

Press release
June 13, 2016



WU aiming for a more socially diverse student population



In October 2015, Edeltraud Hanappi-Egger took over as the new rector of WU (Vienna University of Economics and Business). Upon taking office, she announced plans to increase the diversity of WU's student population. To achieve this goal, WU has now intensified its WU@School program and launched the WU4You pilot project, which will provide scholarships to enable high-potential secondary school students from low-income families to study at WU.

"In the future, WU will place more emphasis on the question of how we can achieve more social diversity in our student population. Inclusion is a very important factor in this respect. We're planning a project to strengthen our outreach activities targeted at socially disadvantaged teenagers. These activities range from establishing contact to schools with a high percentage of socially disadvantaged students to a dedicated WU scholarship program," WU Rector Edeltraud Hanappi-Egger said at a meeting with the press in November 2015. Since then, these plans have taken concrete shape.

Information and assistance for academic success

In Austria, the level of education an individual will attain still depends to a large extent on his or her social background. According to the Institute for Advanced Studies (IHS), upward mobility in education is rare: Only one in five Austrians aged 25 to 34 attain a higher level of education than their parents. This is clearly visible at WU: Most WU students come from privileged backgrounds, and students from homes with a low social status make up only 8% of the student population. "We don't want to lose out on motivated and talented high potential students. I believe that it's part of a university's social responsibility to support young people who are qualified for an academic degree program but cannot afford to study or have never really considered this option. We have to make the transition from secondary school to university easier for first-generation students to keep them from dropping out and help them to complete their degree," explains Edeltraud Hanappi-Egger. And this is precisely the focus of the new initiatives: providing information about what WU has to offer and allowing for a smoother transition to support disadvantaged students in completing their degree.

New WU@School activities: Meet the Alumni/the Prof & pre-study workshops

WU has stepped up its activities for reaching out to secondary school students who may not have considered studying at WU as an option. As part of the WU@School program, WU ambassadors visit 11th and 12th grade students at academic and vocational secondary schools and also 7th and 8th grade students at new middle schools to introduce them to WU's degree programs. On a regular basis, WU also welcomes secondary school classes to Campus WU, where they receive first-hand information on studying at WU. Additional initiatives are now being added to complement these basic programs. "Rather than simply delivering presentations on WU and its programs, we would like to give secondary school students a hands-on insight into what studying at WU is all about," explains Rector Hanappi-Egger. Which degree programs are available at WU? What are the career prospects for WU graduates? In future, these and other questions will be discussed with secondary school students by those who are best qualified to answer them: As part of the Meet the Alumni program, WU graduates share their experiences and recount what it was like for them to study at WU and start a career after graduating. In the Meet the Prof program, WU professors are available for face-to-face meetings, to talk about their research, and, if needed, to provide advice on school projects.

Schools can also request special pre-study workshops. One of them prepares secondary school students for writing a minor thesis, with topics ranging from literature searches to citation rules. This workshop has proven to be very popular. A second workshop is also available, focusing on the differences between secondary schools and universities and between universities and universities of applied sciences.

Pilot project: The WU4You scholarships

Launched as a pilot project earlier this year, WU4You is a scholarship program initiated by Rector Hanappi-Egger. It is intended to support talented students from low-income families who are interested in starting a bachelor's program at WU. These groups of students frequently have to seek part-time jobs to be able to afford attending a degree program. The WU4You scholarships provide financial aid to these students and allow them to study full-time. "We are testing this new program this year. Thanks to the support of several sponsors, we will be able to award up to 12 scholarships starting in October 2016," says Rector Hanappi-Egger. Scholarship recipients will be paid financial aid in the amount of € 500 per month for a maximum of seven semesters. This amount was carefully chosen to ensure that students do not lose any other scholarships they may be entitled to or the government family allowance. The program was launched in cooperation with four selected secondary schools that have nominated suitable recipients. "We already received very positive feedback from the schools and ample support from their principals in the run-up to the program, which encouraged us to follow through on it. If the program proves to be successful, we will continue and, hopefully, expand it," says Edeltraud Hanappi-Egger. "We're hoping for support from businesses and private individuals to be able to continue this program and help young people to complete a degree program despite the challenges they may be facing." The scholarship recipients will also receive continuous assistance during their time at WU. "Particularly first-semester students are faced with many unfamiliar situations and complex bureaucracy, which may discourage some of them and cause them to drop out. First-generation students need special support in this regard, partly because their background has not prepared them for the social system that is a university. We want to provide this kind of support," the rector explains. For this reason, scholarship recipients not only participate in the Mentoring@WU program (beginning students are mentored by more advanced students), but they can also obtain one-on-one advice and assistance from faculty members to keep them from dropping out. "It is no coincidence that the people we asked to serve as senior mentors include emeriti and retired professors. Many of them are enthusiastic about working for the benefit of the WU community and accompanying young people on their way towards a degree," says Rector Hanappi-Egger, explaining the idea underlying the Seniors for Juniors project.

A strategy for strengthening social inclusion

WU is currently working on a comprehensive strategy and exploring appropriate steps to strengthen social inclusion at all levels. "Above all, however, it is of course the responsibility of our political decision-makers to expand the system of financial aid for students and give people from socially disadvantaged backgrounds better access to higher education," Rector Hanappi-Egger points out.

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