

Progress in the implementation of the National Strategy on the Social Dimension of Higher Education in Austria.

What promotes and what challenges the process?

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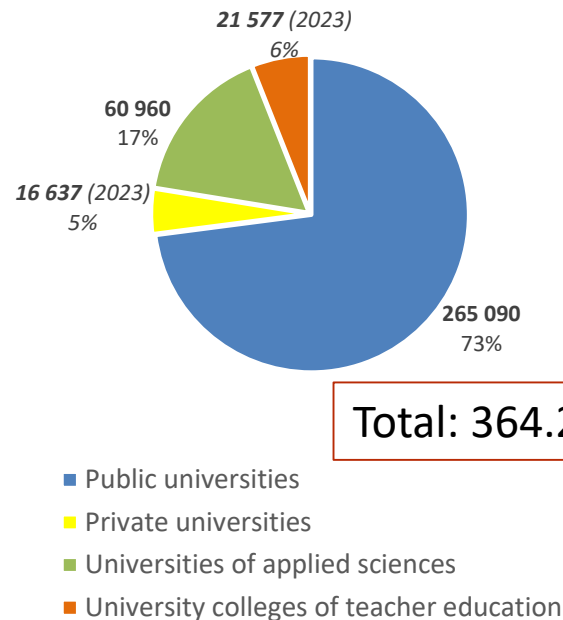
Federal Ministry of Women, Science and Research – Republic of Austria

Higher Education in Austria

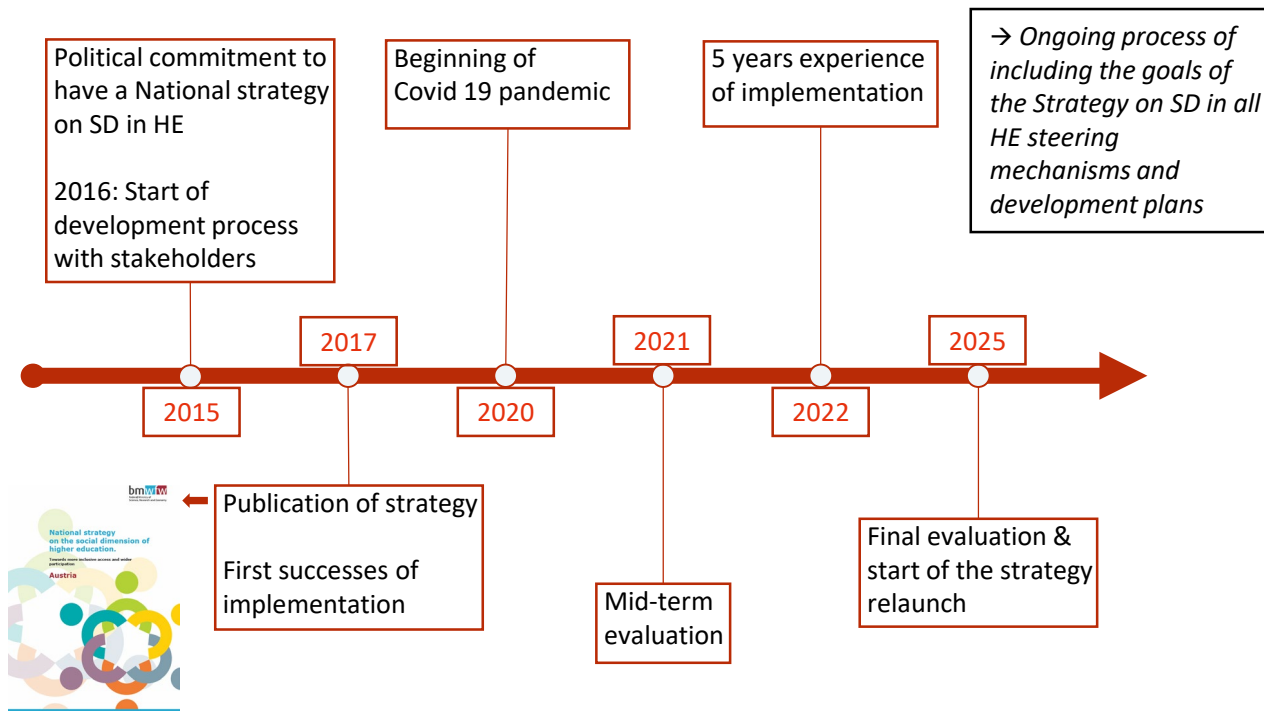
Types of HE institutions

- **23 public universities** (indicator based funding, performance agreements)
- **21 universities of applied sciences** (mix of funding, only 90% funded federally, fixed amount per study place; funding contributions of Bundesländer etc.)
- **14 university colleges of teacher education** (9 public → direct funding, fixed educational budget; 5 private)
- **19 private higher education institutions** (no federal public funding)

Students enrolled (winter term 2024)



2015 to 2025: National strategy on the social dimension of HE – national context



National Strategy on the SD in HE: 3 Target Dimensions

Target Dimension I: More inclusive access

- AL 1: Improve quality and accessibility of information materials
- AL 2: Outreach activities and diversity-sensitive course guidance
- AL 3: Recognition and validation of non-formal and informal skills

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

- AL 4: Ease entry into higher education
- AL 5: Structure of study programmes and quality of teaching
- AL 6: Increase compatibility of studies with other areas of life

Target Dimension III: Create basic parameters and optimize regulation of higher education policy

- AL 7: System-related issues in higher education
- AL 8: Integrate SD into strategic planning for HE and create appropriate governance structures
- AL 9: Further develop the Student Support Scheme

National Strategy on the SD in HE: 9 quantitative targets

1. Increase the number of „educationally disadvantaged“ students in HE

2. Widen inclusive access

3. Promote gender balance

4. Widen participation for students with migrant background

5. Strive for regional balance in HE access

6. Promote SD in mobility

7. Improve compatibility

8. Raise number of received student grants

9. Promote equal opportunity in medicine studies



Implementation successes I

Social Dimension Mainstreaming: National strategy as „supporting narrative“

- **Reforms** of the student support system (valorization of study grant and higher numbers of received grants)
- **Budget retainment** in performance agreements with public universities (**0.5%**)
- **Universities of Applied Sciences Development and Funding Plan 2022/23-2025/26**
- Establishing ‘**Gender and diversity competence centres**’ at university colleges for teacher education
- Improvements in the **recognition of non-formally and informally acquired competences**





Implementation successes II

Dissemination and networking:

- **Annual networking conferences** for the HE community
- **SD profiles of HEIs** published on the ministry's homepage
- **Evidence:** Upper Secondary Graduates' Survey 2022 and 2024; Student Social Survey 2023 (and 2025)
- International PLA on Mainstreaming the Social Dimension Oct. 2020
- PLAR-U-PAG (Feb. & Dec. 2023), OECD event on international good practice on preferential access and career guidance (1 Oct. 2024)





Three challenges to the implementation of SD strategy

Further developments in (almost) all areas of measures (e.g. school-university interface) are underway – but no major systemic change observable

Challenge I: „Implementation Gap“

Challenge II: Multiple societal challenges in the Third Mission of universities

Challenge III: Influence of preceding educational pathway



Challenge I: „Implementation Gap“

- Number of SD measures increased from 170 (at 39 HEIs) in 2016 to 750 (at 60 HEIs) in 2021
- Manifold measures which do – however – have **limited structural and systemic effects** (=„Implementation Gap“)
- Effectiveness, efficiency and range of measures need to be analysed
- **Strategic anchoring** at almost all universities/HEI; service units (e.g. diversity management); interaction of bottom-up and top-down initiatives required as well as mainstreaming the SD at the entire university/HEI



Challenge II: Multiple societal challenges in the Third Mission of universities

- „Die ‚Third Mission‘ zur ‚First Mission‘ machen?“ (Third Mission should be First Mission?) (Schneidewind, 2016, p.21)
- **Third Mission activities become increasingly relevant at HEIs**
 - But there are multiple crises, challenges that have to be addressed as priorities: digitalisation, AI, globalisation, climate change; competition for funds, foreign interference, academic freedom ...
- **Synergies** of measures addressing the **Social Dimension, Gender/Diversity/Equity, SDGs...**
- **Tension** between equity/inclusion/participation and excellence, exclusivity, meritocracy

Challenge III: Influence of preceding educational pathway

- **Quantitative target achievement by 2025 unlikely for almost all indicators** (short observation period; impact of the Covid pandemic; targets too ambitious ...)
- National Strategy might overestimate the effects of social dimension measures at HEIs ⇔ but **HEIs underestimate the effects of social dimension agenda setting related to societal impact**
- **Higher education influences preceding educational levels** (e.g. teacher training, outreach, interface of school and HE, education research, pedagogics)
- **High potential of students with non-academic parents** in secondary education (would especially profit from better & more targeted counselling and information, mentoring, inclusive practices)



Summary

- Successful agenda setting through political commitment and stakeholder involvement
- Budget retainment in steering of public universities (**0.5%**)
- Available data, (inter)national dissemination, and networking (could be improved further)



Outlook

- **HEIs → building upon existing diversity-relevant measures** (to improve cooperation with schools, information & counselling services) with a **focus on systemic and structural effects**
- Stronger **focus on non-traditional educational biographies** (validation, recognition of non-formal educational achievements & fostering Micro credentials)
- Revision of curricula and teaching provisions → **compatibility between studies and other responsibilities** (E-Learning, childcare offers ...)
- Obligatory **diversity trainings** in staff development
- **Relaunch of the strategy** → promote implementation of SD
- **Keep mainstreaming the Social Dimension** → including the Social Dimension in all HE strategies

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Thank you for your attention!

Questions welcome!

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