

National strategy on the social dimension of higher education.

**Towards more inclusive access and wider
participation**

Brief summary

Austria



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1. Introduction

Participation in education and further training at all levels improves the potential for social, economic and political participation and integration in equal measure. The “National Strategy on the Social Dimension of Higher Education” presented here is the first full strategy document on this topic with respect to developments in the Austrian higher education sector. Broad objectives have been formulated for all responsible parties following an analysis of current participation by members of all social groups in higher education. These parties include federal ministries, higher education institutions, relevant interest groups and other intermediary bodies as well as civic organisations. More than 800 experts representing over 80 organisations took part in the year-long strategy process, and the large number of statements on the consultation paper, confirm the clear commitment of stakeholders to the strategy presented here.

The Institute for Advanced Studies (Vienna) advised and supported the strategy development process, and a survey was conducted by 3s on the current status of measures and projects related to the social dimension in higher education and intermediary institutions.

2. European and national context – Basic information

The social dimension has, for some time now, been considered one of the key target priorities of the EU and part of the framework of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) in general (Bologna Process). In the London Communiqué (2007), member states agreed on the shared goal that the student body should reflect the diversity of the broader population at all levels of higher education, from admission, to participation and successful completion.¹ Member states further agreed at the Ministerial Conference at Yerevan in 2015 to develop national strategies for improving the social dimension of the higher education sector.

The government’s programme for 2013-2018 stipulated that measures were to be devised “to support the compatibility of work and study and to provide non-traditional access to the entire higher education sector”². The 2016-2021³ “Austrian National Development Plan for Public Universities” aims in its system goal 8, to “Support a cultural shift towards social inclusion, gender equality and diversity in universities”, and the Federal Ministry of Science, Research and Econo-

¹ “We share the societal aspiration that the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education at all levels should reflect the diversity of our populations. We reaffirm the importance of students being able to complete their studies without obstacles related to their social and economic background. We therefore continue our efforts to provide adequate student services, create more flexible learning pathways into and within higher education, and to widen participation at all levels on the basis of equal opportunity” (London 2007: 5).

² Federal Chancellery (2013): Work programme of the Austrian Federal Government 2013-2018, p. 45.

³ Federal Ministry of Science, Research and Economy (BMWFW) (2015): The Austrian National Development Plan for Public Universities 2016-2021, p. 28-31.

my (BMWF) makes provision in its "Development and Funding Plan for Universities of Applied Sciences" through to 2017/2018⁴ to address a number of aspects of the social dimension. Strategy development with respect to the social dimension of higher education is based on findings from two working groups of the Austrian Higher Education Conference (the 2015 "Recommendations of the Austrian Higher Education Conference on supporting non-traditional access to higher education"⁵ and the concluding report of the 2013 working group on "Social safeguarding of students"⁶). Amongst other things, these identified the following target groups:

3. Underrepresented groups and groups with specific needs

Underrepresented groups can be broadly defined on the basis of the findings of the 2015 Social Survey of Students⁷, the results of which are included in the EUROSTUDENT⁸ survey for international comparison, as well as higher education statistics. Because the social dimension affects not only access to higher education, but also continued participation in education and the successful completion of studies, an outline follows of groups which are underrepresented in admissions to higher education, and whose progress through their studies, and completion, are at risk - not least due to social reasons. The process does, on the one hand, focus on specific groups, but it also offers a broader critique of the categorisation of students by assuming a problem-centred perspective, examining, for example, the ability to balance study and paid work or the interaction of so-called diversity markers (intersectionality).

Underrepresented groups include:

- Students whose parents do not have higher education entrance qualifications or who come from lower socio-economic backgrounds (currently around 40%).
- Underrepresentation of women or men in particular degree programmes (e.g. women in technical studies, men in veterinary medicine studies)
- Students from particular regions/federal states
- Students with migrant backgrounds (with an Austrian entrance qualification)
- Students with a disability and/or chronic illness

In addition, attention was paid to groups with specific needs, where particular indicators could, over the course of a student's educational biography, change and/or become combined in new ways.

Groups with specific needs include:

- Students with young children or other care responsibilities
- Students with a disability and/or chronic illness
- Students with delayed entry to higher education (i.e. at least two years since leaving school or "second chance" education)
- Students in employment

⁴ See Federal Ministry of Science, Research and Economy (BMWF): Development and Funding Plan for Universities of Applied Sciences through to 2017/18, presented to the Federal Cabinet on 27 May 2015.

⁵ See Austrian Higher Education Conference (2015): The Austrian Higher Education Conference's recommendations on supporting non-traditional access to higher education. The working group was composed of representatives from the Federal Ministry of Science, Research and Economy (BMWF), the Association of Austrian Universities of Applied Sciences (FHK), the Austrian Students' Union (ÖH), the Austrian Private Universities Conference (ÖPUK), Universities Austria (uniko), the Austrian Science Board, the Conference of Austrian University Senate Chairs, the Austrian Chamber of Labour and the Federal Economic Chamber.

⁶ See Austrian Higher Education Conference (2013): working group on "Social Safeguarding of Students". The working group included representatives of several federal ministries (Finance, Justice, Families and Youth, Science, Research and Economy) as well as members of the Austrian Students' Union and the Austrian Study Grant Authority.

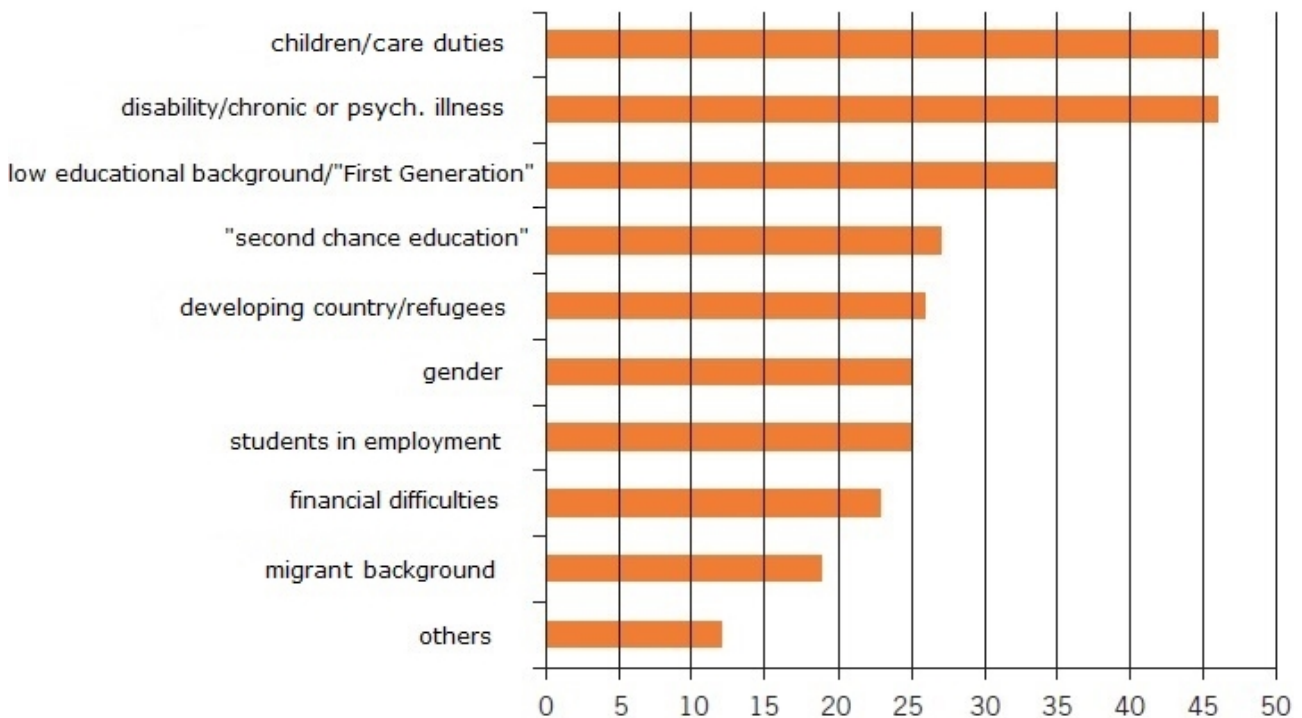
⁷ See Zaussinger, S., Unger, M. et al. (2016): Studierendenzustand (social survey of students) 2015.

⁸ EUROSTUDENT VI, The report will appear in spring 2018: <http://www.eurostudent.eu/>, 20 December 2016.

4. What measures have already been implemented to address the social dimension in higher education?

The survey completed by 3s during the strategy development process shows that a number of activities related to the social dimension are already being implemented in all higher education sectors and intermediary entities (Austrian Students' Union, federal ministries, Chambers of Labour, Federal Economic Chambers, job centres). These were categorised thematically by the institutions as follows:

**Number of measures by target group, in the narrower sense of the social dimension
(Assignment to multiple categories possible)**



source: 3s-chart based on the online survey (n=246)

The 3s study additionally found that the reported measures varied in intensiveness and/or are not yet being systematically evaluated, which means that only limited observations may be made regarding their effectiveness. It was recommended that small-scale projects should be expanded and brought together within a broader strategic framework.

5. Target dimensions and quantitative goals through to 2025

The **overarching, long-term goal** for the National Strategy on the Social Dimension of Higher Education is already embedded in a number of resolutions from ministerial conferences related to the Bologna Process (most recently the Yerevan Conference in 2015) and from the European Council (Conclusions on the social dimension of higher education, 2013) (see chapter 2):

Students who enter, participate in and complete higher education should reflect the socio-demographic diversity of the population at all levels.

The “National Strategy on the Social Dimension of Higher Education” lays out three target dimensions

I. More inclusive access

II. Avoid drop-out and improve academic success

III. Create basic parameters and optimise the regulation of higher education policy

with three action lines and practical measures for each. The target dimensions are oriented around the student life cycle, which is understood as an organisational framework for improving the practical feasibility of study programmes and thus the successful completion (“studyability”).

Target dimension I: More inclusive access

Action line 1: Improve quality and accessibility of information materials

Measures	Responsibility
Establish what study information and support measures are required particularly in reference to the social dimension, and analyse the effects of information on educational and career choices	BMWF, research on higher, secondary and primary education
Assess information and orientation materials across all levels of education in terms of comprehensibility, completeness and accessibility with respect to the social dimension	BMWF, higher education (HE) institutions, Austrian Students' Union, other information providers
Develop (online and accessible) information materials incorporating the social dimension, for those interested in pursuing higher education and for those offering advice	BMWF, HE institutions, Austrian Students' Union, information providers
Networking of information sources about higher education in Austria, to improve accessibility for all potential groups of students and their parents	BMWF, HE institutions, Austrian Students' Union, information providers
Improve the presentation of study profiles, options for higher education and future career profiles	HE institutions
Expand the range of information – in conjunction with schools and other sources of advice (e.g. job centres) – for those interested in starting higher education with delayed commencement of studies as well as students with a disability/chronic illness or impairment	BMWF, Federal Ministry of Education (BMB), employers and industry associations, advice centres
Provide clear information about general requirements and planning a course of study (expected duration of the course, workload, ability to work whilst studying, etc.), requirements for completing the course, expected (living) costs, funding possibilities, semester or year abroad, etc.	HE institutions, BMWF
Transparent, easily accessible information regarding admission requirements and possibilities for learning credits between school and higher education, work and higher education, and bachelor's and master's degrees.	HE institutions, Austrian Students' Union, educational consultants

Action line 2 Outreach activities and diversity-sensitive course guidance

Measures	Responsibility
Expand the existing provision of study guidance, particularly with regard to the social dimension	All entities providing educational counselling and course guidance
Expand the cooperation between higher education and schools, with particular attention to underrepresented groups and increased involvement of teachers, who may have a compensatory effect with respect to the social dimension when it comes to educational decisions	HE institutions, BMWFW, BMB
Cooperation with adult, vocational and further education institutions, in addition to job centres and social services entities	HE institutions
Identify and expand collaboration with civic stakeholder groups (e.g. clubs and associations) and training multipliers	HE institutions
Try out new forms of communication, including those aimed at (younger) target groups	HE institutions, Austrian Students' Union
Provide information about academic career profiles in primary and middle schools, including all socio-economic segments of the population	BMWFW, BMB, employers and industry associations

Action line 3: Recognition and validation of non-formal and informal competencies

Measures	Responsibility
Final cross-sector agreement on a strategy for validating non-formal and informal learning under the framework of the "Strategy for life-long learning in Austria, LLL:2020"	BMB, BMWFW, HE institutions
Develop both standardised and individual-oriented, transparent and quality-assured processes for recognition of prior learning	BMWFW, HE institutions
Further development of the qualifying exam for higher education (Studienberechtigungsprüfung), shared across all educational institutions and involving all stakeholders, with consideration of validation of non-formal and informal achievements	BMWFW, BMB, stakeholders

Target dimension II: Avoid drop-out and improve academic success

Action line 4: Ease entry into higher education

Measures	Responsibility
Needs-oriented and socially acceptable provision of preparatory and bridging courses	HE institutions, BMWF
Further development of tutoring for beginners, buddy systems, mentoring	HE institutions, Austrian Students' Union
Optimise the orientation and introduction phases of degree programmes, and assess whether these could in specific courses be further developed into a "general studies" module (final choice of study programme to be made after completion of general initial modules in several departments, with full recognition of credits for the study programme finally pursued) Modul „Studium Generale“ weiterentwickelt werden kann (Studienwahlentscheidung nach Kennenlernen mehrerer Fächer unter Anrechnung der erworbenen Credits auf das Studium)	HE institutions, BMWF, Austrian Students' Union BMWF, ÖH
Offer low-threshold assistance ("Learning how to learn", introduction to academic work)	HE institutions
Develop a socially inclusive culture in higher education institutions (e.g. welcome events, anti-discrimination training for higher education staff and students)	HE institutions
Reflection on established habits with regard to academic integration	HE institutions, Research on higher, secondary and primary education

Action line 5: Structures of study programmes and quality of teaching

Measures	Responsibility
Integrate consideration of diversity into higher education teaching and the quality assessment of teaching	HE institutions
Further develop teaching and learning methods (e.g. to include student-centred learning)	HE institutions
Assess curricula and semester schedules (exam weeks) in terms of feasibility	HE institutions, Austrian Students' Union
Further digitalisation of teaching, increased use of accessible e-learning and blended learning tools (including training on licensing issues for authors of texts and open education resources) and assessment of the effects with regard to the social dimension	HE institutions, Research on higher, secondary and primary education
Assess increased modularisation of degree programmes and the possibility of variable study speeds (for separate learner groups) and, if appropriate, establish the necessary legal framework	HE institutions, BMWF
Improved transfer of credits already completed in the case of a change of study programme	HE institutions
Create an inclusive teaching and learning environment	HE institutions
Develop and test additional forms of intervention to prevent students dropping out and to improve study progress, e.g. early warning system, incentives, "nudging", learning analytics, tracking, including the monitoring of graduates' career paths	HE institutions, BMWF
Qualification and training opportunities for higher education teachers on appreciating and working with diversity	HE institutions
Develop and test ways to promote mobility that focus on the social dimension and guarantee recognition of credits accumulated abroad	HE institutions

Measures	Responsibility
Further expansion of "internationalisation at home", e.g. incorporating language learning and intercultural competence into curricula	HE institutions

Action line 6: Increase compatibility of studies with other areas of life

Measures	Responsibility
Expand availability of courses that facilitate career development, can be completed whilst working, or are integrated with the student's professional work	BMWF, HE institutions
More flexibility in requirements for physical attendance through, for example, the provision of (accessible) online learning	HE institutions
Review of "prerequisite chains" in curricula with regard to social bias	HE institutions
Review of course workloads (e.g. studying while working, technical courses)	HE institutions
Expand flexible childcare at higher education institutions, including cooperation – where relevant – with other institutions in the same location	HE institutions, BMWF
More flexible opening hours for classrooms, libraries, etc.	HE institutions
Expand support mechanisms, quiet spaces and retreats for students with a disability/chronic illness/specific impairment; baby nursing rooms, etc.	HE institutions
Encourage employers to support employees who are studying, through flexible working practices	Employers and industry associations, Austrian Students' Union, HE institutions
Review the feasibility of "sandwich course" programmes (=Duales Studium) where academic learning is integrated with employment in a training company	BMWF, HE institutions

Target dimension III: Create basic parameters and optimise the regulation of higher education policy

Action line 7: System-related issues in higher education systems

Measures	Responsibility
Establish the social dimension at the centre of educational policy measures and ensure rigorous review of educational institution governance in terms of support for inclusion and its effects on the social dimension	BMWF
Further develop legal provisions with regard to "studyability" and monitoring	BMFW
Review higher education funding and its effect on the social dimension and integrate social dimension criteria into funding (e.g. incentives, budget allocation) and performance agreements for higher education institutions, and into the next development and funding plan for universities of applied sciences	BMFW
Monitor admissions requirements and procedures, as well as aptitude tests in terms of their effects on the social dimension with respect to meeting social targets in university admissions	BMFW, HE institutions
(Guidelines for) fair and transparent recognition of prior learning achievements and competencies acquired outside the education system, across all courses of study and higher education institutions (transferability)	BMFW, HE institutions
Examine the feasibility of internationally typical "short cycle" courses in higher education, which can be credited towards a bachelor's degree (ISCED 6), including advance consideration of transferability issues which may arise again, for example with regard to courses at (tertiary) educational institutions (ISCED 5).	BMFW
Networking and support for higher education research at both national and institutional levels (impact analysis, evaluation, graduate surveys, etc.), continual improvement of data structures (e.g. transgender), questions of data protection	BMFW, Research on higher education

Action line 8: Integrate the social dimension into strategic planning for higher education and create appropriate governance structures

Measures	Responsibility
Implement an institutional strategy on the social dimension and integrate this into institutional profiles on the basis of the "National Strategy on the Social Dimension in Higher Education"	HE institutions
Consider social dimension categories in diversity management, quality assurance, evaluations and reviews of effectiveness	HE institutions
Consistent implementation of equality measures	HE institutions
Establish contact points for diversity-sensitive and individualised information, counselling and support for students in all higher education institutions	HE institutions
Educate members of higher education institutions about the social dimension and establish measures to improve understanding and appreciation of diversity	HE institutions
Provide support for research & development, inclusion of the arts and teaching about the social dimension in higher education	HE institutions
Initiate and maintain peer learning activities	BMFW, HE institutions

Action line 9: Further develop Student Support Schemes

Measures	Responsibility
Increase funding for student support schemes	BMFWF, Federal Ministry of Finance (BMF)
Introduce an amendment to the Austrian law on student support (Student Support Act) to implement additional recommendations made by the working group of the Austrian Higher Education Conference, including an increase in the income limit, increase in grant levels	BMFWF
Further development of the "maintenance grant" (for (previously) employed students) as a separate funding instrument (amounts, prerequisites, etc.)	BMFWF
Review the availability of additional funding grants (e.g. grants for those returning to education)	BMFWF
Review funding requirements with respect to mobility in education funding	BMFWF
Review the appropriateness of evidence of academic achievement required for students with a disability/chronic illness/specific impairment	BMFWF

Quantitative goals through to 2025

Nine quantitative goals have been defined with a view to documenting progress in achieving the initiative's overall goals

Quantitative goals through to 2025	
1	<p>Increase the number of "educationally disadvantaged" students in higher education by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reducing the recruitment quota/probability factor for admission to higher education to 2.25 (2020) and 2.10 (2025) Decreasing the discrepancy in the probability factors between public universities and universities of applied sciences Including private universities and university colleges of teacher education in the calculation of probability factors, adaption of target values
2	<p>„Widen inclusive access by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increasing the number of non-traditional admissions (educational residents) to higher education from the current 4,000 to 5,300
3	<p>Promote gender balance in all degree programmes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Requiring a minimum percentage of 10% men or women in any degree programme (excluding doctoral study) and at any higher education institution Halving the number of degree programmes at each higher education institution where men or women comprise less than 30%
4	<p>„Widen participation by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increasing the percentage of (educational resident) students admitted to higher education who are second-generation children of immigrants from 22% to 30%
5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increase the percentage of students admitted to higher education in all federal states to 42% by 2025 and towards the Austrian average (47%) with reference to the entire education and vocational education system
6	<p>Establish recognition of the social dimension in mobility by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increasing participation in overseas study programmes by students whose parents have no university entrance qualifications, to at least 18%
7	<p>With respect to improved compatibility:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increase the number of vocational places at universities of applied science to 50%
8	<p>Student grants:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increase the number of self-supporting students receiving maintenance grants to 15,000
9	<p>Promote equal opportunity:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sustained increase in the percentage of student admissions from homes where neither parent has a university degree on medical and dental courses towards an eventual target of 50%

6. Implementation and next concrete steps of the BMWFW

Although the commitment of all stakeholders is required in the implementation of the strategy the main responsibility depends on the content of each action line. The BMWFW is in charge of action line 7 (System-related issues in higher education systems) and action line 9 (Further develop student support systems). For action line 4 (Ease entry into higher education), action line 5 (Course structures of study programmes and quality of teaching), and action line 8 (Integrate the social dimension into strategic planning for higher education and create appropriate governance structures), the higher education institutions have primary responsibility for planning and implementing policy measures. Due to different legal frameworks, the leeway differs for different types of higher education institutions. While public universities are mainly required to consider diversity markers in teaching and structuring study programmes and widen access for new groups of learners, universities of applied sciences should focus on transferability between higher education and vocational education. The implementation of the Strategy on the Social Dimension in Higher Education is a crosscutting task, mainly addressing three areas of activity:

Dissemination of the strategy and further raising of awareness with regard to the social dimension: e.g. annual networking conference in cooperation with higher education institutions

Mainstreaming the Social Dimension:

- Integration of policy measures into the preparation of performance agreements 2019-2021 and integration of the social dimension into the "Development and Funding Plan for Universities of Applied Sciences (UAS) through to 2017/2018" and expansion of the UAS sector
- Quantitative and qualitative development of the student support system (focal points, funding)

Supporting monitoring and evaluation: including improvement of the data basis and evidence base: Interim evaluation 2021/2022

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- Recommendations of the working group on "Social safeguarding of students" (2013)

References