

Annual Report of the Austrian Student Ombudsman 2018/19 submitted to the Minister for Education, Science and Research and to Parliament

Summary

The Austrian Student Ombudsman (SO) at the Ministry for Education, Science and Research (BMBWF) is required by Paragraph 31 Subsection 7 of the Austrian Act on Quality Assurance in Higher Education (HS_QSG) as amended to submit its annual report (AR) for the previous academic year to the Minister and to Parliament each 15 December. The report for 2018/19 is available on Parliament's website and on the website of the Student Ombudsman. The report covers the 2018/19 academic year.

Subject of Report and General Statistics:

The subject of the report is the Student Ombudsman's observations regarding the issues submitted to it during the reporting period under its statutory remit relating to courses, teaching, exams, services and administration at institutions of higher education in the Austrian Higher Education Area and at other institutions that deal with student issues.

These institutions of higher education comprise all public universities, private universities, universities of applied sciences, public and private teacher training universities, the Danube University Krems, the Diplomatic Academy of Vienna, the *Institute of Science and Technology Austria* and what are known as § 27 HS-QSG Institutions (i.e. cross-border study programs).

Other institutions concerned with student issues include the Student Financial Aid Authority, the Student Financial Aid Offices, and immigration authorities etc.

The issues addressed were submitted to the Ombudsman by individuals from Austria and abroad who are applying to or who are interested in courses of study at such institutions, by current students and by former students.

The **number of students** at all institutions of higher education in the Austrian Higher Education Area (with varying cut-off dates) totals **396.366** in the 2018/19 academic year.

The number of **applicants for study programmes** insofar as can be ascertained totalled

- **58.666** at universities of applied sciences (multiple applications possible!)
- there are no online figures available for applicants at public universities and teacher training universities
- **10.560** applicants at private universities.

Cases in Figures

As in previous years, there was an increase in the number of issues submitted to the Ombudsman as deadlines laid down by law, regulations and institutional rules approached, i.e. in September (when admissions of new students to public universities end and the final results of the selection procedures are announced at the universities of applied sciences), in November (when the extended deadline ends at public universities) and also around the closing date for applications for support schemes and grants.

Issues by Gender: **43%** of issues were raised by men, **57%** by women.

At the time the report went to press **461** of **478** issues had been resolved. **11%** of issues were resolved by the OS for the party submitting the case in the latter's favour, in **64%** of issues information was given; in **4%** of cases, investigation showed that the SO has no jurisdiction to deal with the issue, in **12%** of cases the party raising the issue did not give permission for the SO to pursue the matter further making it impossible to deal with the issue. In **5%** of cases, it was not possible to find a solution.

Distribution of Issues According to the Type of Institution:

- Universities: 219 (46%)
- Other institutions: 65 (14%)
- Institutions not named / not known: 63 (13%)
- Universities of applied sciences: 52 (11%)
- Student Financial Aid Authority: 49 (10%)
- Teacher training universities: 18 (4%)
- Private universities: 12 (3%)

Issues by Topic:

The most frequently raised issues were:

- 128 conditions relating to courses of study (27%)
- 108 admissions to a course of study (23%)
- 60 other issues (13%)
- 49 student financial aid (10%)
- 32 tuition fees (7%)
- 31 recognition / accreditation of examinations and course work (7%)

- 16 academic degrees (3%)
- 12 recognition and comparison of foreign qualifications (3%)
- 11 grants (2%)
- 11 bullying / discrimination (2%)

The frequency with which issues were raised varied according to the type of institution.

Description of Issues

As in previous reports, detailed accounts of cases were presented in the Annual Report 2018/19 and reports on the results were provided. The laws which have to be considered in each case are presented at the beginning of the case studies. A total of 22 issues were described concerning the following topics:

- Medical degree programme: an applicant with asylum status gains admission to a public university
- Admission to a degree programme at a public university (University Entrance Qualification Regulation-UBVO)
- Problems with legalisation of documents in connection with an admission procedure at a public university
- Erasmus funding for an internship at a public university
- Offsetting of tuition fees for the following academic year at a public university
- Supervision of a dissertation at a public university: Issue concerning new supervisors following three negative assessments of the first version
- Foreign high-school leaving certificate and admission to a public university
- Recognition of free electives at a public university
- Suspicion of ghost-writing at a university of applied sciences
- (Anonymous) complaint about classes not being held at a public university
- British upper secondary school leaving certificate in an admission procedure at a public university
- Determining the time for which no tuition fees are due following an extension to the duration of study due to a changed curriculum of a PhD programme at a public university
- Admission to a master's degree programme at a public university—permeability due to a foreign degree
- Compulsory registration for admission procedure at a public university
- No post-exam review possible – postponement of the retake date at a university of applied sciences
- Following termination of the education contract by the university of applied sciences a student again applied for admission to the same course
- Information regarding recognition of successfully completed examinations and course work
- Termination of the education contract at a private university
- Austrian degree programmes that are offered and carried out abroad
- Double tuition fee at a public university and at a teacher training university

- Repayment of student financial aid despite immediate notification
- Discontinuation of degree programmes in Austria on the part of a foreign educational establishment pursuant to § 27 HS-QSG

Proposals Made to the Governing Bodies and Members of Institutions of Higher Education and to Lawmakers

A total of 18 suggestions were made to lawmakers and to the governing bodies or members of the higher education institutions. Ten suggestions were made to lawmakers.

- Recognition of exams (§ 78 Universities Act-UG, § 56 Higher Education Act-HG, § 12 University of Applied Sciences Studies Act-FHStG)
- Ghost-writing (without reference to any specific legislation)
- Expiry of admission to a degree programme (pursuant to § 68 (1) lit Z Universities Act-UG)
- Statistical survey of students upon admission (registration or when a place is awarded)
- Special University Entrance Qualification (§ 65 Universities Act-UG)
- Repetition of courses with continuous assessment results at universities of applied sciences (§18 (2) University of Applied Sciences Studies Act-FHStG)
- Psychological counselling also for students at teacher training universities (§ 68a Student Support Act-StudFG)
- Tuition fee for students taking multiple programmes at a university of applied sciences (§ 2 (2) Universities of Applied Sciences Act-FHStG)
- Publication of education contracts at universities of applied sciences and private universities
- Overall grade on diploma (§ 7 UHSBV)

Eight suggestions were made to the governing bodies and members of the higher education institutions and other institutions that deal with student issues.

- Expiry of admission to public universities (§ 68 para 1 (8) Universities Act)
- Permeability
- Inclusion in the curriculum of compulsory courses on good scientific practice at all types of institution
- Transparency as regards offers of personal assistance for people with disabilities and filing of applications for deviating methods of examination at higher education institutions
- Continuing education courses coaching
- Identification upon acceptance / admission of applicants to a course of study with the help of electronic media
- Draw attention to the option of payment in instalments or deferred payments following an official notice to repay support payments (Student Financial Aid Authority)
- AQ Austria

Four suggestions were drawn up together with representatives of stakeholder groups in an intensive seminar on the Annual Report 2017/18

- Special University Entrance Qualification
- Recognitions
- Students as consumers (universities of applied sciences and private universities)
- PhD programmes

Review:

Reactions to and implementation of suggestions from previous annual reports
Presentation of regional ombudsmen at the Ministry of Education, Science and Research

Outlook

Work in 2020 will focus on the following areas:

- Further development of the working methods of the ombudsmen in the Austrian Higher Education Area
- International development to further anchor ombudsmen (in the higher education sector) in the final documents of the "Conference of Bologna Ministers" in Rome in June 2020.

The following **events** will be held jointly with various cooperation partners in 2020:

- Symposium "Recruiting International Potential for Austrian Higher Education Institutions: Obstacles and Opportunities", spring 2020, Vienna
- Special seminar: Taking up and processing of issues / complaints, spring 2020, Vienna
- Symposium: "Dialogue Students – Higher Education Institutions", early summer 2020, Salzburg
- Symposium: "Do teacher training universities need an ombudswoman/ombudsman?", early autumn 2020, Innsbruck
- Symposium: "Loss of relationships due to electronic communication: Is a re-personalisation of 'administrative offices' needed?" autumn 2020, Vaduz

International Activities of the Student Ombudsman

The Austrian Student Ombudsman at the Ministry for Education, Science and Research took part in a wide range of international activities during the reporting period: by participating in the activities of ENOHE, the European Network of Ombuds in Higher Education (several presentations by members of staff at the annual **ENOHE conference in June 2019 in León**). At this conference J. Leidenfrost was elected as president of the network (term of office until 2023).

Within the framework of the **ERASMUS+ cooperation project AESOP** (Advocacy Establishment for Students through Ombudsman Position) the concept of higher education ombudsmen has been extended to further Central and Eastern European states and into Azerbaijan, Georgia and Ukraine since 2016. During the reporting period, the Austrian Student Ombudsman attended three project meetings; at the **Kyiv National Economic University named after Vadym Hetmanin Kiev, Ukraine** on 4 and 5 April 2019, at the **Baku State University in Baku, Azerbaijan**, from 26 to 29 May 2019 and at the **Akaki Tsereteli State University in Kutaisi, Georgia** from 14 to 17 July 2019.

The Austrian Student Ombudsman also took part in three working meetings of the Social Dimension Working Group of the Bologna Follow-Up Group in **Zagreb, Croatia, in Brussels, Belgium and in Vienna**. At these meetings preparatory documents for the conference of education ministers and conference of ministers in summer 2020 were discussed.