

Austrian National Students' Union (ÖH – Bundesvertretung)

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1. About the ÖH

(1) The Austrian Students' Union (ÖH) was established in 1946 and legally represents the interests of over 290,000 students throughout Austria (current as of 2008/09, Statistik Austria). In collaboration with university, academic division, and departmental delegations, as well as the delegations of universities of applied sciences and universities for teacher education, the ÖH advocates at all levels for the concerns of students.

(2) The chairs and heads of units represent student interests, first and foremost to the Federal Ministry of Science and Research; the Federal Ministry for Education, Arts and Culture; political parties; state associations and the public. In 2004, against the students' will, the voting procedure of the national delegation was radically altered. For the first time in the post-war era, the direct election of representatives was abolished. Since the enactment of these changes, neither the national delegation nor the academic division delegation has been directly elected by the students. Individual university delegations currently send representatives to the national delegation, leading to distorted representation. We have chosen some of our most important areas of work for consideration in this report.

2. Tuition Fees

(3) Tuition fees were re-established in Austria in 2001 after almost 30 years of free and public higher education. In the following year, 30 % of all students felt forced to leave university. Attempts to attract more students to universities were thrown back by at least five years. By 2005 two out of three students were forced to work beside their studies. Even studies commissioned by the Austrian ministry of education show that women, immigrants and students from poor families are affected by tuition fees more than others.

(4) The fees especially targeted students from non-EEA countries. They were obliged to pay twice as much as students from Austria or other EEA countries, while conditions for working permits for international students were tightened.

(5) Tuition fees still block access to universities, although fees have been refunded to a majority of Austrian and EU students since spring 2009. Foreign students still pay over 700 EUR per year to study in Austria, as do Austrian/EU students who have reached a critical time studying. By autumn 2009, the number of new students rose by over 20% among those groups who access university for free - an increase the groups neglected in the abolishment of tuition still wait for. Also students still quit their studies because they have reached the point at which they are obligated to pay to stay at university.

3. Access to Universities

(6) Since 2005, access to a continuously growing number of study programs is limited. Free access to professional training and free choice of profession is not guaranteed anymore. We denounce that this is first and foremost a strategy to limit investment on higher education. Selection procedures were shown to be biased, putting women, immigrants, and children from

poor and/or non-academic households at disadvantage. This has been shown by studies commissioned by the ministry of higher education.

4. Social Selection in Austria's (Higher) Education System

(7) Social Selection in the Austrian Education System does not start at university level but in kindergarten and above all in school. At the age of ten, children are divided into different school systems. This distinction leads to the fact that the educational background of the parents is reproduced in their children. In this regard one talks about so-called "educationally disadvantaged" and "educationally favoured/advantaged" households. This differentiation refers to the highest educational attainment of the father. Only a small part of an age-group is able to pass school and enter a higher education institution but children from an "educationally advantaged" background are a lot more likely to do so. In 2009, 47,5% of students at institutes for higher education came from "educationally favoured" families, while only 18,2% were children of "educationally disadvantaged" families.

(8) Social selectivity has its strongest impact in gainful occupation: 64,4% of students from a lower social stratum have to hold down a job (on average 23,7 hours per week) to earn a living. Furthermore, 37% of these students, in comparison to 9% of the students from a higher social stratum, have already been working in any area before they started their studies. Students from "disadvantaged" backgrounds show an over proportionate weekly working effort (44 hours) because they have to reconcile their studies and jobs. This is why students who declare that it is hard for them to deal with their financial situation are twice as likely as other students to suffer from concentration problems, from stress-related health complaints or psychological problems and are concerned with fears (c.f. paragraph 5 - accessibility).

(9) In Austria there is, besides a base aid (the so called "Familienbeihilfe" – the family grant), a study grant which depends on the salary of the student's parents. This grant operates redistributive but only 25% of all students and approximately half the students from a lower social stratum receive this benefit. Their gainful occupation is the reason why a lot of students from lower social backgrounds lose their grant entitlements. This is because they have to meet certain, very specific, criteria – e.g. a certain study duration, income limits, etc. - to be entitled to receive this benefit. Moreover, the problem is that a lot of students do not know about their rights and possibilities to receive certain benefits. Another problem in connection with the studying grant system is that the parents' revenue turns the balance whether their children are entitled to receive a grant or not. There is a broader tax-based scope in the treatment of incomes from self-employment, farming, etc. This fact favours students from "better-off" backgrounds to receive a studying grant.

5. Accessibility to and at Austrian universities and higher education institutes

(10) According to an official inquiry by the ministry of science and research (responsible for universities and other institutions of higher education in Austria) in 2009, about 1.3% of Austrian students have a physical handicap, 12% a chronic illness and 8% other health problems. This means, that these groups are still underrepresented if compared to the general population. Also, Universities do not follow legal guidelines for the compulsive employment of chronically ill and handicapped persons.

(11) Although certain efforts have been taken to give these students equal possibilities at universities, many obstacles remain. Until now disability compensation is virtually unknown in Austrian university law.

(12) Successful on-campus lobbying for implementation of accessibility measures (e.g. for establishing guidance systems and special library) often hinges largely on the local student representatives' personal commitment and assertion. In general, larger institutes of higher education offer significantly better features for students with physical handicaps or chronic illnesses. Chronically ill and handicapped students still depend on the good-will of university administrations.

6. Mental illness among students

(13) In the last years the number of students affected by mental disorder/illness has risen disturbingly:

22 % of students in Austria feel they suffer from pressure to perform/performance anxiety

20% suffer from depression

20% have low self-esteem

18% are afraid of exams

16% fear for their existence

15% suffer from burn-out

12% feel socially isolated and

7% suffer from eating disorders.

(14) Students of medicine and veterinary medicine are over proportionately represented in these figures, as are students studying at Universities for Arts and at institutions of higher education with a scientific focus. We see a clear relation between these numbers, decreased social welfare for students, worsening study conditions and increased pressure to perform.

7. Democratization

(15) Self-governing bodies were introduced to Universities in 1975. They developed from the necessity of democratizing institutions of higher education and were supposed to reflect the importance of equality of all agents in the tertiary education sector. These structures and their competencies were, however, severely curtailed by reforms of the University Studies Act in 1993 and 2002. A further step in unequal treatment of students and teachers in higher education was taken by establishing the "Fachhochschul"(FH)-sector (universities of applied sciences).

(16) The desire to have contributions from private investment towards education costs in Austria led to the acceptance of organizational structures under private law in the establishment of the FH-sector around 15 years ago. Due to the organizational structure, managing directors of FHs have the possibility to impose hierarchical directives from the top that have to be legally met by all parties. Furthermore, students are bound by "articles of traineeship" under private law to refrain from voicing criticism about their FH. These structures counteract a necessary democratization of the tertiary sector.

(17) The question arises whether the private sector should be allowed to exercise such a high level of influence on decisions in higher education. The Austrian Students' Union (ÖH)

vehemently negates this. In a place where independent and critical thought should be encouraged, with research and teaching functioning accordingly, particular interests cannot be the basis for decisions. A tertiary institution should rather organise and develop from the inside with involvement of all parties.

(18) A small step in the right direction was the creation of student representative structures at FHs in the last two years. Criticism voiced in the name of a student representative body prevents individual students from violating the terms of their “articles of traineeship” and generates a loud channel for voicing students’ interests. The developments in this area have led to the consideration of self-governing bodies for FHs; their implementation, however, remains to be observed.

(19) Conversely, the structures of FHs sadly have come to serve as a model for Austrian universities to limit the free development of institutions of higher education and implement rigid hierarchical structures. It is a vital interest of the ÖH to prevent this development. Institutions of higher education are not corporations and must not develop in that direction in order to retain the freedom of knowledge.

Sources:

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