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Open Letter: BILDUNG BRENNT

The Austrian turquoise-green government plans a comprehensive amendment of the Austrian Universities Act (Universitätsgesetz, UG). In the middle of the Corona crisis roughly 150 changes are to be rushed through.

With this open letter, we call on the Austrian Federal Government to immediately abort the amendment of the Universities Act. We, lecturers and students at Austrian universities alike, reject the projected changes. Numerous other people also support our open letter.

Part of this change is that the Senate – the „university parliament“ and one of the three governing structures at the university – is denied most of its authority. This degrades the Senate to a democratic „ornament“, which won’t have much to say in regards to important decisions. In the future, the rector of a university would be reappointed by the Unirat solely (which is composed of external persons, some of whom are appointed by political parties). The Senate would no longer have much say and the door would be open for party-political influence on the universities. The Senates (still) form and release curricula. However, according to Turquoise-Green, the rectorates should set the future guidelines and thus determine how curricula are to be designed. The Ministry of Education makes no secret of the fact that it wants to gain legal

access to modify curricula – mediated through the rectorates. This gives the ministry the possibility to gain influence in areas in which the government could not previously intervene.

We reject any planned weakening of the Senates with absolute vehemence! The possible influence of politics on university structures endangers the freedom of the sciences and their teaching and contradicts democratic principles. The planned restructuring of the university law is further advancing the neoliberalization of education.

We, teachers and staff members of all Austrian universities, demand the consolidation and expansion of codetermination and democratic structures at all universities. Especially in these difficult times, in which universities are struggling with the corona situation and the restructuring of teaching, we demand support from the federal government instead of additional barriers that impede democratic education, teaching and science.

The thumbscrews are also tightened for students. Students who gain less than 16 ECTS per year will be thrown out of their university and blocked for life from their course of studies. Going to university while engaging in gainful employment will become even more difficult and therefore opportunities for advancement will be hindered. For students who are parents the already challenging situation will be rendered impossible in the future. Students with chronic diseases and students with care obligations are exceedingly disadvantaged and set under additional pressure by the amendment of the Universities Act. Furthermore, we vehemently reject the forced exmatriculations planned in the amendment!

With this open letter, we call on the federal government to stop the planned amendment of the Universities Act immediately and call for a comprehensive debate to draft legislative amendments in consultation with and through the codetermination of universities, teachers and students.

Short version:

In our view, the government enforces the following deteriorations through the amendment of the Universities Act:

– Massive restrictions on the constitutionally guaranteed autonomy of universities.

– An imbalance in the universities‘ distribution of power: The rectorates and university councils are gaining power; while the Senates, the democratically elected bodies, which are competent in terms of content and subject matter, are losing authority.

– Excessive political rights for the ministry to influence the universities and the contents taught there.

– Students from socially disadvantaged families, working students, students with children and generally students who have already had a harder time at universities will face even more obstacles.

Access to education has to be open for everyone!

On no account may democratic structures and codetermination at universities be weakened; on the contrary, they must be maintained and consolidated in the future. We demand that studying is to be facilitated and not hindered. Going to university must not again become an exclusive right of rich parents‘ children.
Studying must not be further precarized!

We call on the government to guarantee the autonomy and balance of power at universities and to remove the problematic passages from the draft of the Universities Act.

#bildungbrennt #ugnovelle

https://bildung-brennt.at/translation-of-offener-brief-bildung-brennt/