

Austria

Non-traditional students in the 2000s

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Introduction

Ten years ago, we gave an account of the situation of non-traditional students in Austrian higher education (Pechar and Wroblewski 2000). We defined non-traditional students by the following characteristics:

- alternative routes of access to higher education (the regular route to higher education is via graduation from the Gymnasium, however, there are alternatives for students with occupational experience that are taken by a small minority);
- delayed entrance to higher education;
- part-time study, mainly due to working while studying.

We mainly focused on part-time students because this was, by far, the largest group. However, our paradoxical finding was that this group was largely invisible, because there was (and still is) no official part-time status at Austrian universities. Although the majority of students study part-time, they are considered to be full-time students. Our conclusion was that this myth of the full-time student resulted in the neglect of the needs of non-traditional students in general and working part-time students in particular. The structure of Austrian higher education – the legal definition of students, the way courses were offered, the nature of student aid – did not do justice to the needs of this group of students.

In this chapter we will follow-up on these considerations and discuss the impact of the recent changes in higher education policy on the conditions of non-traditional students, in particular working part-time students. We will also discuss to what extent the awareness of the underlying principles of lifelong learning has increased in universities.

The last decade brought many changes to Austrian higher education:

- a major reform in university governance (Federal Ministry for Science and Research 2011);

- the implementation of the Bologna reform;
- the introduction of tuition fees;
- the establishment of new sectors of higher education (private university sector, and the establishment of a new University for Continuing Education).

In the first section we will discuss the rationale for these policy changes and we devise some hypotheses on the possible impact of these changes on the conditions for non-traditional students. In the second section we present a statistical portrait of non-traditional students and discuss the extent to which the data support, or otherwise, our hypothesis. Our conclusions point to a mismatch between traditional and modernized elements in Austrian higher education.

Policy changes in the 2000s

University governance

The reform of university governance triggered the most fervent controversy of the last decade. The traditional governance pattern at Austrian universities was characterized by a dualism between administrative and academic responsibilities: on the one hand the university was a state agency and subject to centralized decision making by legislation and state bureaucracy. On the other hand the academic oligarchy was in charge of all issues regarding teaching and research – each chair holder controlling his/her own specialized field of research. The university as an organization was weak. The rector was regarded as *primus inter pares* to represent the university, not to govern, let alone manage it.

Academics regarded it as a cultural obligation of the enlightened secular state (*Kulturstaat*) to provide beneficial circumstances for academic life. The state was seen mainly as a power to protect the integrity and autonomy of universities, not as a potential threat to their independence. The implicit precondition for this pattern of dual governance was mutual trust and respect between the state bureaucracy and senior academics. This tacit agreement was seriously disturbed during the expansion of universities starting in the 1960s and the attempts of the government to make higher education more relevant to the economy.

Starting in the 1990s, the government abandoned the *Kulturstaat* tradition and instead embraced the Anglo-Saxon policies of new public management (NPM). The first major step to apply NPM successfully to higher education was the establishment of *Fachhochschulen* in 1993 (Pratt and Hackl 1999, Pechar 2004). It was much more difficult to apply the NPM approach to universities. A first reform proposal by the government was strongly rejected by the academic community and resulted in a compromise (University Organisation Act 1993) that was only a cautious step towards more institutional autonomy (Pechar and Pellert 1998).

The most important consequence of this new university act was the emergence of a new type of rectors who – compared with the former rectors – had significantly increased responsibilities. It was mainly this group that advocated for more efficient management structures. In the early 2000s the government continued with a governance reform that aimed for full legal entity of universities (Titscher *et al.* 2000). In 2002 a new Organizational Act (Universities Act 2002) was passed by Parliament, in 2004 it became operative.

Universities are no longer state agencies, but they remain in the domain of the public law ('legal persons under public law'). The federal government keeps the responsibility for basic funding, but universities are relieved from the fiscal regulations of the federal budget and receive a lump-sum budget under their own discretion. Resources are allocated on the basis of performance contracts. Each university has a governing board that elects the rector. The rector is no longer 'first among equals' but a manager who is more independent of collegial academic bodies than before. Academics are no longer civil servants but employed by private contracts.

The new organizational law is probably the most far-reaching reform since 1849, when Austria embraced the Humboldtian model. It has – among other effects – severe consequences for the culture of teaching and learning. In the 'old regime' this culture was characterized by a *laissez-faire* style that allows students to determine the pace of their studies, e.g. they could decide to take an examination at the end of the course or to delay this decision to a later semester – potentially an open-ended process. Because of the flexibility associated with that system there was no necessity to provide specific support for working students or students with specific needs. The *laissez-faire* conditions for students were matched by *laissez-faire* conditions for academics. Neither of the two sides had formal obligations vis-à-vis the other in the way it occurs in the higher education systems of the Anglo-Saxon world. Monitoring the progress of students was not considered an obligation of the university and its instructors. Such monitoring was even seen as illegitimate and inconsistent with the spirit of the Humboldtian university, ignoring the fact 'that Humboldt's ideals were created for a university at which at most 1% of a given age group studied, and therefore bear little relation to the realities of present-day mass higher education, especially in German-speaking Europe' (Ash 2006: 248).

The *laissez-faire* culture was persistent because neither students nor academics were interested in changing it. Both enjoyed the large amount of freedom it granted to them, and under the old governance regime rectors had neither a responsibility for nor influence on teaching. This changed under the new governance regime. Now the university management has a strong interest in an efficient use of resources, hence they try to substitute the *laissez-faire* attitudes by stricter rules. Rectors have a direct interest in reducing the duration of studies, because this duration plays a role in the formula for the

allocation of the budget. Gradually the old *laissez-faire* practices are displaced by stricter rules. The changing attitudes of university managers are also reflected in their support for the Bologna Process. From their perspective the new European study architecture is an excellent opportunity to abandon the *laissez-faire* culture of teaching and learning.

Bologna Process

At the European level the Bologna Process is considered a success story. Indeed, in 1999 not even the most optimistic proponents of this reform would have thought that this concept would prevail so fast (Pechar 2007). In Austria too, Bologna was implemented quite successfully, at least at a superficial level. With the exception of medicine, law, and teacher training all disciplines have introduced the new study architecture. By now (winter term 2009/10) 75 per cent of all studies taken by first year students are bachelor studies. However, beneath this success with the most visible and ostensible goals of the Bologna Process we can discover some serious problems. There is some indication that the Bologna Process was implemented in a superficial way (Ash 2006).

The introduction of the Bachelor degree was much more than the addition of a new degree; it replaces the single tier by a two-tier logic (Clark 1983, 49). For centuries, the single-tier logic has shaped the attitudes of students and teachers and the expectations of employers at the level of the labour market. Hence, implementation of the Bologna Process marked a dramatic change for Austrian higher education and it seems that some advocates of the Bologna Process underestimated the magnitude of this change.

The Bologna reform was mainly promoted by the government and the university managers. In contrast, academics and students predominantly rejected this reform. Objections to its emphasis on employability are deeply rooted in the Humboldtian tradition that tends to depreciate practical and applied knowledge. The opponents were quite successful in assimilating the new degree to the traditional one-tier framework. In many cases the reform was implemented in a way that contradicts the spirit of the Bologna declaration. In some cases, bachelor's programmes are set up by simply dividing a *Diplomstudiengang* (the old type of one-tier master's programme, taken after completion of secondary school) into two parts. The curriculum of the bachelor's programme is not shaped by the logic of a two-tier system, but remains rooted in one-tier logic.

Moreover, the Bachelor is often not regarded as a degree in its own right, but rather as an 'intermediate degree' on the way to the master's. More than 80 per cent of bachelor graduates from universities start a master course within a year and so did 62 per cent of graduates from *Fachhochschulen* (Unger *et al.* 2010b).

The transition towards a two-tier system is a matter not only of the content of the curriculum, but also of the style and culture of teaching and

learning. In higher education systems with a long tradition of two tiers it is understood that the culture of undergraduate education differs from that of graduate programmes. The Humboldtian idea of ‘unity of teaching and research’ is not applied at the undergraduate level, but to graduate – mainly PhD – programmes. In the German-speaking countries the idea of ‘unity of teaching and research’ is still regarded as the essence of any kind of higher education. Any move towards a more structured curriculum with explicit obligations for both students and teachers is pejoratively called ‘Verschulung’ – a move towards a school-like curriculum that eliminates the differences in the learning cultures of schools and universities. Moreover, the objective of modularizing and of achieving graduation by accumulating credits points for modules is not compatible with a preference for extensive comprehensive examinations. Hence, although ECTS¹ is being increasingly introduced, it is often used in a very formal, superficial way.

The acid test of successful implementation of the Bologna architecture will be the acceptance of the bachelor’s degree in the labour market. So far, the status of the Bachelor’s degree is still vague and employers are rather sceptical. Ironically, although employers’ associations are among the most vigorous advocates of the new study architecture – because they strive for a shorter study duration – individual employers still tend to prefer a master’s degree. It does not help to overcome this scepticism that the government, which is one of the most important employers of graduates in Austria, does not yet recognize the bachelor’s degree for high level civil service positions.

Tuition fees

In the early 1970s tuition fees were abolished and for the last decades of the 20th century higher education was regarded as a pure public good. It was seen as the responsibility of the state to provide and fund all higher education. Commencing in the 1990s, the lack of public resources again stirred a debate on the need for possible additional revenue from private sources. In 2001, tuition fees amounting to €363 per semester were introduced. In 2008 another policy change occurred. Tuition fees have not been completely abolished but they were redesigned as a surcharge for students who exceed the standard duration of study courses. However, many exceptions – in particular for working students – have the effect that only a minority of students (22 per cent) are paying fees (Unger *et al.* 2010a: 377).

The fee policy gave rise to a heated debate about whether fees function as a social barrier for students from low income families. There is no empirical evidence to social selection due to fees. The €363 fee per semester was relatively low. In addition, students who are eligible for student aid were exempt from fees. However, the ‘flat fees’ introduced by the government for all enrolled students did not differentiate between full-time and part-time students.

In the first year when fees were introduced, enrolment figures declined by more than 20 per cent. However, this decline can be explained in terms of the exit of non-active ‘paper students’ who under previous laissez-faire conditions stayed enrolled for various reasons. Estimates based on examination statistics concluded that the number of active students – defined as students who took at least one examination during a period of two years – remained stable (Pechar and Wroblewski 2002). When fees were charged for the first time, there was about an 8 per cent decline in the number of first-year enrolments. However, this decline was compensated for in the following years with first-year enrolments higher than expected.

Establishment of a private university sector

The private university sector in Austrian higher education is a very recent phenomenon. Until the 1990s Austria restricted ownership of universities to the Federal government. Private universities then were regarded as inconsistent with the goal to provide a homogenous higher education system of high quality. However, during the 1990s, a dramatic internationalization of higher education took place. Austrian policy makers suddenly were confronted with the emergence of new providers, a booming market of degree courses offered by non-traditional institutions, and the establishment of branch campuses of foreign institutions and franchising arrangements. Many of those developments exceeded and undermined national regulations. It became evident that in this new environment attempts to maintain a public monopoly would be counter-productive. Hence, at the end of the 1990s the Austrian government decided to legalize a private sector. It was legally established in 1999 (*Universitäts-Akkreditierungsgesetz*), and the first private university was accredited in 2000 by the Accreditation Council (*Akkreditierungsrat*).

The private sector is small and is likely to stay so in the foreseeable future. From a comparative perspective, it can be classified as ‘marginal’ (Geiger 1986). Overall, the accredited institutions offer a wide range of different fields of study. Most private universities have successfully found niches of their own in carefully defining their subject fields as well as in providing good support to their students. One surprising development is the emergence of ‘provincial’ universities which legally are private institutions but depend heavily on public subsidies from the provinces. The intensity and quality of research is still highly heterogeneous between the accredited private institutions.

Establishment of a University of Continuous Education

For several years, a commitment to lifelong learning has been an issue in education policy. Higher education is no exception. However, a closer look reveals a limited understanding of this concept. Most frequently, lifelong

learning is identified with continuing education (Sünkel and Westphal 2011). A commitment to lifelong learning is thus interpreted as support for more attention and more resources to education and training after completed initial education. In that sense, for many years Austrian universities have extended their non-degree offerings in continuing education, mainly for university graduates, but increasingly also for other target groups. For Austrian universities, which are not allowed to decide on fees for degree courses, offering continuing education has the appeal that this activity is an opportunity to generate additional income.

As a consequence the range of courses in academic continuous training expanded. In addition, a special university for continuous training, the Danube University Krems, was founded in 1994. It is the first university specializing in continuing education in Austria; it is funded by the Federal Government, a province (Niederösterreich) and tuition fees. Since 2004, the university is based on a specific act (Federal Law on the University for Continuing Education Krems) and has the status of a public university – with the special task of offering only continuing education.

The university comprises five faculties (Health and Medicine, Communication and Globalization, Business and Law, Education and Media, Arts, Culture and Building) and 16 departments. Student figures at the Danube University increased steadily, from 1,270 students in 2000/01 to 5,049 students in 2009/10.

Impact on study conditions

The description so far has revealed that despite the foundation of the University Krems lifelong learning was no priority in higher education policy. Our assessment of the impact of the policy changes portrayed above will focus on the conditions of non-traditional students. We will formulate some hypotheses and in the following section we will check whether the available data confirm these hypotheses.

Our main hypothesis is that the policy changes have complicated the situation for students with reduced time budgets because of employment, childcare or health problems. The main reason is that the *laissez-faire* characteristics of study conditions at Austrian universities were reduced. As we have seen, the Bologna Process, in particular at the bachelor level, has introduced more structured study programmes as in the old study architecture. Since the new governance model simultaneously has established strong incentives for university leadership to reduce the duration of studies, the university management was eager to take the implementation of the Bologna architecture as an opportunity to eliminate at least some of the traditional *laissez-faire* characteristics.

That has mixed outcomes for students. On the one hand, a better structure of study programmes can be regarded as a facilitation for students, in

particular for academically weaker students who have problems in mastering complex and diffuse tasks. From that perspective, the introduction of more structured study programmes can be regarded as a kind of ‘normalization’, a reduction of an Austrian ‘exceptionalism’ that is at odds with mass higher education. On the other hand a tighter study structure makes it more difficult for students to act as part-time students in a system where they are formerly regarded as full-time students. The new Bologna study architecture puts at risk the delicate balance between negligence and freedom that made it easier for students to arrange conflicting tasks even if a formal structure of part-time study did not exist.

In addition, the temporary introduction of tuition fees increased the stress for working students. Since no part-time option was available, students who effectively did study only part-time still had to pay full fees. Obviously, such an arrangement is a strong incentive to shorten the duration of study in order to minimize the total amount of fees. For that reason, many students tried to reduce their employment. However, the nature of student aid in Austria puts limits on that strategy. Since stipends are limited and student loans are not available, many students had to work for economic reasons, even if that had the consequence that they were enrolled for a longer period and paid a higher amount of fees.

Our initial analysis in 2000 was based on a specifically conducted survey. For our present analysis we have to rely on existing data (official statistics and results of a regularly conducted Austrian student survey). To put comparisons over time on a legitimate basis we refer to these data sources and not to our own survey from 1998. The official statistics that are provided in the next section give only an incomplete picture of the impact of the policy change on the study conditions because official statistics do not contain information about factors that constitute non-traditional students (e.g. children, employment etc.). Thus, student surveys are the main source of information about living and studying conditions of students. However, there is another source of evidence, even if it is inherently sketchy and difficult to quantify: the attitudes of students to the policies which we have described, in particular their resistance to the Bologna Process. Again, no methodically sound survey exist on that issue, but there are many sporadic signs of discontent that finally erupted in a powerful protest movement during autumn and winter 2009.

A statistical portrait of students in the 2000s

The development of enrolments at Austrian universities during the last decade is characterized by a continuous increase of student figures (with a temporary decline after the introduction of student fees in 2001/02), an increasing female participation, and a restructuring of the higher education sector due to the upgrading of former colleges of education to *Pädagogische Hochschulen* and an ongoing expansion of *Fachhochschulen* (Figure 2.1).²

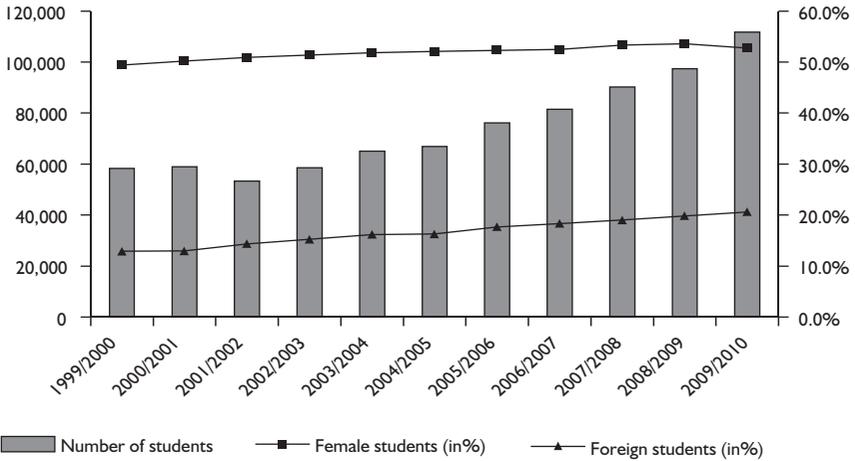


Figure 2.1 Development of student numbers in Austria (1999/2000 to 2009/10)

In 2009 about 300,000 regular students were enrolled at public higher education institutions in Austria. The vast majority (about 246,000 students) were at universities: about 8,000 students were enrolled at universities of arts, 36,000 at *Fachhochschulen* and 8,000 at *Pädagogische Hochschulen*. *Fachhochschulen* accounted for most of the increase in student figures as the number of students increased from about 10,000 (winter term 1999/2000) to 36,000 (winter term 2009/10). If we consider the whole tertiary sector, by now 40 per cent of the Austrian resident population aged 18 to 21 enters higher education (male: 36 per cent, female: 45 per cent). This means an increase of 10 percentage points compared with 1999/2000.

Access to higher education is still biased by social origin. The probability that the child of an academic enters higher education is four times higher than that for a child of a person who completed an apprenticeship (Unger *et al.* 2010a: 60f). Fifty-four per cent of all students at universities are female. However, there is a high degree of gender segregation in the university system as 80 per cent of students at *Pädagogische Hochschulen* but only 45 per cent of students at *Fachhochschulen* are female. Also the gender segregation within subjects remains stable – women are still an exception in technical studies.

Students with alternative entrance qualifications

Until the end of the 1990s the university entrance qualification for the majority of first year students was the final certificate of upper secondary education (*Matura*, the Austrian equivalent to the German *Abitur*). This changed due to the increasing share of foreign students and as a consequence of the expansion of *Fachhochschulen*.

The share of students with alternative university entrance qualifications (*Berufsreifeprüfung* or *Studienberechtigungsprüfung* for people with apprenticeship or other forms of secondary education) increased at universities from 3.5 per cent in 2000/01 to 5.9 per cent in 2009/10. In absolute terms the number of students with alternative entrance qualification quadrupled within 10 years (224 students had an alternative entrance qualification in 1999/00, but the figure in 2009/10 was 990). The share of students with foreign A-levels also increased significantly (from 13 per cent in 2000/01 to 20 per cent in 2009/10). As a consequence the significance of traditional access routes (upper secondary general school) declined. At *Fachhochschulen* the situation is a bit different: in 2009/10 most students graduated from upper secondary vocational schools (46 per cent) and only one-third attended an upper secondary general school. Alternative entrance qualifications are slightly more important compared with universities (7.2 per cent) and other entrance qualifications (e.g. an entrance examination) are more frequent (6.3 per cent).

Late beginners and senior students

The age structure of students at research universities didn't change during the last decade (Unger *et al.* 2010a: 43). First year students are on average between 20 and 21 years old. At universities of arts, beginners are on average one year older and here the average age increased by 1.5 years since 2000/01. Students at *Fachhochschulen* are the oldest with an average entrance age of 25.2 years. At *Fachhochschulen* the average age of first year students increased in the same period by about 2 years. This is mainly due to the increase in the number of places for working students. At the moment (winter semester 2009/10) one-third of student places at *Fachhochschulen* are designed for students in regular employment.

The number of senior students (women aged 55+, men aged 60+) declined significantly after the introduction of student fees in 2001 (from about 4,500 in 2000/01 to 2,300 in 2001/02). In the following years the absolute number of senior students remained stable with a recent increase in the winter semester 2009/10 (about 3,000 senior students).

Working students

As no official part-time status exists for working students, information about employment of students is only available on the basis of surveys.³ Since the end of the 1990s employment of students during term has increased: while in 1998 more than half of all students were not employed during term, in 2002 only one-third and in 2006 and 2009 about 40 per cent didn't work. The share of students in full-time employment remained stable (about 10 per cent). The increase in employment rates is mainly due to an increase in

Table 2.1 Employment of students during term

	1998	2002	2006	2009
Continuous employment during term	31.5%	49.0%	41.9%	44.7%
Temporary employment during term	15.8%	17.6%	17.7%	16.5%
No employment during term	52.7%	33.4%	40.4%	38.8%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Sources: Austrian student surveys 1998 (Wroblewski *et al.* 1999), 2002 (Wroblewski and Unger 2003), 2006 (Unger and Wroblewski 2007) and 2009 (Unger *et al.* 2010a).

minor employment.⁴ In 2002 one-third of working students were in minor employment whereas in 2009 their share amounts to 42 per cent (Table 2.1).

Although the extend of employment varies, the overall picture didn't change. Therefore we refer in the following mainly to actual data (2009, Unger *et al.* 2010a) to describe the situation of non-traditional students. Employment is highly correlated with age, in particular continuous employment during term increases from 20 per cent among the youngest students to 71 per cent among students older than 30. Furthermore the extent of employment rises with age. Working students up to 20 years old work on average 10 hours a week while the average working week of older students comprises 33 hours.

Working students in the youngest cohort work mainly in minor employment (63 per cent) or as an intern (4 per cent). Working students older than 30 have employment contracts as employees (51 per cent), officials (21 per cent) or are self-employed/free-lancers (14 per cent). Atypical employment (like minor employment or internships) plays hardly any role (17 per cent).

Employment rate and extent of employment vary significantly between bachelor and master students. Thirty-eight per cent of bachelor students work during term regularly, 17 per cent work occasionally and 45 per cent do not work at all. On the contrary, 55 per cent of master students work regularly during term and 17 per cent are temporarily employed. Hence, only 29 per cent of master students do not work during term. The differences in employment between bachelor and master students are on the one hand due to the different age structure. However, the main reason is the different organization of study as bachelor studies are more strictly organized (they require more attendance time at university, are based on a tight schedule, etc.).

The share of working students is to a lesser extent determined by social origin. While 42 per cent of students from upper class families do not work during term and 41 per cent work regularly, only about one-third of students with a working-class background do not work during term and 52 per cent are employed continuously. The effect of social background on employment status is moderated by the existing system of state student assistance which is mainly means tested. Forty-three per cent of working-class students receive

state student assistance, as do 30 per cent of students coming from lower middle class families compared with 8 per cent of upper class students.

Employment of students is mainly motivated by financial necessity: 76 per cent of working students agree with the statement 'Employment is necessary to make a living'. There is no significant difference by gender or between bachelor and master students. Despite financial necessity, 47 per cent of working students are also employed in order to gain professional experience and 39 per cent hope they will benefit from their working experience in future job searches. The motive to gain professional experience is more important to master students (59 per cent) than to bachelor students (46 per cent).

As mentioned above, the form of employment differs between younger and older students and between bachelor and master students. The older students are the more likely it is that they have 'regular jobs' not jobs that might be considered 'typical for students'. How students assess the relationship between employment and study gives strong support for that assumption: the jobs of master students are more challenging and are more often related to the field of study. Master students also state more often that they benefit in their studies from their work experience. On the other hand, bachelor students work more often in jobs that require no specific qualifications. They also would like more often to reduce job engagement in favour of study. No difference between master and bachelor students exists in the assessment of job flexibility and problems to reconcile employment and study. It is worth noticing that more than half of working students are flexible to schedule their working time according to their need (e.g. their university schedule). It seems that the possibility to reconcile study and work is more a result of flexibility in the labour market than a consequence of specific target group oriented offers by the university.

About one out of five students enter higher education with regular work experience (defined as employment for at least one year, at least 20 hours a week). This applies more to men than women (23 per cent of men and 19 per cent of women). The share of first year students with work experience varies significantly by social background. Thirty-seven per cent of working class students have work experience before enrolment but only 9 per cent of upper class students (lower middle class: 24 per cent; upper middle class: 15 per cent). Students with work experience are overrepresented at *Fachhochschulen* (36 per cent) and especially in courses for working students (61 per cent).

Study motives

Although lifelong learning is not a very prominent topic in higher education policy, it is a relevant study motive especially for master students. The relevant motive structure is different for first grade students (bachelor students and students in old diploma degree programmes) and master students. Furthermore there are differences between the higher education sectors. The

most important motive for enrolment is interest in the subject – this holds for about 90 per cent of all students regardless of higher education sector and/or type of study. Labour market orientation is mentioned in both groups in second place, however for master students to increase labour market prospects is even more important (master students: 88 per cent; bachelor students: 70 per cent). Among first grade students labour market orientation plays a more important role for students at *Fachhochschulen* (83 per cent).

As already mentioned, an important motive for starting a master course is the low reputation of a bachelor degree. About 70 per cent of master students – especially those from universities – agree that a bachelor is not enough to gain an attractive labour market position. Furthermore 53 per cent of master students defines the master degree course as a kind of further education (compared with 20 per cent of first grade students). Further education is most important for students in courses for working students at *Fachhochschulen* (73 per cent). Another motive that is mainly relevant for students with work experience is vocational re-orientation. This motive is mentioned by 20 per cent of bachelor students, especially at *Pädagogische Hochschulen* (34 per cent) and by working students at *Fachhochschulen* (39 per cent).

Students with children

During the last decade the share of students with children declined from 12 per cent in 1998 or 11 per cent in 2002 to 7 per cent in 2006 and 9 per cent in 2009. In 2009, 7 per cent of bachelor students and 9 per cent of master students had children.

The decline in the share of students with children may be caused by a complex set of intervening factors. The introduction of fees might be one explanation because students with only a few study activities decided to exmatriculate. The implementation of the Bologna system might also have some influence because bachelor studies are more strictly organized and include less scope for flexibility. Therefore the reconciliation problem is reinforced. On the other hand, the age at first birth in general has increased continuously in Austria. On average, women are 28 years old when they give birth for the first time (2010, Source: Statistics Austria), in 1991 the average was 25 years. A study for Germany revealed that female as well as male students plan to have their first child after graduation when they are settled in a ‘good job’ (Middendorff 2003).

Furthermore the situation for students with children changed during the last decade because of more engagement of universities in providing support for childcare. Since the end of the 1990s measures to help reconcile study and childcare were introduced stepwise. In 1999 a career/family compatibility service centre opened at the Federal Ministry for Science and Research and a three-year ‘Childcare in Universities’ project was launched (Czernohorszky

2003). In the beginning, the Ministry financed initial pilot projects and created structures to anchor this topic in the universities (e.g. the establishment of ‘childcare officers’ which gave university staff and students with children a voice at the university). Furthermore some universities (Vienna, Graz, Salzburg and Linz) received EU-project funding to set up campus childcare facilities. These projects were subsequently continued and financed by the universities at the end of the initial funding period and served as role models for other universities. In the meantime, all public universities in Austria now either provide at least some childcare facilities or have established a childcare information centre.

Students with special needs

A specific group of students that is highly affected by the missing part-time status are handicapped students or students with chronic diseases. In 2009 (Unger *et al.* 2010a), 1 per cent of all students defined themselves as handicapped, 12 per cent were chronically ill and 7 per cent reported another impairment. Seventy per cent of affected students reported that they are impaired in their study because of their health status. In the following we define students who are physically or mentally impaired and who are consequently impaired in their studies as the relevant group. This group consists of 14 per cent of all students.

The University Act 2002 contains specific regulations for students who are registered as handicapped (e.g. they hold a handicapped ID for which one may apply in case the impairment amounts to at least 50 per cent). For these students the regular duration of studies is doubled (which is important if they receive a scholarship) and they are entitled to adapted conditions for exams if needed. Because of anticipated stigmatizing effects when looking for a job, students try to avoid applying for an ID. Therefore only 4 per cent of all students who belong to the relevant group hold a handicapped ID, which represents 0.5 per cent of all students. However, if students with diseases do not hold a special ID (e.g. to avoid stigmatizing effects in case of job search after graduation) they are not entitled to any support. The degree of support for such students depends on the engagement of the representative of handicapped students at the university and the significance that the university management devotes to the topic (Wroblewski and Laimer 2010).

Students in new sectors of higher education

The description so far has focused on regular students who form the core of the official statistics and the population of student surveys. Students attending university courses who are registered as ‘special’ students are therefore not considered in official statistics or student surveys. The same holds for students at private universities. In official higher education statistics in Austria only the absolute number of students in university courses by gender are reported.

The number of participants in university courses of continuing education increased significantly during the last decade (from about 7,000 in 2000/01 to 14,400 in 2009/10). More than one-third of students in university courses are enrolled at the Danube University Krems.

In 2009/10, 5,829 students were enrolled at private universities in Austria. The private university sector has expanded during recent years (2005/06: 3,608 students). The share of foreign students is higher than in the public sector (37 per cent versus 21 per cent).

Conclusions

Austrian higher education has arrived at an interesting crossroads: the modernization efforts of the last decade have provoked significant resistance from academics and students, but some of this refusal is due to an incomplete and incoherent implementation of these reforms. It is neither feasible nor desirable to move backwards to the traditional *laissez-faire* model. Massification has irrevocably changed higher education and Austrian universities, like many of their European counterparts, have significant problems to adopt to that reality. However, during the last decade there were considerable steps in that direction, such as the new governance model and the implementation of a new study architecture. In other areas – such as admissions, part-time studies, student aid – no significant change has occurred.

Thus we observe an incoherent system with a mismatch between traditional and modernized elements. One example of such mismatch is that policy makers emphasize the responsibility of universities to reduce dropout rates and duration of studies, but do not allow them to limit admission of students according to the places available. Another kind of mismatch occurs when the new study architecture emphasizes stricter rules that actually reduce the traditional *laissez-faire* features of Austrian education without providing a part-time functional equivalent for students who are not in a position to study on a full-time basis. One might summarize that despite the recent severe changes in the higher education system, higher education policy is still oriented towards the ‘traditional student’, who studies full time at a public university immediately after graduation from high school.

We can increasingly find discussions that reveal a deeper understanding of lifelong learning at the conceptual level, namely as a concept that breaks with the traditional segmentation of learning phases during a person’s biography (Schnabl and Gasser 2011). Considered in that way, lifelong learning would not just strengthen an additional sector beyond initial education and training, but it would also restructure the culture of learning in existing institutions (including universities) for a new paradigm that regards learning as a lifelong activity. Such an approach would mainly have two consequences:

- It would firstly require to open universities – including their degree courses – for new target groups. Higher education institutions would need to re-think their concept of necessary requirements for entrance (Pechar 2009). At present, access to higher education is basically limited to students who have graduated from upper secondary schools. A lifelong learning approach would approve other qualifications as well and ideally develop procedures for recognizing informal prior learning.
- It would secondly require reconsideration of the traditional classification and subdivision of learning periods over the life course. The late teens and early twenties would remain the main target group for universities, but it would become normal for a person to change between periods of study and periods of employment. The initial education and the first degree would remain the foundation of a tertiary qualification, but it would be regularly updated by sub-degree and occasionally also degree courses. Such an approach would allow to shorten the time for initial education.

There are many barriers in the present Austrian higher education system that constrain a policy change in that direction. Most important, the present legal regulations on access prevent universities from exerting any influence on the composition of their student body. As school leavers who graduate with a Matura are entitled to enroll on any course in any university, universities are left with no discretion over admissions. This is a major difference between universities and all other sectors of higher education. Only the former are denied the right to control admission of students. This is a bizarre reversion of the internationally established relation between prestige and selectivity of higher education sectors. Usually, the higher the prestige of a sector or institution, the more selective is admission to higher education. It is an exception in Austria that the most prestigious institutions are open whereas all others are selective.

The conflict about this ‘no admission’ policy has become very intense during the last decade and it is probably the most divisive question in higher education policy. Advocates of no admission defend this policy on equity grounds, but it is obvious that this concept embodies a very special notion of equity. Access to universities is framed as a privilege for a special group that can be considered as a kind of ‘estate’. The ‘educational estate’ is treated equitably but everybody who does not belong to that estate is excluded. This type of ‘openness’ and ‘equity’ is the opposite of an equitable approach to lifelong learning that opens up to new target groups for higher education. Representatives of universities have repeatedly argued that it is impossible to realize the idea of recognizing prior learning if institutions cannot admit their own students (Österreichischen Universitätenkonferenz 2008). In other words, a comprehensive approach to lifelong learning requires the entitlement system to be substituted by university entrance selection.

Notes

- 1 The European Credit Transfer System is an important aspect of the Bologna Process which aims at facilitating student mobility. ECTS credits are based on the workload students need in order to achieve expected learning outcomes. In most cases 60 ECTS credits are attached to a full-time academic year.
- 2 A note on terminology: *Pädagogische Hochschulen* are often translated as ‘Universities of Education’ and *Fachhochschulen* as ‘Universities of Applied Science’. We stick to the German term because both sectors are regarded as non-university sectors.
- 3 Surveys of students have a long tradition in Austria. The first survey was conducted in 1974. The surveys we refer to took place in 1998, 2002, 2006 and 2009. All of them are based on a stratified random sample. The surveys in 1998 and 2002 were postal surveys (paper and pencil), in 2006 and 2009 the surveys were conducted as online surveys. Due to these changes in survey design and some changes in question wording, the survey results are only comparable with caution. The survey population is regular students at public universities. As a consequence the survey population doesn’t cover irregular students (e.g. students in further training courses) or students at private universities. In 2009 about 40,000 students participated in the survey.
- 4 ‘Minor employment’ is defined as monthly income which does not exceed €366.33 (2010). Income up to this threshold coincides with the eligibility for student assistance and family allowance. Minimum income workers are covered by accident insurance but not by health insurance or pension insurance. They might voluntarily obtain health insurance and pension insurance.

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