

Case Study: University of Vienna (Austria)

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The University of Vienna is one of the oldest universities in central Europe and the largest in the German speaking world. For the University of Vienna doctoral education and the advancement of young researchers have been identified as central development goals. According to the Universities Act 2002 (UA02) universities in Austria are obliged to offer only three year doctoral programs for newly admitted doctoral students from winter term 2009 onwards. In the Austrian HE system a Master degree is required for students to be admitted to doctoral studies. However, in contrast to most European university systems there are neither quantitative nor qualitative restrictions for the admission of doctoral candidates, i.e. all candidates who fulfill the formal requirements have to be accepted. There are several severe consequences of unlimited access to the third cycle which must be taken into account when a reform is tackled. Therefore we will briefly give some facts and figures describing the general background.

An important practice in ensuring the quality of both PhD candidates and supervisors is the implementation of quality assurance measures. Concerning the doctoral degree some main structural changes which have just recently been introduced at the University of Vienna as supportive measures to ensure quality will be addressed: the University of Vienna aims at transforming supervision from being a “private” relationship between one professor and one PhD candidate to becoming a collective research group inclusion. Specific directors of the study programs were appointed by the Rectorate and graduate committee were established to enhance the collective responsibility for the selection for doctoral thesis projects and supervision. Secondly, supervision contracts will be mandatory: arrangements for supervision and assessment will be based on a contractual framework of shared responsibilities between doctoral candidates, supervisors and the University. Thirdly, a public defense will be mandatory for all PhD candidates. Additionally it was clarified that being a candidate’s supervisor is incompatible with being the same candidate’s referee in the final defense. Finally, to emphasize the Universities institutional responsibility, a centre for doctoral studies is set up for all doctoral candidates to provide support complementary to supervision which is provided by the faculty.

We will conclude by stressing some success factors for the implementation process and we give a brief outlook concerning future challenges.