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THE MOST SWEEPING UNIVERSITY REFORM IN 150 YEARS (JULY 2005)

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by [Sigurd Höllinger](#)



The University Act of 2002 represents a continuation of policies in place since 1990, whereby the Austrian universities are being progressively weaned away from a system traditionally based on central command and control, and towards autonomy. The previous reforms did not go far enough, and embodied too many compromises. The new Act has opened the way for decisive changes, which the universities are now in the process of planning and implementing.

The aim is to make the universities of tomorrow competitive players in research and teaching in the European higher education arena. It should enable them to enhance their research and teaching performance, to use resources more efficiently, to adapt more flexibly to new developments, to do a better job of promoting creativity and individual initiative, and to become a more active, independent, and critical intellectual authority. The tasks of the universities remain research and teaching, and they will continue to be devoted to basic research in areas of interest to academics, and to prepare students for working life.

The new Act provides for three different stages of realization. The first stage started in October 2002; the second stage, when the universities were granted full legal capacity, began in January 2004; and the third stage will commence with implementation of the performance agreements in January 2007. Highly effective changes with a positive impact both on students and on scientists should not be expected in the short run. The enhanced performance and prestige of Austrian universities (or the lack thereof) will only become evident after several years. The effects and consequences of such extensive changes in a system must be evaluated after decades, and considered in connection with other major developments such as the European unification process. Humboldt's reform in the 19th century achieved its greatest success and results nearly a century after it was first attempted. Today the results are likely to appear more quickly.

Having been challenged in 155 of its provisions and having only three of those ruled unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court, the new Act has successfully met the most serious legal challenges. The universities have been successful in establishing their new organizational structures within the short period allowed. The senior

governing bodies – the president's office, the board of trustees and the senate – have assumed their duties and established their mechanisms for cooperation and interaction. The universities have compiled the opening balance sheet and, for the first time, a statement of account. The Education Ministry, together with the association of university presidents has prepared a draft for the intellectual capital reports of the universities. These reports represent and communicate all the available and accessible knowledge of the universities which is relevant to research, teaching, learning, continuing education, and administrative processes. The universities are presently preparing development plans that allow them to delineate and strengthen their profiles, as well as to eliminate fields and departments which are weak or of lesser importance. Limited but secure public funds favor changes in unfavorable structures. Occasionally, a university president is not open to communication; hence conflicts, even small ones, frequently become public. The Ministry oversees a restrained and conservative policy of supervision of the universities. In case of conflicts, the Ministry does not intervene, since the universities must become accustomed to their new autonomy and legal identity, a process which should not be interfered with.

The first test of the new cooperative partnership between the universities and the state, instead of the previous old and sovereign – albeit hallowed – relationship, will be the negotiations over the performance agreements for the years 2007, 2008, and 2009. All parties involved are playing their parts for the first time. The negotiations that will be entered into for the first time in 2006 will be more difficult than subsequent ones, because no precedent has yet been established for the negotiations, the performance report, or giving details about the preceding period of the performance agreement.

The great majority of university professors, as well as the junior faculty and the students, seem to have approved of the reform, albeit without much enthusiasm. The university administration is now noticeable and receives criticism, hence the first success of the reform can be perceived. In contrast to the earlier system of collegial bodies, decisions can now be attributed to specific persons who have to take responsibility for these decisions.

The University Act of 2002 provides for a legal protection system concerning gender specific matters, instruments for the promotion of women in case of structurally-caused inequalities, and a legal framework for continuing established and well-proven institutions, founded for the advancement and development of activities in research and teaching in the area of "Gender Studies." The legal protection system concerning gender-specific matters consists of control mechanisms within the university structure, equal opportunity working parties, and arbitration commissions, none of which is bound by any directions in the exercise of their duties. The Equal Opportunities Act, with its provisions about protection and promotion, applies to all members of the university. One important instrument for the promotion of women is the requirement that the autonomous university issue an advancement plan for women. The promotion of women is prominently positioned in our new university system, and also acts as an instrument for financial control. The continuation of well-proven facilities is guaranteed by the organizational structure in the new Act. In autumn 2005 the Ministry will start a new advancement program called "excellencia," which will extend the present measures taken in the area of promotion of women as well as "Gender Mainstreaming." The aim of the program is to double the number of female university professors at Austrian universities by the year 2010.

Austria already has outstanding research institutions, is pushing through an ambitious university reform program, and has a high quality of life. All this makes it an ideal location for a new world-class research center acting as a beacon for the research effort throughout Europe. The founding of such a center has been proposed, creating an institution to be named the "*Austrian Institute of Advanced Science and Technology*." The *Austrian Institute of Advanced Science and Technology* is to be a new institution – the only one of its kind in Europe – and will cooperate with existing universities and research institutions at the national and international level. The goal is for it to be one of the key institutions in the European Research Area, one that will set standards and benefit existing universities and research institutions. The new institute will initially focus on natural science and mathematics, and subsequently branch out into other disciplines. It will aim to open up new research areas – especially fields still generally perceived to be of marginal importance. "People are more important than subjects" will be the keynote of the new institution's mission.

Government funding of the *Austrian Institute of Advanced Science and Technology* will not be at the expense of existing universities or research institutions. The federal government will provide additional resources earmarked for the institute. A substantial increase in the resources available to the Austrian Science Fund will be necessary. Members of existing universities and other institutions will be able to compete on equal terms with members of the new university for these resources, which are allocated to research projects according to their merit.

Efforts for fundamental reform and modernization are also being made by the Austrian Academy of Sciences. Some excellent new institutes have already been established as legal corporations.

The conditions set up to develop and strengthen the profiles of the Austrian scientific institutions are new, and the majority of scientists show strong commitment. The prospects are very good for reaching the highest international level in research and teaching – in many more fields than today – within one or two decades. Considerably more money will be required from the public sector as well as from the private sector. The Federal Government is already committed to providing an additional €1 billion for research for the year 2005-2010.

Achieving world-class status for Austrian universities is possible.

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