

Motivation

Conference of the Austrian Science Board

27th and 28th November 2009 in Vienna

Steering Autonomous Universities: European Perspectives

With the Universities Act 2002 Austrian universities attained institutional independence as well as far-reaching autonomy. This autonomy involves the provision of funding in the form of a block grant from the state, entitlement to independent design of study programmes, authority over allocation of human resources and organization-related matters, and autonomous decision-making power over academic emphases. Austrian universities were thereby empowered to control their own development in order to assert themselves in terms of national and international competitiveness and to invest their resources efficiently. In principle therefore each of the 21 public Austrian universities makes its own decisions about its curriculum offer and its research profile. Mutual and reciprocal coordination and cooperation between universities is voluntary.

Within this framework, the state - in the case of Austria, the federal government - , bears overall responsibility for the development of the higher education system and its steering from a superordinate, overall perspective. The Universities Act 2002 envisages the „Leistungsvereinbarungen“ – performance contracts – which are being signed for a specific 3-year period between the state and each individual university, as virtually the only formal instrument for overall steering of the system. In these performance contracts performance goals for each individual university and the financial means to be provided for these purposes by the state are agreed. Even after attaining institutional independence and autonomy almost 90% of the funding of the Austrian universities is still coming from the public purse. A comprehensive planning process for the whole university system in excess of this is not envisaged. Now with the first experience of performance contracts to hand, it is evident that strategic overall direction from a superordinate perspective is necessary, if the state is to discharge its responsibility for educational and research policy. It is also for this reason that the current government programme includes the creation of a "national higher education plan". This plan should

indicate a direction for university development as well as for the concomitant integration of the remaining parts of the tertiary sector (polytechnics [Fachhochschulen], Teacher Education Colleges [Pädagogische Hochschulen], private universities [Privatuniversitäten].)

At its conference the Austrian Science Board wants to address the question of how, in a system characterized by far-reaching autonomy for the individual university, overall state planning for university development can be achieved. This question will be discussed against the background of intentions and experiences of other European countries which have also had to tackle or are still tackling the same challenge. In the process a range of different problems will be considered:

- Who bears the responsibility for planning national university development – should it be the democratically legitimized legislator, the education ministry, or a collective body of the universities themselves, and what significance do academic advisory boards such as the Wissenschaftsrat (Science Board) have in this regard?
- Which targets can or should be set for autonomous universities, for example regarding a mutually agreed curriculum offer or the establishment of research foci? How much government control (“state steering”) is needed to optimize the commitment of resources as well as to raise the quality, without undermining autonomy?
- Should the decision to introduce a new study programme or to close an existing programme be solely a matter for the individual university or should the state intervene in such matters? Is there a need for national alignment in the planning of curriculum offers? Would “small subjects“ then still have a chance?
- How do the principles of competition and cooperation between individual universities relate to the necessities of superordinate planning?
- How much planning is actually compatible with scientific research and academic teaching? What are the necessary and meaningful contents of a “national higher education plan”?

The first part of the conference will be devoted to the discussion of experiences in other countries, the second part will deal with the state of similar efforts in Austria and their possible consequences. During this year the Austrian Science Board has taken it upon itself to develop certain guidelines for overall national higher education development planning. The provisional result of this work,- in the form of recommendations - will therefore be presented at the conference and at the same time be put forward for discussion. How can the planning process that this work has initiated be advanced further? Is there a need for a more or less formal educational policy decision? Does this seem indispensable, in view of the responsibility of the state for financing its institutions? Are further planning instruments necessary, so that the Ministry can lead the negotiation of future performance contracts on the basis of transparent strategic goals?

A further question that cannot be separated from higher education development planning, is the influence of research funding on the development of universities. It is obvious that the research funding bodies inevitably influence research emphases, principally through competitive allocation of funds but also through various initiatives (Clusters, excellence initiatives). Is the stronger differentiation between single universities which results from this either necessary or desirable? Should we differentiate between teaching and research universities in the future?

Lastly there is the question about the geographical location of universities in the overall structure of a highly differentiated tertiary system with diverse actors and interests. The political will to control the whole system is discernible, but in view of the structures that have grown up historically, and the idiosyncracies of the system, is it actually possible to consolidate around a number of strategic goals? Are there new forms of cooperation between autonomous educational institutions and the state? And how will the process of university development function in a longer-term perspective, and in relation to the European Research and Education Area?

Vienna, April 2009