The difficulties of gender equality governance at Austrian universities. A problem of competing institutional logics?

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1. Introduction
Austrian universities have a long history of masculinism, only in 1908 the first women were allowed to enroll for specific courses at the University of Vienna. Presently, Austria has 22 public universities with a total number of about 255,000 students. Female students have steadily been catching up on higher education since the 1970ies. While today female graduates have outnumbered their male colleagues in some disciplines, the ratio of female academics rose only incrementally and women still are rather poorly represented in the higher ranks of academia. While in 2011 58% of students, 55% of graduates, and 42% of doctorates were female, only 19% of lecturers and associate professors (Außerordentliche ProfessorInnen and AssistenzprofessorInnen) and only 17% of full professors were women. Moreover, only 15% of faculties at Austrian universities are headed by women and only two universities out of 22 are led by women (Graz and TU Vienna). At the University of Vienna, the situation improved in the last years: Between 2007 and 2013 the percentage of female professors increased from 14% to 25% (however, this number includes visiting professors with temporary contracts). While women account for 70% of all degrees on the MA level the percentage of women receiving a doctoral degree was only 48% in 2011, but the percentage of habilitated women increased to 39%.

Hence, inequality between men and women persists although Austrian universities as state institutions are obliged to implement the Law on Equal Opportunity in public service introduced in 1979, which since the 1990s includes institutions and instruments of affirmative action for Austrian universities.

Austrian universities are characterized by their long history as state institutions and by a ‘state model’ of hierarchical governance. The first major reforms of Austrian universities after World War II took place in the 1970ies, when the social-democratic government initiated the democratization of Austrian universities by encouraging especially students from lower social strata and women to enter the higher education system. The non-restricted, open access to Austrian universities without any fees was not only seen as a democratization of academia but of the society as a whole. Since the 1990ies, like other European universities Austrian universities are confronted with a new wave of major changes – starting with the Bologna process and the EU strategy to create a competitive European knowledge based economy: The University Organisation Act in 1993 (UOG 1993) and the University Act in 2002 (UG 2002)
resulted first in a transition from direct state control into so-called autonomy – Austrian universities became full legal entities. The second consequence of the new laws was the implementation of New Public Management (NPM) as governance instrument, and third, the introduction of new contract models for university employees.

How does the new governance mode impact on gender equality at Austrian universities? The aim of this paper is to understand the opportunities and potential pitfalls of new management structures and the variety of gender equality work at Austrian universities. This paper investigates the question if Austrian university reforms create opportunities for increasing the still low representation of women in higher academic ranks. Although new equality instruments have been introduced in the context of recent university reforms which did indeed already improve the situation of female academics at the doctoral level, we will argue that it is likely that gender inequality continues to be reproduced at Austrian universities. Why is this the case? Our rather pessimistic view is based on the argument of equal opportunity dilemmata of higher education policy – dilemmata of different logics within Austrian universities.

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In the following we first describe the Austrian university reforms. Then we will assess the opportunities of Austrian university reforms for gender equality. The concluding remark shall argue that recent developments threaten to bring about ‘hard times’ for female academics.

2. From state control to comprehensive de-regulation. Recent reforms

During the 1990s, first steps were taken to reverse the former situation of regulatory state influence on universities: “Deregulation became the new buzzword for university reforms” (Bessenyei/Melchior 1996 cit. in deBoer/Enders/Schimank 2007: 144). In a comparative study Harry deBoer, Jürgen Enders and Uwe Schimank (2007) found that Austria – and England, by the way – underwent the most profound changes in higher education (ibid.: 147). While this is not surprising for England as the country has been a ‘forerunner’ in the
implementation of NPM, the degree of change in the case of Austria is remarkable – particularly “after years of standstill” (ibid: 149).

Schimank (2005) identifies shifts in five governance mechanisms as a result of de-regulation and transformation in higher education: first, a decrease in direct state regulation (for example through university autonomy in financial and personnel management as well as in teaching matters), second a decrease in academic self-administration, third increased influence of external governance (for example targets defined by actors in politics and economy), fourth increased importance of a hierarchical centralized university leadership, and fifth stronger competition between universities, organizational units, academics and students. All five governance shift can be found in Austria.

Instead of detailed micro-coordination by the ministry, Austrian universities today autonomously design their internal structure and courses offered and they are now the employers of their academic and non-academic staff. Nevertheless, the government maintains some control by monitoring universities through agreements on objectives: This is codified in a “three-year contract under public (civil) law between the Ministry of Science and Research and a university” (Schaller-Steidl 2010: 13).

Moreover, Austrian public universities today are funded by so-called global state budgets and therefore have leeway to decide how to spend their budgets. Also, the financing of universities was redesigned from an input- to an output-based concept, which again is assessed through performance agreements with the higher education ministry, which are handed on to faculties, departments and individual professors.

In the transformation process the number of academic self-governing bodies and their democratic decision-making competencies were reduced or even abolished, while, at the same time, managerial self-governance increased significantly. This led to a concentration of decision-making power at the rectorate and the deans of the faculties and hence to the disempowerment of democratically elected bodies and committees.

The University Act (UG) 2002 re-structured academic governance mechanisms according to the principles of New Public Management (NPM) by introducing business terms and instruments – such as performance agreements, management by objectives and out-put
orientation – i.e. output of publications, third party funds and graduates. The implementation of NPM in Austrian higher education was supposed to enhance the performance and increase the accountability of academic work. Yet, it also increased competition between researchers. These transformations have been labeled as changes towards an “entrepreneurial” (Clark 1998) or “managerial” university.

3. The managerial university – an opportunity for gender equality? Gender equality instruments at Austrian university

Since the 1990ies, a number of gender equality measures have been introduced at Austrian universities. At the beginning of the 1990s, for instance, first grant programs for women were created, and ten years later, fFORTE was founded, a comprehensive program for financial support of female scientists. The core legal framework for university equality measures is the federal Law for equal treatment, which came into effect in 1992. The law includes a quota regulation of a minimum of 40% women on all ranks of university personnel. The staff unit (Stabstelle) “Gender- and Diversitymanagement” at the Ministry of Science monitors equal opportunity policies at Austrian universities. Since its institutionalization, quite a few number of femocrats is involved in “gendering” Austrian universities. Since 2002, so-called “Working groups for equal treatment” implement the law by monitoring for instance recruitment procedures at universities. These working groups have to monitor the effective implementation of the 40% quota system. The working group members at the level of faculties and departments have the right to receive all information on recruitment processes, to participate in job interviews and decision-making processes on recruitment, however without a vote. Nevertheless they have the right to veto discriminatory decisions – for instance if qualified women are not invited to job interviews or if they are not ranked on short-lists for professorship.

The amendment of the UG in 2009 introduced a gender quota of 40% in the rectorate, the university council and all collegial bodies, including committees to hire new professors. The aim is to increase the representation of women in decision-making bodies – i.e. to foster a “politics of presence”. Only recently a discussion developed to change this quota regulation into a “parity law”. Critiques of this new amendment state that this might lead to a legal men’s quota of 50%.
Another important legal framework is gender budgeting or budget politics as a way of increasing gender equality at universities. In 2000, the Federal Ministry of Sciences launched the first “gender budgeting initiative” to increase the number of female professors – the so-called “Exzellenzia Program”. This program created financial incentives for universities to hire female professors – a sort of “bounty” for female professors. In 2002, Austrian universities agreed to take first steps towards the introduction of gender budgeting on the organizational level in order to render distribution of resources more transparent. The university of Vienna, for instance, established the project “Gender Pay Gap Monitoring”.

Moreover, performance agreements opened opportunities to re-regulate gender equality through budget negotiations and goal and performance agreements between the ministry and the universities and between the rectorates, faculties and departments. Since 2010 negotiations for performance agreements and budgets between the Ministry of Science and Austrian universities include equal opportunity goals. Universities are awarded budgets according to their performance figures (output of publication, research money, graduations); they can allocate additional budget for their performance with respect to gender equality and the promotion of women. The University of Vienna decided to invest this money to create new professorships for excellent young female scholars from the University of Vienna: Since 2011 the Berta Karlik two years professorship is awarded in a very competitive process.

Nevertheless, a number of these legal changes were expected to improve career chances for women. The university law of 2002 (UG02) states that gender equality is a crucial political and academic issue. The law implemented Gender Mainstreaming as a strategy for reaching more gender equality. The official commentary on the law (Bast, UG02) points out that science is still a male domain in Austria, while it is stated as a general goal in the law that “adequate measures need to be taken by universities in order to produce gender balance in all working areas of academia” (ibid: §41).

One of the aims of implementing new bureaucratic rules and increasing control was to replace informal procedures of academic self-management which accounted for male bondage. The former ‘state model’ of higher education governance had allowed for wide-ranging decision-making powers of male professors in academic matters. The undisputed authority of mostly male seniors over the selection of young academics resulted in a perpetuation of male-dominated academic careers. Therefore, the transition to managerial self-governance opened
way for an ‘organizational turn’ towards equal opportunity at universities by introducing performance indicators and a meritocratic system as a basis for the distribution of staff resources making job competition and career opportunities more objective and de-gender these processes: Performance assessments have been formalized and quantitative assessment criteria have been introduced (e.g. number of journal publications, impact factors of journals, third-party funding). For instance, external national and international reviewers are now appointed for recruiting university personnel aiming at introducing objective criteria for quality measurement – instead of a gender biased process. These new procedures might provide a possibility for cracking male bondage to some extent. Moreover, the former tenure system was abolished, which opened Austrian universities for young researchers at pre-doc level and also for female researchers. The numbers of women at the doctoral level makes this development a success-story. Moreover, rules and control mechanisms have been implemented in order to make the distribution of personnel and financial resources within universities more transparent.

In the early 2000s, gender equality units, which have been established already in the 1980ies, were moved to the university rectorates and their departments for personnel in order to give them more power. In 2000, the University of Vienna, for instance, has established the “Center for Gender Equality”, which was later renamed as unit for “Equal Opportunity and Diversity” at the rectorate. The tasks of this unit include career developing measures as for instance mentoring programs for post-docs on their way to a professorship (two years program), networking meetings for women and counseling on salary negotiation for female professors. In 2001, the University of Vienna has founded Austria’s first Sexual Harassment and Mobbing Counseling Office in academia.

Since 2011, a tenure track model has been implemented as a reaction to a visible brain-drain due to only short-term contracts at Austrian universities. All universities created some, yet low numbers of so-called tenure track positions (*Laufbahnstellen*), that is permanent positions for excellent young scholars. Only one university, the University of Leoben (a very male dominated institution) decided to dedicate their tenure track positions for women only.

The University of Graz established a project to implement work-life balance. Part of this is a “daddy month” for all university employees. By now seven fathers went on this one-month leave. Moreover, the university has a day-care center for children of university employees,
which is open during vacation. The university also grants leave for care of older relatives or family members with specific needs.

In Vienna, a network of female professors has been established in 2013 to create a pressure group against the male dominated association of Austrian professors.

4. The gendered pitfalls of Austrian university reform

Thus, it could be argued that deregulation, the shift towards managerial self-governance and NPM might prove beneficial for gender equality (Matthies/Matthäus 2010: 87) and the scientific shift toward increasingly bureaucratic organizational standards could lead to a decrease of “the background effects of the gender frame on behavior” (Ridgeway 2009, cit. in: Mathies/Matthäus: 87). However, these windows of opportunity seem to be closed rather quickly – especially at the level of professors.

Our analysis highlights the obstinate culture of gender inequality embedded in Austrian academia – embedded in institutional procedures, but foremost in mental patterns and the habitus of professors. Particularly the lack of gender awareness among leading actors at university level is striking. Decision-making bodies are still male dominated or embedded in male-dominated networks. Neither the regulations of the Equal Opportunity Law nor the “objectivation” of the new University Law are sufficient to overcome this culture of inequality. I want further elaborate on the contradicting logics which characterize the Austrian university landscape to explain why the transformation of Austrian universities did not lead to a de-gendering of recruitment processes.

What are the gendered pitfalls or risks of the recent university reforms? And which competing logics can we detect in this process of university transformation? First of all, de-regulation and the implementation of managerial self-governance came along with monocratic decision-making organs such as the rectorate and the deans – to a large extend men. In the course of this monocratization, the already weakly institutionalized affirmative action mechanisms have been disempowered further (Flicker/Hofbauer/Sauer 2010). Also, the abolishment of democratic decision-making bodies disempowered the representatives of students who usually made claims in favor of gender equality. The implementation of equal opportunity goals in the paradigm of de-regulation proves to be not sustainable: Hence, the Austrian government faces the dilemma of taking steps of regulative intervention towards equal opportunity –
backed by Austrian femocrats –, while at the same time encouraging de-regulation and self-governance of academia which leaves the implementation of equal opportunity to the working groups without much decision-making power.

Second we see a conflict between excellence and gender equality: Because gender equality is not mentioned as a prime goal of so-called modern Austrian universities this aim runs the risk of being ignored. Our research shows that important elements of the gender equality discourse are absent from the universities’ management documents, as well as from the political higher education discourse. It seems that an offensive affirmative action policy or a critique of the new academic norms like performance, merit, excellence and quality as male biased is seen as endangering the legitimacy of core concepts of ‘academic professionalism’ and the ‘entrepreneurial’ and ‘managerial university’. And moreover, the idea of entrepreneurship and excellence in academia seems to conflict with gender equality: Whoever argues against the „performance culture“ of modern universities (Halford et al. 1997: 266) as women-unfriendly is seen as arguing against ambition and excellence and therefore risks damaging his or her own reputation.

Third we see a conflict between meritocracy and gender equality: Academic entrepreneurship enforces a meritocratic discourse that conceals the “routinization” of inequality as Jim Barry, Elisabeth Berg and John Chandler (2010) have argued. Austrian universities have always been hierarchic institutions (Kreckel 2005), and therefore, the recent discourse on meritocracy masks the gendered context of academic practices and ignores the fact that career competition takes place on the grounds of unequally distributed resources. Instead of creating objective measurements the implementation of NPM measurements increased performance pressure and status competition as for instance the pressure to publish in high-ranked journals, geographical mobility and the intensification of the work-load (e.g. through managerial tasks). Given that strategic individual resources for status struggles are gendered, new career barriers are likely to emerge for women. Again, women academics with family obligations suffer a systematic disadvantage.

Fourth we witness a contradiction of the efficiency logic and gender equality: The rigid schemes for scientific careers have been tightened: The time period for getting access to career paths on the basis of doctorates and postdoctoral qualifications has been limited to 10 years. Both preconditions mentioned may not be achieved within the same working contract.
or university. Family obligations for instance still are a significant barrier to (women’s) careers. Despite the dismantling of traditional entrance barriers for women, career planning therefore has become even more insecure, and women may not be able to cope with the demands of such accelerated academic positions.

To sum up: The de-regulation of Austrian universities resulted in a decline of state influence on gender equality measures and weakened the pressure of state agents and femocrats to enforce gender equality at Austrian universities. At the same time self-governance of the academia and the academic culture still rest on traditions of unequal treatment of men and women, on gendered stereotypes and a lack of gender awareness and gender knowledge. Also, different institutional logics which shape universities – the logic of the academic profession and science, the logic of the managerial administration, the state logic of equal opportunities – contradict or block each other and hamper an effective implementation of gender equality measures. In this situation of institutional complexity, where several logics compete with each other, our research suggests that gender equality concerns run the risk of being instrumentalized or hijacked especially for managerial aims. In this process, gender equality work is reduced to intervention in case of formal errors and explicit gender discrimination and loses its utopian vision of creating gender justice at universities.

References


