

Dear Rectorate of the University of Vienna,

we would like to congratulate you on your election and introduce ourselves as the student representatives of the doctorate students of the natural sciences. We are looking forward to this new period of collaboration and hope to work on improving the lives of all doctorate students at the University of Vienna together. We were very excited to read the results of the survey of doctoral candidates 2021 by the quality assurance team as we are always looking for ways to improve the lives of doctoral students at the University of Vienna. Combining this report with our experiences from the previous year in office as student representatives we worked out a few key priorities we would like to bring to your attention.

1) Ensuring that the University of Vienna's status as an international University in the heart of Europe is supported by a culture of welcoming and supporting international students

As reflected by the results of the survey of doctoral candidates 2021, many international students (especially from non-EU/EEA countries) struggle with the relocation and admission to the University of Vienna. Many staff members at the University of Vienna are not proficient in the English language and do not understand the issues of international students arriving in Vienna.

There is practically no assistance for the Visa process for most students (although some Doctoral Schools and Faculties are supportive in some aspects) and in some cases the University even makes it more difficult for students to receive the appropriate visa by not issuing the relevant documents in a timely manner. Furthermore, the tuition fee for non-EU/EEA students adds an unnecessary financial burden to students arriving in Vienna. Most international doctoral students have to pay the tuition fees in the first semester, since they do not yet fulfill the requirements for remission (the visa process is usually too slow to apply for equal status with EU/EEA citizens and they have not been employed yet for 90 days during the previous semester).

We are convinced that the following measures are easy to implement and would greatly improve the experience of international students:

- clear recommendations for University administrators responsible for international students to make sure students apply for the correct visa and receive all the relevant information and documents from the University on time (the OEAD website offers comprehensive information on the Visa-Process: <https://oead.at/en/to-austria/entry-and-residence>) - for example there should be a streamlined process to receive the hosting agreement ('Aufnahmevereinbarung') from the University to ensure PhD Students can receive the 'Researcher' Visa
- free English courses for University staff in contact with international students and free German courses for international PhD students arriving at the University of Vienna
- automatic remission of tuition-fees for any student employed at the University of Vienna (or at least reimbursement if the correct visa for equal status with EU/EEA citizens is issued in the next semester to account for the long visa processes at MA35)

Long term, a centralised support structure for international students at the University of Vienna, including communication with MA35, would be the most beneficial. Many research institutes (for example the Research Institute of Molecular Pathology at the Vienna Biocenter) streamline the Visa process for their employees to make it more efficient. Given the sheer number of international students and employees, an incredible amount of time and effort could be saved if new arrivals (and their colleagues) would not have to spend their first weeks dealing with the MA35, receiving the correct visa and preparing the respective documents.

2) Fair and transparent Employment for PhD Students at the University of Vienna

The diversity in employment status of doctoral students and the variable handling of issues by the different faculties and administrative support structures at the University can easily cause problems and confusion for doctoral students at the University of Vienna. Therefore it is especially important that the University makes the process of employment as transparent and fair as possible for everyone.

We request that all employment contracts should also be provided in English to ensure that international students are aware of their rights and obligations regarding their employment at the University. The University should clearly state what activities are included within the standard 30-hours working contract for PhD students and what their supervisors are allowed to demand from them. Furthermore, the timely issuing of the contracts should be guaranteed. Several students have reported receiving their contract over a month after employment, which can cause other administrative problems (for example for visa applications or finding a flat).

The new rules that will be applied with the UG-Novelle will have far-reaching implications for many PhD-Students, especially when additional teaching contracts are involved. Chain contract rules and potential consequences of different contracts should be transparent and a clear contact person defined.

The variability in teaching responsibilities is an additional cause for frustration and confusion among PhD Students, while some students have to teach as part of their 30 hours working contract, others are not allowed to teach and some receive additional contracts for teaching. Teaching responsibilities should be distributed more fairly among PhD Students within their respective faculties, compensated for in a fair manner and opportunities provided to students who are especially interested in teaching.

Furthermore, there is a huge variability in unrecognised supervision responsibilities. Many doctoral students are forced to allocate a significant amount of hours every month to training Bachelor and Master Students without official recognition or regulation. We request that doctoral students are provided the option of receiving ECTS points for supervising students and be officially recognised as supervisors by the University.

Due to the diverse nature of our situations and contracts, it is unclear who would be the representatives for doctoral students regarding these matters, especially since the workers council does not feel responsible for doctoral students.

3) Supervision of Doctoral Students

The relationship with the supervisor is arguably the main factor determining the success of a PhD project. While overall the supervision quality seems to be quite satisfactory, the University of Vienna offers very little training for supervisors and support for doctoral students in problematic situations.

The University of Vienna should offer binding rules for supervisors (accessible to PhD Students) to ensure minimum quality of supervision. This should include trainings and reflections with professionals, a maximum number of simultaneous students and enforced regular, documented meetings with their students.

Unfortunately there are no accessible guidelines on how to solve conflicts or change supervisor should a critical case arise. We suggest an ombudsperson from a different faculty be made available at every department as a contact person for students. Additionally, enforcing co-supervision (an additional supervisor from the field) from the beginning would improve the research quality, communication between research groups, quality control and would offer students a potential contact person should issues with their main supervisor arise.

Best Regards,

The Student Representatives of the Doctoral Students of the Natural Sciences (StV DokNawi)