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Co-determination and equal opportunities at the university since 1945 – data, facts and documents

Exhibition at the University Archives
2025

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Science between freedom and social responsibility

Academic science is committed to the pursuit of knowledge regardless of political, economic or ideological constraints. In the majority of countries, the freedom of science, research and teaching is a legal right. However, it is also associated with an ethical responsibility – such as respect for human dignity.

State universities reflect the prevailing social order. Key decisions such as the selection of staff, teaching contents, epistemic goals and methods of science and, last but not least, the question of who is allowed to study at all are influenced by those who maintain the universities.

At the same time, universities have always benefited from a certain degree of independence.

3

Promoting and maintaining equal opportunities

Access to universities regardless of gender, ethnicity, religion or social background has not always been a given. Equal opportunities for students and staff are guaranteed by fair social and organisational conditions.

Studying at university has always been associated with considerable costs. In Austria, a scholarship system in the modern sense did not begin to develop before the 1860s. From the 1960s onwards, the expansion of the student grant system enabled the transition to a socially broader mass university.

In 1898, the Faculty of Philosophy admitted the first woman to a full degree programme, followed by the first female medical students in 1900. The Faculty of Law followed suit in 1919, and then the Faculty of Theology only after 1945.

Since the 1990s, the “Working Group for Equal Opportunities” has contributed significantly in the move towards a university free of discrimination.

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Co-determination affects all members of the university

Co-determination at the university			
Students		Staff	
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General staff • Academic staff • Staff of university clinics (until 2003) 	
Organisational framework	Social framework	Teaching	Research

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Jesuit University (1585–1773) – State University (1773–1782) – Lyceum (1782–1827)

In 1585 Charles II founded the university as an institution of higher learning and to accomplish re-Catholicisation. Land ownership ensured income, independent jurisdiction and a seat in the Styrian Estates. Although poor students benefited from scholarships, the Jesuits boasted about the sons of the upper classes attending the university.

The first actual election of a rector took place in 1762, after the university had become independent from the Jesuit College. Even though a Jesuit received the majority of votes, the state appointed the second-placed secular priest as rector.

After the transformation into a “Lyceum” [college], professors of theological, philosophical, legal and medico-surgical studies were to take turns in running the rectorate; this rotation policy survived well into the Second Austrian Republic.

Peak of reforms in the second half of the 19th century

The Revolution of 1848 marked a turning point, calling for the freedom of research and teaching. These goals were finally achieved in the 1860s. However, plans for a limited participation of students, also dating from 1848, were not realised and the professors remained the sole decision-making authority.

In 1827 the University of Graz was re-established. From the early 1860s onwards, students were granted freedom of assembly, which allowed them to form fraternities, student clubs and associations. Moreover, support funds (strictly separated according to German, Italian and Slavic nationalities) and foundations as well as a so-called “Freitisch-Anstalt” (free-table establishment) providing meals were installed at the university.

This awakening shaped the university until the First World War, which caused severe financial losses for the university.

A new beginning in 1945

After the standstill in the interwar period and setbacks of academic freedom due to Austro-Fascism and National Socialism, the redevelopment started after the Second World War. In 1946, the so-called “*Österreichische Hochschülerschaft (ÖH)*” [Austrian Student Union] was founded as a students’ union in Austria. Each student automatically belongs to this central political organization, which is embodied by law. This organisation acts on behalf of the students, representing their interests both within university and governmental settings. However, the “*Hochschulorganisationsgesetz (HOG)*” [Law for Organising Colleges] of 1955 heavily drew on the reform era of the 19th century and continued the dominance of the professors. Whereas assistant professors/lecturers (Dozent*innen) received limited participation rights, the students were left without a vote.

1975: Expansion of co-determination

The “*Universitätsorganisationsgesetz (UOG)*” [University Organisation Law] of 1975 gradually introduced co-determination for non-professorial academic staff (“Mittelbau”), students and general staff. The “university of professors” was thus history, and the so-called “university of groups” was born. To still keep the group of professors in charge, they were favoured for appointment to the collegial bodies. This was intended to refute accusations that the expansion of co-determination would lower the standard of teaching and research. At the same time, complaints about the large number of time-consuming meetings increased. Meanwhile, the federal ministry ensured its influence by newly created “*Universitätsdirektionen*” [University directories].

1993: Partial legal capacity

The Universitätsorganisationsgesetz (UOG) 1993 reformed the often criticised “Sitzungsuniversität” (university of meetings), in particular its long decision-making processes, which sometimes led to a decline in participation. Some commissions were abolished. The law strengthened university autonomy in the drafting of statutes and internal decisions. The influence of the ministry was maintained through funding. The rector, who was now appointed for four years in a two-stage process, was given significantly more room for manoeuvre in decision-making. Management functions in faculties, departments and curricular commissions were also strengthened, while at the same time being entrusted with more responsibility and reporting duties. Another important innovation was the beginning of student participation in accrediting assistant professors and lecturers.

2002: Full legal capacity

The autonomy gained with the Universitätsgesetz (UG) 2002 is regulated by target and performance agreements (Zielvereinbarung, Leistungsvereinbarung). This applies both to employees at the university and to the university as a whole. As to university performance agreements concluded with the state, negotiation processes are emphasised. Once again, state funding is central. The newly established Universitätsrat (University Council) is situated between the state and the university. At the University of Graz, four of its members are appointed by the Senate, another four by the government; these eight people appoint the ninth member. The University Council is in charge of carrying out the elections of the rectorate, and has to approve the university performance agreements, the development and organisational plans as well as the Rectorate's internal regulations.