



12th ENOHE Annual Conference: Challenges Cyberspace, Quality and the Economic Crisis

Meeting of international university ombudsmen in Innsbruck

Some 80 ombudsmen from Europe, the USA, Canada, Mexico, Israel and Australia gathered last weekend in Austria to share their experiences and reflect upon the first 30 years of this profession in Europe as well as to identify and discuss the main challenges for the future. The first university ombudsman was created in 1985 in Spain. In Austria, the student ombudsman was set up in 1997 to specifically deal with problems encountered by students in everyday university life. In 2012 the student ombudsman at the Ministry of Science was enshrined in law. As of 2015/16 it will also be permitted to publish the names of institutions and the problems that arise there in its annual reports. The three most important challenges facing higher education ombudsmen in the next few years, the conference concluded, are the dynamic communications environment of our modern Internet society, i.e. social media, safeguarding the quality of teaching and research and the economic framework for students and institutions of higher education, i.e. good value for money.

The conference was jointly organised and hosted by the Student Ombudsman in Vienna and the European Ombudsman Institute in Innsbruck.

Achieving a balance between confidentiality and transparency

In his welcoming address, the former rector of the University of Innsbruck and former Minister of Science, Karlheinz Töchterle, who is now a member of the Austrian parliament and science spokesman of the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP), emphasised the importance of ombudsmen as instruments for improving study and working conditions at institutions of higher education. In the wake of the most recent amendment of the Act on Quality Assurance in Higher Education, the ombudsman at the Ministry is now better positioned than

ever before but in future will have to strike a delicate balance between confidentiality and transparency in its work.

Potential to Learn from One Another

Vice Rector Roland Psenner of the University of Innsbruck noted in his welcoming address that universities as learning institutions themselves also appreciate the opportunity to learn from others, specifically from the ombudsmen. However, the institutions are also willing to share their own experience with others, which puts the focus on the issue of student diversity, he said.

Ombudsmen Stand for Positive Solutions

Rector Elisabeth Freismuth from the University of Music and Performing Arts Graz gave the keynote speech on the function of relationships between autonomous higher education institutions and independent ombudsmen. In a statement she said, "To the rector of a university it seems eminently desirable to have nothing to do with student ombudsmen. But based on the experience I have had in my career so far, which also includes working at the bmwfw for a time, I know that this attitude is completely unjustified. Ombudsmen do not stand for the problems that are the reason for contacting them but for positive solutions and also for the fact that there is good path to reaching them."

The Innsbruck Descriptors: Appraisal and Development

During the Innsbruck conference, working groups and presentations addressed subjects such as ombudsmen's legal status and the possibilities available to them under law, the connections between the work of ombudsmen and quality assurance and accreditation instruments, mediation and extra-hierarchic working methods as well as the key challenges facing higher education ombudsmen. A draft policy document containing a comparative systems overview entitled "The Innsbruck Descriptors" was also presented at the conference. This will be discussed over the next few months before it is adopted and published in autumn. It will include general definitions regarding the *raison d'être* for ombudsmen, the avenues that are open to them as well as the constraints they face, their institutional status as well as their main tasks of providing individual assistance and fighting systemic shortcomings.

Any other business

The following motion was adopted by members of ENOHE, without opposition, at the final plenary of the Innsbruck Conference: "This Association endorses the cardinal principles of operational independence of university ombudsmen and their legitimate protection from arbitrary dismissal."

The conference documentation is available on the members' pages of the ENOHE website www.enohe.net.