

## CHAPTER I

# Some remarks on the question of “elite universities” with regard to universities in Austria

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## Abstract

The author of this article is an experienced university historian who has published extensively within the field of the history of Austrian Universities. This contribution is based on a long experience and also reflects the personal opinion of the author as to recent development of Austrian and other European universities.

After 1975, the term “university” was extended to not only include classical universities, but also lower level institutions, like schools of agriculture, mining etc. In Austria institutions with quite different ranks and content are defined as universities. However, only classical universities should be discussed in the view of the term “elite universities”. Even in that sense it’s difficult to give a clear definition of an “elite university”. We may call an institution an elitist university with a great number of participations in high ranked project teams. But this can be dangerous, because the process of approval of the funding of projects inclines to follow scientific fashions and by that restricts the freedom of scientific research. A reform in 1993 pushed the responsibility for the handling of the budget to the universities themselves, and in 2002 the state granted full autonomy, which meant that Austrian universities could suddenly go bankrupt. This has affected the quality of the universities, and not in a positive way. Classical

universities of Austria have therefore lost some of their former dominance and the term “elite university in Austria” can therefore be difficult to define.

**Key words:** Elite universities, Rankings of universities, Classical universities, Project, Vienna, Reforms of 1993.

## Main question

How to define “elite university”? I do not know – we all know the problems of the various world-wide rankings of universities and similar institutions. Besides these difficulties the term “elite university” is ambiguous: “elite human resources for the university” or “university for elite” or “university with elitist performance”? And the following explanations may show, how difficult it is, to give any answer to this question for Austria.

## How to define “university” in Austria?

Before 1975 the term “university” without exception meant the classical university with four faculties dedicated to scientific teaching and research. Then, in 1975 the polytechnics and other specialized academic institutions, like veterinary medicine, agriculture, mining and so on, were entitled “university”; in 1998/99 the same happened to the “Kunsthochschulen”<sup>1</sup>, and at the beginning of this century even lower level institutions call themselves “universities for applied sciences”<sup>2</sup> and aim for the right of awarding academic degrees

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1. They developed from the Musikschulen (music schools) > Konservatorium > Musikakademie > Musikhochschulen > Universität für Musik (and similar for fine arts, performing arts etc.).

2. This resulted from the old problem of the translating the German term „Hochschule“ into English, when the literal translation of “Hochschule” is “highschool”, what means another type of institution than the German “Hochschule”; this is a fact, which had been the reason for the changes in 1975. But meanwhile another type of institution had been installed, the so called “Fach-Hochschule”, which is dedicated to the education in special applied fields like mechanics, electronics, economy etc. and originally is ranked below the old “Hochschule”, which in 1975 has been entitled



FIGURE I: A picture of the main building of the University of Vienna (front view), finished in 1884 (central administration and faculties of theology, law and philosophy). Universität Wien / Foto: Franz Pflügl.

as the master and the doctorate, as also meanwhile since 2000 private universities (in different fields of science, medicine and arts or simply for tourism and “international management”) do. So today in Austria the word “university” is used inflationary, excessively for a lot of institutions quite different in rank and content: There exist three old “classical” universities (Vienna, Graz and Innsbruck) and additionally four universities founded between 1962 and 1994 with different structures resp. contents (Salzburg, Linz, Klagenfurt and Krems); in 2004 the former medical schools of the old universities were installed as separate universities. Beside these units exist universities developed out of former institutions in the rank of a *polytechnicum*, six universities for different arts and 12 private universities; in summa there are 34 institutions called “university”. A similar development happened in other German-speaking countries and it

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“university”. The new “Fach-Hochschule” in English figures as “University of applied sciences”

is significant and understandable that a few, very high ranked institutions refused to be entitled as universities, like the Rheinisch-Westfälische Technische Hochschule in Aachen and the Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule in Zürich, they are proud of their old and famous status and not participating in inflationary tendencies (even when they were called “university” in English).

## How to define “elite university”?

Such different institutions as listed up above may not be compared at all. So in view of “elite universities” we should speak only about the classical universities, which since the 17th and 18th century were not so much considered as a “universitas magistrorum et scholarium”, as it was the case in the late Middle Ages, but as institutions representing the whole of science in the sense of a system of knowledge on the highest possible level of thinking about logics, human beings and nature, as Kant has defined science as a logical consistent system, which Popper emphasized as a never ending asymptotic process running in always higher levels of specialization in all fields.

And even in this sense it is very difficult to give a clear definition – firstly under the aspect that the “Hochschulen” in German-speaking countries as well as e.g. the MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) or the CalTech (California Institute of Technology) set up schools of humanities; by this they came closer to the classical universities and were accounted inside of their ranking, and secondly under the aspect of the immense specialization inside the classical universities since the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, because this fact, in concern of the funding of the permanent increasing systems, seems to enforce the idea, that even the classical universities finally would have to concentrate on special fields inside the whole of science and by that give up the ideal of representing the whole of the system of (pure) sciences. But, under the influence of the revolution in scientific communication by means of the internet etc. this seems not to be the case: specialization now happens in the way of free communities and in project-communities funded by national and international sources – so new virtual institutions arise, exactly tailored on the specific subject defined as a “project”. This is the

new organizational instrument of elite forming and is substituting the single universities in elitist research; and this also has its impact on scientific teaching – so in some way we may differ between basic teaching in classical scientific fields and higher ranked special teaching in context of research.

Under such aspects the question “elite university” is more difficult than ever before. We may call an institution an elitist university with a great number of participations in high ranked project teams. But this is dangerous, when the process of approval of the funding of projects inclines to follow scientific fashions and by that restricts the freedom of scientific research. So even under that aspect we may differ between free, non-project-oriented research with third-part-funding (done in a conventional way at a university<sup>3</sup>) and supra-universitarian project-organized research.

### A short outline of the development of the legal situation in Austria

The main periods in the universities legal situation were 1365 – 1752/73 Universities in Habsburg countries were run by the Societas Jesu 1753/1773 – 1848 absolutely state-controlled and centralised system in enlightened absolutism, dominance of utilitarism, some excellence in clinical medicine Since 1848 universities in Habsburg countries became institutions of scientific teaching and research work.

Up to 1848 Austrian universities were not obliged to be active in research – they only had to teach for clericals, clerks and teachers in the secondary school level. The revolution in 1848 caused real and profound reforms, which historians normally connect with the minister Leo Graf Thun-Hohenstein, but he came in this position in summer 1849, when very important decisions already had been made in the time before under the dominant influence of Thuns former

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3. It is to be respected, that a researcher may not be interested in a lot of administrative work, when he tries to do his job in quiet intensive work – but performance records do not measure such activities, but only a resulting publication; by that intensive work of years might figure as a simple number in a statistic analysis of activities.



FIGURE 2: A picture of the inner courtyard of the building in nr 1 in present days standing; under the arcades are many monuments of famous scientists.

mentor in Prague, the philosopher Franz S. Exner; but Thuns main merits were, that he followed the intentions of Exner even after Exner's death and that he prohibited the re-confessionalization of the universities by the way of the concordat in 1855. So the years 1848/49 were the real beginning of modern universities in Austria.

From 1848 until 1993/99 in Austria we have universities in a modern sense quite similar to the German model, but still with a centralised state's administration in a strict hierarchy of universities: as in the emperor's residence the university of Vienna was the first rank university at the top of the other universities, which had the equal rights, but in minor levels concerning the equipment and the funding in every sense. A reform in 1922<sup>4</sup> did not cause so much effective changes in organization, but in a political way, when uni-

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4. "Bundesgesetz vom 20. Juli 1922, womit das Gesetz vom 27. April 1873 [...] betreffend die Organisation der Universitätsbehörden abgeändert und ergänzt wird" – ... law changing the law concerning the organization of university administration from 1873..

versities were defined as "deutsche Forschungs- und Lehranstalten"<sup>5</sup>.

When we skip over the legal changes during the Austrian "Ständestaat" (1933/34–1938) and the nationalsocialist period (1938–1945), the next step happened in 1975, which brought a structural reform under mainly social aspects, when it ended the conservative dominance of the professores ordinarii by giving a say in a lot of decisions to assistants, students and even non-academic staff. When it after years became evident, that this reform caused a lot of struggles, delays and dangerous awkwardness as also an immense increasing of the budget without the desired effects in quality, in 1993 the state capitulated and pushed the responsibility for the handling of the budget to the universities themselves: with the reforms of the years 1993/99 and then 2002 the state granted full autonomy – this was, what the universities had desired and demanded from 1848 on as an ideal erroneously attributed to the Middle Ages. The new laws from 1993<sup>6</sup>, in Vienna and Graz not installed before 1999, and then the law from 2002<sup>7</sup> brought a framework concerning some outlines of structure with rector, vice-rectors, senate and faculties under the control of an external board. The number, the content and structure of faculties were to be constituted by the universities themselves<sup>8</sup>. Since then the universities get global five-year's-budgets on the basis of agreements between each university and the state's administration according to the performance of the university and its planning and, very important, also its third-party-funding. This brought the end of centralization, the universities are free to organize their studies (under the aspects of the Bologna system, which should be installed without higher expenses, as a zero-sum-system), are free to open and to close chairs, but at the same time became a subject of a high degree of commercialization: the univer-

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5. In the laws before there was no definition of university given – because it was not considered necessary.

6. Bundesgesetz über die Organisation der Universitäten (UOG 1993, resp. „Universitäts-Organisationsgesetz 1993“) ... laws concerning the organization of universities

7. Universitätsgesetz 2002. This law installed the former Medizinische Fakultäten in Wien, Graz and Innsbruck as independent Medizinische Universitäten.

8. So there exist universities with 18 faculties and others with 7 etc.

sities have to act in accordance with the rules of the Austrian Code of Commerce and can go bankrupt. Therefore since 1999 professors are not appointed by the president of State; now they are mere employees of the university on the basis of a treaty with the rector, and very often for limited time (in some cases only 2, very often 5 years, others unlimited) – so many of them will not really identify with the university, but will look and try to qualify for a better unlimited engagement at another university. On the other hand there still exists a large staff of assistants with unlimited agreements with rather fine salaries from the period before 2002 (sometimes higher than the salaries of new professors).

But in one crucial point the Austrian universities are not free – even not in the period since 2002: they have no permission to choose resp. select their students under the aspect of quality as the lower ranked “universities of applied sciences” can do; the consequence is: at the one side the number of students increased immensely during the last decades, whereas at the other side the level of erudition of the graduates at the secondary school level is going down – so we have a mass of students, who are not able to read and understand a demanding text<sup>9</sup>. Only in a few fields like medicine and some discipline, which need labs, the number of students is controlled by entrance examinations, which has been caused by the fact, that Austria gets a lot of students, who failed the entrance examinations at German universities<sup>10</sup>. Fact is now, that Austria today in relation to the number of its inhabitants has more than twice the percentage of

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9. In 2016 it was officially published, that 73 % of the pupils of the Austrian elementary schools suffer from a serious lack of commanding writing and reading their German mother tongue; and there is still a high percentage of student graduates from the gymnasium, enrolling at the universities, who suffer from such problems, as everyone knows who is holding oral or written exams. This can easily be documented.

10. 30 to more than 50 % of the candidates of entrance examinations in medicine are students from Germany. This is the consequence of a law of the European Union, that foreigners from the EU have to be treated equal to Austrians; as long as the Austrian government refuses to introduce tuition fees for Austrians, students from Germany or elsewhere in the EU have not to pay any tuition fee in Austria.

students enrolled at universities than it is the case in Bavaria<sup>11</sup>. This is bad enough, but on top of that there exist organizations in some universities, which stipulate that the budget of a curriculum is to be determined by the number of students passing exams, what causes that the number of non-passing students in exams are to be avoided on behalf of saving the budget (and therefore the non-passing goes to zero). All that means a waste of the money, which would be necessary for excellent students.

And there are other problems too: in a higher degree than before the reforms of 1993 and 2002 the quality of Austrian universities depends on the experience and knowledge of the whole system of science and of an university of only a small number of decision makers, specialized certainly in their own specific field but without solid knowledge concerning the development of science at all. The second part of decision making process before the reforms got lost by the reforms: the often maligned experienced officers of the ministry, comparing the universities, looking for balance of the different fields of science, in some way familiar with the history of the development. The rectorates in fact together with a compliant senate are omnipotent, the boards often are ineffective and, if not, primarily interested in the economical standing of the university and without

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11. The Advisory Board for Research and Technology at the end of 2015 has presented his "Ratsempfehlung [...] zur Finanzierung von Universitäten und öffentlicher Forschung und Entwicklung in Österreich im Bundesfinanzrahmen 2017 bis 2020, Kapitel Wissenschaft und Forschung" – recommendations to the Austrian Government concerning the funding of universities and scientific research in the years 2017–2020. This advice lead to an increase of funding, which is based by statistic arguments: there are 350.000 students in Austria (13,1 % of them in "Fachhochschulen" = FHS), 234.000 in Switzerland (38,4 % in FHS) and 360.000 in Bavaria (33,9 % in FHS); this means that in Austria the number of students at universities in relation to the inhabitants approximately is twice as high as the numbers in Switzerland and Bavaria; Austria spends 3,8 Mrd € for the universities (12.619 per student), Switzerland 7,2 Mrd € (50.152) and Bavaria 6,3 Mrd € (26.051). The very simple conclusion of the board is to raise the budget for the universities in Austria, not to lower the number of students by the way of quality controls (which would unmask the statistics of unemployment, in which graduated people are not unemployed, when they work as taxi-drivers.)

sufficient specific knowledge<sup>12</sup>. So, in the system there is a lack of experience and, as it is in political life, a lot of work is done under the aspect of re-election for another period. If there does not exist a culture of information and free discussion, it is an absolutistic system as in the 18<sup>th</sup> century style or in some periods in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

There is also, as mentioned before, a lack of corporate identity, which could work as an instrument of discussion and, in some way, as a quality assurance. The situation on behalf of identification in Austria never has been comparable with the US-American universities, when in Austria universities always exclusively have been funded by the state; donors, who supported science, gave their money to the Academy of Science in Vienna (or to fine arts), not to the universities. As shown above the lack of identification inside the universities increased since 2002. The enormous dimension of specialization and the incredible increasing of today's communication inside the specific scientific communities are working against local institutional identification and the connections inside the universities become less important than the global network in the specific field of research interest. It seems that the universities become resolved in favor of communities of research subjects, of organizations beyond universities as shown above.

## A look to the past

When in Austria there was a pyramidal structure with Vienna at the top and the other universities in different ranks below, the „elite university“ always had to be Vienna. But the reality after 1848 was, that under the influence of the emphatic young scientists from Germany appointed to chairs of Austrian Universities in 1848 and also of eager and well-educated students coming from the also reformed Austrian gymnasium in short time the whole system of Austrian universities got a new quality<sup>13</sup> and within two, three decades many

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12. It is an interesting fact, that the law provides, that the members of the boards have to fix the amount of their own salaries as members of the board...

13. It is not the place here, to explain the important preparing effect of the pre-March-era, which was an important stimulus.



FIGURE 3: The campus of the Karl-Franzens-University Graz – the picture dates from ca. 1960 and shows the campus as it has been set up in the time between 1870 and 1905 in its original status: the eldest building (anatomy and physiology) can be seen in the middle directly in front in a small park), then physics (1876, in front left side) and chemistry (1879, at the right side) between the main building (1895); in the background at left the building for theoretical medicine disciplines and at right the building for natural sciences (inside the faculty of philosophy). The buildings for physics and for chemistry at the time of their construction were worldwide famous – physics partially was built without iron in behalf of special experiments, first professor working there was Ludwig Boltzmann. – Today this campus is still the nucleus of the enlarged university. The clinics of both universities were and are outside; in Graz a new large hospital area with a lot of buildings was opened in 1912. Archive of the Karl-Franzens-University of Graz.

disciplines reached eye level to those of at German universities. This happened mainly, but not only in the core sciences (e.g. Ludwig Boltzmann)

## The future?

In some way the present development in Austria remembers to the situation in the years after 1848, when outside the university of Vienna, but in personal connection with corresponding institutes at

the university, special institutions and schools were founded – in physics, history, meteorology, geology – which quickly developed to important scientific centers<sup>14</sup> and achieved high scientific importance and then by the time passed away<sup>15</sup>. In the late 1990ies and specially after 2002 institutions have been created as so called centers of excellence above the level of universities and also “universities for applied sciences” in a lower level, but with much better conditions than the universities<sup>16</sup>; the first ones as institutions of high level research in higher ranked addition to the classical universities, the seconds as centers of applied sciences research and work in addition to the technical universities. So changes are going on and the classical universities in some way seem to lose their former dominant role; but even when it seems that in such a process of transformation the universities will be overarched in some fields by new higher ranked and specially in research more qualified institutions, it is to be expected that these structures by means of the factor of teaching (when students of the normally at the university enrolled

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14. These institutions originally were not scientifically oriented but installed for practical applications (meteorology and geology) or simply as „schools“ for the education of high qualified teachers in the reformed gymnasia (physics and Austrian history); they very soon changed into effective research institutions in core sciences and even in humanities – e.g. the Central Institute for Geology in 1849, for Meteorology in 1851, as „schools“ the Physikalische Institut 1849–1890 (Stefan, Mach, Boltzmann etc.; continued 1910 by the famous Radium Institute inside the Academy of Science) and the Institut für österreichische Geschichtsforschung (1854–2016), both in legal terms outside, but in terms of teaching in some way situated inside the University of Vienna. These institutions proved very effective for the scientific progress on an excellent international level at the end of the 19th century and up to 1938. So the high excellency given in that time, was not so much an excellency of the University of Vienna itself, but of a cluster of external scientific institutions in personnel connection with the University and of their output in human resources also for the other Austrian universities.

15. Therefore the high excellency given in that time, was not so much an excellency of and at the University of Vienna itself, but by a cluster of external scientific institutions in personnel connection with the university. In consequence they had a significant impact on all the universities in Austria not only in their special disciplines by means of their personnel output, but also as a rolemodel.

16. They can decide on the number and the qualification of students and have rather high budgets.

students will accepted as participants in the lectures at the special institutions) later on will be incorporated in universities, while other external structures will be created and so on. This in practice will result in a basic system of scientific teaching and research at the one side and on the other side of alternately temporary elements of excellence in specific fields of research and teaching.

In the situation we just outlined we can see a quite similar situation as in 1848, but a main different and very important factor in accordance with „elitist universities in Austria“ today we have not yet mentioned: we are missing the enormous catalyzing enthusiasm of that revolutionary period around 1848 – on the contrary in the last decades under the pressure of specialization and in connection with the modern electronic devices we have lost a lot of basic knowledge and of education in general as the necessary fundament of specialization, which was so significant even for the natural scientists in the 19th and 20th century<sup>17</sup>. In general we miss some eagerness and punch in activities, in the sense of self-discipline, there is a kind of idleness, in some way indifference<sup>18</sup>.

But, maybe, that this all are only wrong impressions of an old man dreaming about an ideal picture of the university and the past...

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17. One of the most important German newspapers in the last months has published a series of articles concerning the lack of erudition of students in Germany, e.g. <http://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article154187052/Die-erschreckenden-Bildungsdefizite-junger-Deutscher.html>.

18. Young people, unemployed, because having lost their job, answer to the question, why they lost the job: I do not like to get up in the morning. When companies are looking for apprentices, they find that they may work with 5 %; 95 % are to be categorized as unable. Certainly, these are not students, but it gives an impression of the current situation. At the universities there are scarcely activities on Saturday, only few on Monday morning or on Friday afternoon.

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