

# *We may think University differently!*



## **Demands of the Initiative Unterbau Uni Wien**

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The following demands emerged from many discussions among colleagues of various different research fields. They reflect the experiences of the temporarily or precariously employed academic members of staff at Austrian universities. At the University of Vienna, this group makes up about 80 percent of the scientific staff. The demands were put to a vote in a raw version on November 24, 2022 at the general assembly of the mid-level staff and were accepted with an overwhelming majority. Although we all love our work, we are not content with the overall working conditions. High pressure and a variety of obligations combined with permanent uncertainty make working at universities increasingly unattractive. At the same time, there is a constant demand from decision makers for more 'excellence'. But the basis for excellent research is excellent working conditions. The opposite is currently the case, which is why many of our colleagues have already turned their back on academia in disappointment. The university policies of the last decades are characterized by failures and the creation of working conditions that prevent quality and scientific excellence in research and teaching rather than fostering them.

We believe that it is the duty of political decision-makers to create an appropriate framework and foundation for good research and teaching - the Universities Act currently in effect does not provide this! We expect the rectorates to exhaust all possibilities available to create fair working conditions for all employees and to improve them sustainably. The following measures are therefore necessary in our view:

### **Short-term demands**

#### **1. A renegotiation of the amendment to the Universities Act (UG) 2021: revision or cancellation of §109 without replacement!**

The current version of the regulations for multiple consecutive contracts kills academic careers, is contradictory in itself, and makes the university an even less attractive employer than before. As a consequence, the regulations cause damage to research and teaching at universities. We see no good reason why an exception to regular Austrian labor law should be in effect particularly in the university sector. A renegotiation of the UG amendment passed in 2021 is inevitable in order to prevent the medium-term collapse of the university system. This must be done with the involvement of all stakeholders (students, the mid-level staff on fixed-term contracts, and the general university staff).

#### **2. Immediate permanent employment of §109 hardship cases!**

Due to the strict interpretation of §109 (Universities Act/UG) at the University of Vienna, numerous experienced university employees are facing professional termination – without any fault of their own – or will have to leave the institution in the near future. As a result, the University of Vienna is risking to lose know-how in research, teaching and committee work that can hardly be replaced.

Given these facts, the University neither fulfils its responsibility towards its longtime, established employees nor its obligation to make the best possible use of the public funds made available for the benefit of Austrian society (§§1-3 UG 2002). We call upon the University of Vienna to immediately grant these hardship cases permanent contracts, as has already been done at other universities.

### **3. Redistribution of the current budget to create a larger number of permanent positions!**

Permanent tasks ask for permanent positions! Due to retirement, a number of personnel resources will become available in the next few years. Several types of tasks and obligations in research, teaching and committee work have traditionally been carried out by 'associate professors' (permanent mid-level positions). Once the retirement wave is in full swing, many of these tasks can no longer be executed as the associate professor position will no longer exist. This represents a substantial loss of know-how and will hit many departments hard. We call on the Rectorate of the University of Vienna to use the current situation to create significantly more permanent positions now (!) - also beyond the existing professorships and tenure-track positions! Without such a personnel policy, we believe that it will be difficult to maintain the university's operations.

## **Medium-term demands**

### **1. A general increase of the university budget to ensure a sustainable personnel policy!**

As the largest educational institution in the country, the University of Vienna has a special responsibility: it is a main driver of knowledge, breeding ground for social action and orientation in many areas, trains specialists and teachers, and thus contributes to providing solutions for multiple crises in. In order to fulfil these tasks, it is unacceptable that the University of Vienna replaces the majority of its staff every eight years and let go of expertise that was acquired over a longer period of time. We therefore demand from the government to increase the university budget and provide a basis for a sustainable and future-oriented personnel policy. Only if universities have better basic funding can research and teaching be secured in the long term and can the majority of academic university staff be employed on a permanent basis.

### **2. A roadmap for more attractive permanent positions!**

Good teaching and research need appealing employment conditions as a prerequisite for attracting and retaining excellent, motivated staff. Permanent positions after the doctorate should be the rule, not the exception -- as has been repeatedly recommended by external and international evaluators. Clear and transparent criteria are important for this: those who have proven themselves in research and/or teaching should receive a permanent contract. Attractive terms of employment make possible a fair balance between research and teaching and in addition that payment is based on actual working hours. It is not acceptable that positions are filled on a 50% or 75% basis, while 100%, 125% or 150% of the working time is required for professional tasks to be accomplished.

### **3. Physical mobility must not be an end in itself: Think internationality more broadly!**

International exchange and cooperation are undoubtedly important factors for innovation in research and teaching. However, measuring these factors on the basis of physical mobility falls far short of the mark. While several years of work abroad are a central application and career prerequisite, they are often not relevant for contributing to and furthering research and innovation in the discipline. This requirement has a highly socially selective effect and is incompatible with a family life: many highly qualified and motivated researchers and teachers cannot or do not want to fulfil this requirement of "forced nomadism". Instead of focusing on purely quantitative "incoming-outgoing" statistics, relevant factors - international research and teaching content, participation in international collaborations and networks, shorter research stays, etc. should serve as the basis for measuring mobility. In view of the possibilities of digital networking and communication, the orientation towards purely physical 'mobility' seems to us to be simply anachronistic.

#### **4. Actively counteracting all forms of discrimination, especially in personnel decisions!**

Diversity in society must be represented by diversity at university! We demand a concept of diversity that goes beyond mere PR purposes towards a structural change on all levels of the University of Vienna and that reflects social plurality and dismantles structures of discrimination. This requires an expansion of the competencies of the Working Group for Equal Treatment Issues and the consideration of other inequality factors (such as racism, classism, rejectionism, etc.) in personnel decisions. Only by recognizing existing inequalities and their effects on university structures can they be actively and sustainably counteracted.

### **Long-term demands and principles: This is our vision of the university in the future.**

#### **1. Creation of attractive permanent positions beyond professorships and diversification of career paths!**

Not everyone working in academia wants to or should become a professor. However, the current fixation on the professorship as the only career option creates a bottleneck through which only a few can pass. In fact, there are far fewer people than universities need to handle research, teaching and administration. Conversely, professors suffer from massive overwork due to the triple burden of research, teaching and administrative tasks. These tasks should be distributed more broadly: The tasks at a university are diverse, and so should be the employment conditions! The possibility of differentiated, heterogeneous career paths would also make it possible to set priorities earlier in one's career (more teaching or more research) and thus make possible better planning and sustainable research and teaching for those concerned and for the university alike. A diversity of employment options also helps to promote social diversity within the university staff and to do justice to the diversity within our society.

#### **2. Cooperation before competition! Less competition in academia in favor of long-term cooperation.**

Due to the restructuring of the university system in the last two decades, the importance of cooperative practices and structures is steadily decreasing, while personal 'excellence', supposedly generated by constant competition, is prioritized over everything else. However, research lives from exchange and cooperation. Its main function, however, is not captured by the current metrics of quality management and budget allocation. The unquestioned belief in the automaticity of systemic self-optimization through quantifying competition (rankings) not only distorts the evaluation and public control of the quality of institutional services. It also creates counterproductive pressure to perform through an incentive system that in many disciplines penalizes cooperative, innovative work that pursues complex questions. These framework conditions lead to the fact that the potential for excellent research at the University of Vienna is not exhausted. We demand that the principle of cooperation be given a higher priority due to its key role for excellent and sustainable research and teaching. The current crises, in particular, require joint efforts and joint responses instead of lone wolves.

#### **3. Research and teaching are mutually dependent!**

A separation of research and teaching can be observed for quite some time. In order to pursue a successful academic career, engagement in teaching brings disadvantages instead of reward. The new regulation of §109 (UG) worsens this situation dramatically as because of the different calculation periods and methods, parallel teaching and research now have an even more negative effect on future academic opportunities. However, it is precisely this connection that makes universities so appealing! Teaching and research are mutually beneficial: the exchange with students has a positive effect on research; conversely, the integration of current research makes teaching more attractive for students and increases its social relevance. With this drifting apart, the universities lose one of their essential unique selling points.

#### **4. Democratization of the universities! Equal participation in decision-making of students, mid-level faculty and professors.**

Full professors represent only a small minority of the academic staff at universities (currently about 5% of the academic staff at the University of Vienna). However, they have the absolute majority of votes in almost all committees. We demand a fundamental renewal of the university structures in the sense of a sustainable democratization. This means that all people who teach and study at universities should have a say. University comes from 'universitas', the community of teachers and learners. This must also be reflected in the committees, in which professors, mid-level faculty and students should be represented in equal numbers with the right to information and voting.

Universitäten lehren und lernen, eine Stimme haben sollen. Universität kommt von *universitas*, der Gemeinschaft der Lehrenden und Lernenden. Dies muss sich auch in den Gremien widerspiegeln, in denen zu gleichen Teilen Professor\*innen, Mittelbau und Studierende mit Einsichts-, Auskunfts- und Stimmrecht vertreten sein sollten.