

Equal Opportunity: An Illusion or a Mission of Universities?*

A practical example of diversity management from the University of Innsbruck

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CONTENTS: 1. Introduction. – 2. Politics Addressing the Social Dimension in Higher Education. – 3. Diversity Management at the University of Innsbruck. – 4. The *talentescout-tirol* Project: Addressing the Social Dimension of Higher Education in Western Austria. – 5. MAUI. – “Mittelschulen an die Universität Innsbruck” Middle Schools to the University of Innsbruck. – 6. Conclusion.

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Abstract: Since 2017 Austria established a national strategy for the social dimension in higher education, and universities have developed their own diversity strategies. The University of Innsbruck started in 2017 with a steering group for diversity management and published its diversity strategy in 2022 placing a strong focus on social background. A key project in the debate on social background, upward mobility and higher education is the talentescout tirol, which was founded in 2016. Building on this, another project addressing the social dimension was launched in 2022: "Middel Schools to the University of Innsbruck"

Keywords: Diversity management – Higher education – Upward mobility – Science scepticism – Secondary schools – Practical example – Austria

1. Introduction

The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu described educational systems as spaces of selection and exclusion. Over 50 years since publishing his work *The Illusion of Equal Opportunities* written together with Jean Claude Passeron,¹ problems within the educational system have not changed so much. When we consider the historical evolution of universities, we must acknowledge that we operate within a highly exclusive area that perpetuates implicit and explicit exclusions.

We know that most students at the university still come from middle-class backgrounds, especially those whose parents are academics. The percentage of students from working-class and/or migrant backgrounds at Austrian universities is very low and has been recently declining. Upward mobility in education, i.e. obtaining a higher level of education than one's parents did, is particularly difficult in Austria compared to other countries.² The Social Survey of Students, conducted by the Institute for Advanced Studies, found that individuals whose fathers have at least a school-leaving certificate are around 2.5 times more likely to enroll in higher education than those whose fathers do not.³

But within the last 10 years the topic social class and education got more attention in social discourse and at the political level. Since Didier Eribon published his bestseller *Returning to Reims* (first published in French in 2009, then in English in 2013 and in German in 2016) in which he wrote very impressively about the difficulty of being working-class within the academic field, we have a broad discussion on this topic. A number of publications have been inspired by this, such as *Educational Advancers from disadvantaged Backgrounds*

¹ BOURDIEU, PASSERON, *Die Illusion der Chancengleichheit. Untersuchungen zur Soziologie des Bildungswesens am Beispiel Frankreichs*, Ernst Klett Verlag, 1971.

² OECD, *Education at a Glance 2024*, OECD Indicators OECD Publishing, Paris, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1787/c00cad36-en>.

³ ZUCHA ET AL., *Studierenden Sozialerhebung 2023, Kernbericht*, Institut für Höhere Studien, im Auftrag des Bundesministeriums für Bildung, 2024, in <https://www.sozialerhebung.at/images/Berichte/Sola23/Studierenden-Sozialerhebung-2023---Kernbericht.pdf>.

by Aladin El-Maafalani (2012)⁴ or *Class-Journey* by Betina Aumaier and Brigitte Theißl (2020)⁵, *Classism and Science* Ricardo Altieri and Bernd Hüttner (2021)⁶, *The subtle differences in school careers* by Robert Pham Xuan⁷ or *University career and social class* by Frerk Blome (2023)⁸ to name just a few examples. And it should also be mentioned that the association *ArbeiterKind.de* was founded in Germany in 2008 with the aim of increasing the proportion of working-class children at universities. Similar initiatives have also been established in other European countries.⁹

Ten years ago, European policymakers also responded to debates about social class and the permeability of education systems. Consequently, national strategies focusing on the social dimension of higher education and diversity management were introduced by universities. The implementation of diversity management at Austrian universities and also at the University of Innsbruck has been a gradual process since 2017. In the course of this, the universities developed diversity strategies in which they set priorities. In the following, we briefly describe the basis for diversity management at Austrian universities and specifically the practice at the University of Innsbruck.

2. Politics Addressing the Social Dimension in Higher Education

Within the framework of the Bologna-Process, the European Union paid attention to the question of the *Social Dimension in Higher Education*. First mentioned in the Bologna-Communiqué of Prague 2001, it came to a resolution in 2015. Each member state was required to develop a national strategy aimed at improving the social dimension of higher education. Aims are:

- to create a variety of learning opportunities for different students
- to increase the freedom to choose between the different educational sectors
- to achieve a balance between the sexes
- to promote access and degree for disadvantaged groups.¹⁰

⁴ EL-MAFAALANI, *BildungsaufsteigerInnen aus benachteiligten Milieus. Habitusformationen und soziale Mobilität bei Einheimischen und Türkischstämmigen*, Springer VS, 2012.

⁵ AUMAIER, THEISSL, *Klassenreise. Wie die soziale Herkunft unser Leben prägt*, ÖGB-Verlag, 2020.

⁶ ALTIERI, HÜTTNER, *Klassismus und Wissenschaft. Erfahrungsberichte und Bewältigungsstrategien*, Reihe Hochschule Bd. 13, BdWi-Verlag, 2021.

⁷ PHAM XUAN, *Die feinen Unterschiede in der Schullaufbahn. Rekonstruktionen zum Schüler:innenhabitus beim Übertritt von der Mittelschule ins Gymnasium*, Budrich Academic Press 2023.

⁸ BLOME, *Universitätskarrieren und soziale Klasse. Soziale Aufstiegs- und Reproduktionsmechanismen in der Rechts- und Erziehungswissenschaft*, Beltz Juventa 2023.

⁹ ArbeiterKind.de, in <https://www.arbeiterkind.de/>

¹⁰ BMBWF, *Nationale Strategie zur sozialen Dimension in der Hochschulbildung. Für einen integrativen Zugang und*

Institutions such as universities now have to and are willing to deal with diversity and diversity management, also because students and teachers have become more diverse. Diversity is a cross-cutting issue and is relevant in all areas: in teaching and research as well as in the administration of a university. Dimensions of diversity, explicitly mentioned in the law, are age, colour, gender, ethnicity, religion and worldview, sexual orientation, disability and health impairment. These dimensions are standing under legal protection by Austrian and EU law. Article 13 of the Treaty of Amsterdam from 1997 and the EU-Guidelines for anti-discrimination from 2000¹¹ established not only a policy of recognition of differences and against discrimination but legal measures against multiple discrimination.¹²

Although there was no legal basis, social background became an important political objective. This is interesting insofar as EU-Politics is mostly ignoring class issues. However, since 2015 the social dimension in higher education got more attention and thus also the access of people with working-class background or migration experience to the universities. Establishing a national strategy, the Ministry of Education, Science and Research provides workshops and conferences for stakeholders from the universities in the field of diversity management, diversity politics and gender studies.

3. Diversity Management at the University of Innsbruck

In accordance with the indications on the national level, the governance documents of the University of Innsbruck implement a diversity management based on the concept of intersectionality. Recently, both the Development Plan 2022-2027 and the Performance Agreement 2022-2024 and 2025-2027 dedicate sections to Diversity management, picking up on the strategy already laid down in the Development Plan 2019-2021 and the Performance Agreement 2018-2021. In particular, the Development Plan focus on social inclusion, gender and enhancing knowledge and awareness in diversity.

In Spring 2017 a *Steering Group Diversity Management* coordinated by the *Unit of Equality and Gender Studies* was set up, using its expertise in the field of equal treatment and gender. The group encompasses the members of the Rectorate responsible for Human

eine breite Teilbabe, 2017, in [https://www.bmfwf.gv.at/dam/jcr:06705a72-5d40-4c56-9640-91a84cc2768d/Nationale%20Strategie%20\(PDF\).pdf](https://www.bmfwf.gv.at/dam/jcr:06705a72-5d40-4c56-9640-91a84cc2768d/Nationale%20Strategie%20(PDF).pdf)

¹¹ Council Directive 2000/43/EC of 29 June 2000 implementing the principle of equal treatment between persons irrespective of racial or ethnic origin; Council Directive 2000/78/EC of 27 November 2000 establishing a general framework for equal treatment in employment and occupation; Directive 2002/73/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 September 2002 amending Council Directive 76/207/EEC on the implementation of the principle of equal treatment for men and women as regards access to employment, vocational training and promotion, and working conditions and Council Directive 2004/113/EC of 13 December 2004 implementing the principle of equal treatment between men and women in the access to and supply of goods and services.

¹² SAUER, *Intersektionalität und Staat. Ein staats- und hegemonietheoretischer Zugang zu Intersektionalität*, 2012, in <http://portal-intersektionalitaet.de/theoriebildung/ueberblickstexte/sauer/>

Resources and for Teaching and Students as well as experts stemming from central administrative units as Human Resources Development unit or Public Relations and includes the Students' representation, the staff councils for administration and for researchers and last but not least the Working Group on Equal Opportunities.

In 2021, the university began a comprehensive process involving more than 50 internal and external experts from various administrative and scientific organizational units, led by the Vice-Rectorate of Human Resources, to develop a diversity strategy. The diversity strategy was presented at a university-wide strategy day and published in spring 2022.¹³ The strategy focuses on social background and gender diversity. Its main targets are: (1) raising awareness, (2) strengthening equal opportunities and transparency in recruitment processes, (3) improving access to university for disadvantaged student groups, and (4) establishing diversity monitoring for staff and students.¹⁴

4. The talentescout-tirol Project: Addressing the Social Dimension of Higher Education in Western Austria

The project *talentescout-tirol* was established in 2016 as one of the first initiative in Austria explicitly addressing the social dimension of higher education.¹⁵ Based on the work of El-Mafaalani¹⁶ (2014) and others, which highlights the important role of “social mentors” during critical transitions in the biographies of educational climbers, individuals from general and vocational secondary schools (AHS and BHS) have been supported since 2016. This support begins in the school year prior to graduation (i.e., from the 7th grade in AHS or the 4th grade in BHS) and continues up to a maximum of the third semester at university. The focus of the measures is on providing information and guidance to the target group of so-called “first-generation students,” i.e., young people from the federal state of Tyrol who are the first in their families to pursue higher education. The project is structured around three distinct phases of support:

1. Initial Meeting and Orientation Phase: This phase involves clarifying the possibilities and limitations of the support offered, discussing expectations and aspirations, and defining specific counseling objectives.

¹³ UNIVERSITÄT INNSBRUCK, *Diversitätsstrategie der Universität Innsbruck – Entwicklung und Umsetzung*, in <https://www.uibk.ac.at/de/universitaet/diversitaet/diversitaetsstrategie/>

¹⁴ HAPFACHER, KHAKZADEH, WEISS, *Diversity and Diversity Management at Austrian Universities*, in SIMONATI (ed.) *Diversity as Strategic Opportunity. Exploring New Paths to Good Administration*, Emerald Publishing Limited, 2024.

¹⁵ WULZ, NINDL, *Studie zu Maßnahmen zur sozialen Dimension für einen integrativeren Zugang und eine breite Teilhabe in der Hochschulbildung*, 2016.

¹⁶ EL-MAFAALANI, *Vom Arbeiterkind zum Akademiker. Über die Mühen des Aufstiegs durch Bildung*, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V., 2014.

2. Specification and Study Preparation Phase: Activities in this phase include attending educational fairs, university open days, and trial study sessions; assisting with university applications, enrollment, housing, and financial planning (e.g., scholarships); providing financial literacy information; developing contingency plans (“Plan B”); introducing students to university-related services (e.g., student unions, psychological counseling, scholarship offices); supporting the creation of class schedules; and guiding students through their initial academic experiences, such as attending lectures, taking exams, and writing seminar papers. This phase also addresses any questions or uncertainties that may arise during these early academic experiences.
3. Latency Phase and Conclusion of Support: In this final phase, students are expected to have gained sufficient confidence and knowledge to navigate the university environment independently. A concluding meeting is held to discuss their progress and future plans, including the completion of their studies.

In addition to the core task of supporting individual clients, the project also includes other responsibilities, such as promoting the project in schools, raising awareness among principals, teachers, and student representatives, building school partnerships, and encouraging principals, teachers, and student representatives to identify and support “talents.” Furthermore, the project involves networking with “complementary services” such as study and graduate counseling, trial study days, scholarship counseling, informational events on higher education, public relations, etc.

To promote the *talentescout-tirol* project and establish collaborations with schools, 32 (out of a total of 49) general and vocational secondary schools in the federal state of Tyrol were contacted between June 2016 and December 2017. Of these, 27 schools expressed interest, while 5 schools showed no interest in the project. In terms of school types, interest was slightly lower among AHS schools compared to BHS schools. The nature of contact and collaboration with interested schools varied from school to school, ranging from a one-time meeting with the principal or educational counselor to school visits involving entire year groups.

Despite all these efforts, collaboration with schools proved challenging, as many teachers either lacked awareness of the issue or had insufficient resources for further cooperation. On the other hand, an informational event about study opportunities, aimed at all students from AHS and BHS schools in Tyrol, was well received by schools and students. Therefore, as a next step, the *talentescout-tirol* project was presented as a part of this general informational event. However, demand on this specific service from prospective first generation students still remained low. This was at least partly explained by the effect of social stigmatization: This means that students from non-academic family backgrounds may feel stigmatized if they are singled out for special support programs, as this could highlight their perceived “difference” or disadvantage compared to their peers, leading to a behav-

our of self-selection.¹⁷ This social background concealment can discourage them from seeking help or participating in such programs, even if the support is beneficial. Another observation was that the general demand for information on study choices and support as provided during the information event was equally high for high school graduates from both academic and non-academic backgrounds. This leads us to the conclusion that social selection in the education system was already highly effective at this late stage.

Our experience shows that the project *talentscout-tirol* works well as an awareness building instrument inside and outside the university. However, when it comes to reduce social inequality during the transition from high-school to university, information and events addressing all students with specific topics such as financial support, housing etc. seem more appropriate in order to support first generation students.

5. MAUI – “Mittelschulen an die Universität Innsbruck” Middle Schools to the University of Innsbruck

Building on the findings and developments of the *talentscout-tirol* project, the pilot project “Middle Schools to the University of Innsbruck – MAUI” was initiated in 2022 as part of an internal university funding program on the topic of diversity.

The MAUI project brings students from middle schools in Tyrol, Vorarlberg, and South Tyrol to the University of Innsbruck as part of their career orientation classes. The aim is to provide children and young people, especially those who have no direct connection to the academic world due to their personal or family environment, with new insights and perspectives through visits to the university and interactions with students, helping them overcome any apprehensions. At the same time, university students are sensitized to and made aware of the topic of “equal opportunities in education.”

The MAUI project focuses on two main phases. During the winter semester, awareness and training workshops were held with university students. In the summer semester, school workshops were conducted in collaboration with these students.

In the winter semester of 2022/23, six partially interconnected sensitization workshops focusing on educational equity and first-generation students were conducted with university students. From these workshops, project staff were recruited. Initially, around 30 students from 22 different fields of study participated. The team facilitating the school workshops consisted of 19 students from bachelor’s, master’s, and diploma programs. During these workshops, the university students also developed their teaching inputs for the school workshops.

¹⁷ VELDMANN, MEEUSSEN, VAN LAAR, *Social background concealment among first-generation students: The role of social belonging and academic achievement concerns*, in *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations*, 2022, 26, 3, 762-778, <https://doi.org/10.1177/13684302221089116>.

Students from 22 middle school classes in Tyrol participated in the workshops during the summer semester of 2023. Each school class was divided into groups. These groups rotated through a series of stations led by university students, where the students introduced their fields of study through practical exercises. During each session, four to six individual workshops, each lasting about 15 minutes, were conducted. This allowed the middle school students to experience the diversity of study programs at the university firsthand. After a short break, the classes participated in a campus tour organized by the Central Student Advisory Service at the Innrain campus. During these tours, they visited lecture halls, the library, various laboratories, Christoph-Probst-Platz, the Hall of Honor, and the Archaeological Museum.

In addition to providing an initial impression, the program aimed to show students how the collaboration of various disciplines forms the essence of a university. At the end of the visit, students had the opportunity to provide oral feedback, and teachers were informed about the online evaluation process.

The students were surveyed after the workshops using a questionnaire. This internal monitoring process covered the following areas: first contact with a university, evaluation of the workshop, and qualitative questions about their own educational background. Questions regarding the development of the program from the students' perspective were also included. Teachers were asked to provide brief standardized feedback via email after the event. Here, too, a strong emphasis was placed on improving and further developing the program. While university students were informally surveyed during the pilot phase, a formal survey of their experiences with the project is planned. Long-term impact assessments for students, university students, and teachers are not feasible due to the lack of longitudinal data. However, short-term evaluations have already been conducted internally, with 436 questionnaires analyzed during the pilot phase. The results showed that 84.6% of the middle school students had never been in contact with a university before and were visiting the University of Innsbruck for the first time through the MAUI project. The students rated the MAUI project 4.4 out of 5 stars. Additional comments and questions were provided in the online questionnaires, some of which were amusing. Here are a few examples: "What do you do if you're sitting in the middle of a lecture hall and need to go to the bathroom?" "The coolest thing was the real lecture on Roman law." "I didn't know you could just walk into a university." "How much does a researcher earn?" "What do students do in the summer?" The survey results are incorporated into the evaluation and final report and serve to ensure the quality of the project.

The project strongly aligns with the national strategy for social inclusion¹⁸ and aims to raise awareness of the issue of early educational pathway decisions and, if necessary, counteract them. In this context, particular emphasis is placed on Target Dimension 1: More Inclusive

¹⁸ See: [https://www.bmfwf.gv.at/dam/jcr:06705a72-5d40-4c56-9640-91a84cc2768d/Nationale%20Strategie%20\(PDF\).pdf](https://www.bmfwf.gv.at/dam/jcr:06705a72-5d40-4c56-9640-91a84cc2768d/Nationale%20Strategie%20(PDF).pdf)

Access and Action Line 2: Outreach Activities and Diversity-Sensitive Student Counseling. MAUI falls under measures such as expanding collaborations between universities and schools to reach underrepresented groups and increasing the involvement of teachers, who play a compensatory role in educational decisions related to social inclusion. It also aligns with the measure of testing new communication methods targeted at (younger) audiences.

The project also contributes to achieving SDG 4, “Quality Education,” particularly sub-goal 4.3: “By 2030, ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational, and tertiary education, including university education”.¹⁹ Furthermore, the project supports the goals of the “Trust in Science and Democracy” (TruSD) program followed by DNAustria²⁰ by addressing skepticism toward science and democracy.

The university students involved in the project use methods of science communication to introduce participating middle school students to potential fields of study. Ideally, this should encourage students to reflect on their own strengths and interests and explore further individual pathways within the Austrian education system. Thus, the project has a significant impact both on an individual level and within the school education system. The “self-reflection exercise” on one’s own educational background, conducted as part of the project, likely also has positive effects within the families of the participating students. “The first contact with a university should not be an administrative one.” This quote comes from a workshop on the topic “Transition from school to university”. In the MAUI project, this (often) first contact is with university students who can still vividly recall their own educational decisions and are close in age to the target group of middle school students. The direct interaction between middle school students and university students provides all participants with a new perspective on their own educational journeys and potential future career paths.

According to the university students involved, participating in this project strengthens their connection to the university in the long term. They not only get to know other students outside their own field of study but also become familiar with central university facilities and the school environment as a workplace. Many students found it rewarding when middle school students asked questions about their field of study, which they could answer both as peers and from an “expert” perspective. The pilot phase of the project has already provided initial career and orientation opportunities for the university students. The paid participation in a project that they could partially design themselves and that they perceived as having societal value was highly appreciated and praised. For students who began their studies during the pandemic, this project served as a way to feel more connected to the university and broaden their perspectives.

¹⁹ See: <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal4>

²⁰ See: <https://dnaustria.at/>

The MAUI project is a model project and could easily be replicated at other universities, provided the appropriate framework conditions are established. It is well-documented and addresses the specific issue of early educational pathway decisions, which is relevant across the country. With minor adjustments, it could be quickly implemented at universities in other federal states or even internationally in countries with comparable education systems.

The MAUI project was awarded one of the main prizes of the Diversity Management Award “Diversitas” by the Austrian Federal Ministry of Education, Science, and Research in 2024 for its low-threshold access and innovative involvement of university students.²¹ The award recognizes outstanding, innovative achievements in the field of diversity management at Austrian higher education and research institutions. An independent expert jury honors initiatives that have recently led to significant diversity-specific advancements at their institutions. The prize money is earmarked for use in the area of diversity management. Thanks to the prize money, the MAUI project can be extended and will be implemented from 2025 to 2027.

The MAUI project makes a significant contribution to promoting equal opportunities in education and raising awareness of diversity on a local scale and within the University of Innsbruck. It strengthens the connection between middle schools and the university while providing participating university students with valuable experiences and perspectives. The pilot phase has demonstrated that the project has positive effects both on an individual level and within the educational system, serving as a model for similar initiatives.

6. Conclusion

The article provides an overview of the measures that have been taken at the University of Innsbruck as part of its diversity management strategy, which was published in 2022. These initiatives are based on a 2015 decision by the EU Council of Ministers and the national strategies developed from this regarding the social dimension in higher education. At the University of Innsbruck, the focus was placed on social background, as studies show that relatively few students come from working-class and / or migrant backgrounds. Two specific measures – talentescout tirol and the MAUI project – address this issue and have raised awareness at both an individual and institutional level in recent years.

²¹ See: <https://www.uibk.ac.at/de/newsroom/2024/diversitas-preis-fur-projekt-zur-chancengleichheit-in-der-bildun/>