop?

In 2030, the climate change and ecosystem-related problems will be overwhelming. Also the socioeconomic aspects of energy consumption and market saturation will need universities able to tackle these time bombs. The great challenge is not to serve the current mainstream of neo-mercantilism and its requirements for rapid application of research results, but rather to answer questions of declining energy supply, coexistence between south and north, in one word, sustainability. The current legal situation is not suited to encourage such an orientation.

With the European development of universities in mind, what are the specific strengths of the Austrian universities – what makes them stand out in an international competition? How would you entice international students to study in Austria?

Austrian Universities have the strength of interdisciplinary work based on broad expertise developed over more than a hundred years combined with cutting-edge knowledge. Many institutes are outstanding.

How can the open-door policy in university admissions be maintained while, at the same time, sustaining high quality standards and remaining internationally competitive?

It is a common misunderstanding that numeri clausi or any other methods of sieving students per se creates excellence. Out of a big pool of well trained students, many able scientists will emerge. An elitist concentration on a few students will produce, in a short time, many excellent students having good marks, but not necessarily having the other characteristics required for scientific quality – open minds, creativity, cooperative thinking, broad education rendering them capable of grasping important challenges, students who are not just competitive in terms of squeezing as many papers as possible out of a project. An open door to education must remain, because an ignorant population guided by a few competitive “excellers” is a horrible picture of the future.

What implications – if any at all – does the European enlargement have for Austrian universities?

The European enlargement makes it all the more necessary to concentrate on issues of poverty, land use and cover change, risk assessment, and a renaissance of research related to philosophical and sociological concerns.

(Fonte: <http://www.ostina.org/content/view/356/>)