COMPETITION OF NARRATIVES: DECIPHERING THE DEBATES ON RESEARCH AT UNIVERSITIES OF APPLIED SCIENCES IN AUSTRIA

ACADEMIC CONTRIBUTION

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ABSTRACT

Research at Austrian universities of applied sciences (UAS) is often characterized as practice-oriented and directly applicable, yet it is also criticized as amateurish or trivial. Despite the varied reality of research activities, only a few dominant narratives shape public perceptions of UAS research and influence debates about its identity, quality, and legitimacy. This article, based on a comprehensive document analysis, explores why research at Austrian universities of applied sciences has remained controversial over the past three decades. It identifies two main narratives: one that views UAS as institutions primarily focused on teaching rather than research, and another that regards UAS research as a significant contributor to innovation and regional development. These narratives are intertwined with broader discourses on higher education and scientific knowledge production. Drawing on insights from higher education studies and science and technology studies, this article examines how these narratives reflect and perpetuate competing social norms and ideologies. The coexistence of these narratives in public discourse highlights underlying power dynamics and social inequities, compelling stakeholders, including UAS administrators and researchers, to navigate conflicting expectations regarding UAS research. By delineating these narratives, situating them within broader discursive frameworks, and acknowledging their simultaneous existence, this

article enhances our understanding of the ongoing debate surrounding UAS research. It underscores the importance of engaging with the complexities of this discourse rather than dismissing it, as it is crucial to broader discussions about the value of academic research and the role of universities in advancing research and innovation.

Keywords: university of applied sciences, research mission, higher education research, science and technology studies, Austria, discourse analysis, document analysis, applied research

INTRODUCTION

In 2022, a seemingly routine commentary on the Standard's online edition, advocating for basic federal funding for research at Austrian universities of applied sciences (UAS) (Bauer 2022), quickly sparked a massive wave of online discussion. Published after the annual UAS research forum, the piece rapidly amassed hundreds of comments, sparking a heated and passionate debate about the legitimacy and quality of research at these institutions. This immediate and intense reaction underscores a compelling reality: thirty years after the founding of Austria's universities of applied sciences, the discussion surrounding their research remains as vibrant and contentious as ever. In this regard, UAS research is often praised as innovative and directly applicable but also criticized as trivial and amateurish. Despite the diverse nature of research activities at UAS, these dominant narratives shape public perceptions and persist in discourse. Though often oversimplified clichés, these views significantly influence opinions on the identity and value of UAS research, contributing to an ongoing and unresolved debate.

Based on this perception, the primary objective of this article is to delve into this persistent controversy surrounding UAS research. An examination of nearly 30 documents spanning the past three decades —encompassing news articles, press releases, forum discussions, scientific analyses, and policy papers— reveals two prevailing narratives within the debate. The first narrative *"Stick to your knitting – UAS are teaching institutions, not research entities"*, scrutinizes the aptitude of UAS as research establishments and their role within the broader higher education framework. The second narrative *"UAS research: A catalyst for innovation and regional development"* situates UAS research within the context of the broader research and innovation landscape, evaluating the significance of the knowledge generated.

However, it is evident that the narratives surrounding UAS research are not a random occurrence; rather, they are intricately interwoven within a complex tapestry of discourses surrounding higher education, the production of scientific knowledge, and the very fabric of academia itself. They reflect and perpetuate social realities, norms, and ideologies, influenced by historical, cultural, and political factors, thus rendering them inherently logical and persuasive. Through this internal coherence, these narratives gain resilience and can be wielded to advance specific political objectives and agendas, albeit amid inevitable counter-narratives and challenges. This explains why certain beliefs and myths about UAS research persist and are ingrained in people's minds.

These situated narratives do not exist in isolation but coexist within the messy fabric of everyday life. All of them are concurrently (re)produced, sometimes by the same individuals, for diverse purposes. In this intricate tapestry of public discourse, power dynamics, social inequities, and the privileging or marginalization of certain perspectives are evident, placing us in a competitive arena of different stories. Practically, this means stakeholders in research and higher education policy, evaluators, research managers and researchers themselves face a myriad of contrasting views and expectations regarding UAS research. Navigating this complex, often contradictory landscape requires these actors to make sense of their own beliefs, expectations, demands, and actions effectively.

By undertaking three analytical steps — firstly, delineating three core narratives surrounding UAS research; secondly, situating these narratives within broader discursive frameworks; and thirdly, elucidating their simultaneous coexistence while addressing divergent perspectives — this article facilitates a deeper understanding of why, three decades on, UAS research remains a contentious subject. It also underlines that controversial debates about research in UAS frequently serve as pivotal forums for broader discussions about the value of academic research and the overarching mission of universities to drive research and innovation. These more fundamental debates are integral to political and societal progress. The imperative, therefore, is not to silence this discourse but rather to understand its complexities and, where necessary, to actively engage in steering its trajectory.

THEORY

Before approaching the public discourse on research at universities of applied sciences (UAS) in Austria some theoretical considerations regarding the concepts of discourse and narratives, their emergence, effects, and their political and social functions become necessary. In a constructivist and postmodern vein, echoing Foucault's (e.g., 1972) perspective on discourses as effective practices, in this paper, I consider narratives as both a way of conveying meaning in everyday life (Czarniawska 1998) and as constitutive elements of a broader societal understanding of the phenomena under study (Felt 2007). In this regard, it becomes essential to highlight some major characteristics of narratives.

- **Narratives are deeply rooted in the cultural, political, historical, and economic context** within which they arise (Rhodes and Brown 2005; Felt 2007). They draw upon shared beliefs, values, symbols, and myths that are deeply ingrained in a society's collective consciousness. They transmit cultural beliefs and expectations, hierarchical orders (Lamont 2012), as well as categorical distinctions that classify people, objects, and events (Bowker and Star 1999), across generations. These cultural and historical influences provide the raw material from which narratives are constructed and influence how they are interpreted and understood by different audiences.

- **Narratives are products of collective actions within social worlds** (Clarke et al. 2018), which include various actors who shape, spread, negotiate, change, and engage with the narratives. Narrative infrastructures, as highlighted by Felt (2017), continuously evolve, influencing the relevance, agency, and relations of different actors. Thus, power dynamics, hierarchies and inequalities within society strongly influence whose voices are heard and whose stories are privileged or marginalised.

- **Narratives serve as effective tools for wielding power,** particularly in competitive environments. Those in power shape narratives to control discourse, prioritize issues, and steer interpretations, dictating the terms of engagement. Engaging in active boundary work (Gieryn 1983, 1995), powerful actors use narratives to establish legitimacy, authority, and success criteria, solidifying their dominance and defending established boundaries. Additionally, narratives are essential for gaining support and building alliances, as those in power strategically

construct narratives to mobilize allies, project a compelling vision, and assert their authority (Rhodes and Brown 2005).

- **Narratives play a crucial role in shaping individual and collective identities and tacitly govern practices** (Felt and Fochler 2010). They influence self-perceptions and social interactions, and reinforce social orders, norms and values, guiding individuals in understanding their roles and responsibilities within organizations and communities (Felt 2017, 2007). By promoting normative ideals through storytelling and media representations that portray certain behaviours or identities as desirable or undesirable, narratives shape individuals' perceptions of what is acceptable and appropriate. Accordingly, they aren't just reflections of reality but actively construct our understanding of the world and guide decision-making (Keller 2013; Clarke et al. 2018). Particularly in uncertain and rapidly changing situations, collectively shared narratives can create coherence and provide social coordinates for orientation.

- **Narratives are subject to individual interpretation and creativity,** allowing them to resonate with diverse audiences and adapt to changing social context. They evolve over time, reflecting social change and challenging power structures. Accordingly, though often perceived as stable, narratives in fact are dynamic and subject to constant reinterpretation and revision (Clegg, 1989, p. 152). Different actors engage in 'narrative battles', competing to shape the dominant narrative and gain advantages, challenging existing narratives or creating new ones to redefine boundaries and social order. As a result, alternative narratives are certainly possible and gain dominance under different circumstances.

In essence, narratives exert a considerable influence on reality. This is evidenced by their capacity to shape perceptions, construct meaning, guide behaviour, create shared beliefs, mobilise action, and reinforce social structures. Accordingly, by analysing the prevailing narratives in the debate on UAS research, we gain insights into the discursive processes and practices that form its identity, position and worth.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a discourse analysis approach informed by situational analysis (Clarke et al. 2018) to investigate the narratives about UAS research present in a diverse range of documents. The analysis included 28 documents encompassing various genres such as publications in edited volumes, journal articles, evaluation reports, policy papers, newspaper reports, and online forum postings. For selection, I employed a purposive sampling strategy (Creswell and Poth 2018), which involves defining and justifying selection criteria to ensure the collection of relevant and rich data. I searched for documents related to Austria, spanning the period from 1994 to 2024, with the earliest document in the sample dating from 2002[1].

In terms of content, I included material related to UAS researchers, their experiences and career perspectives, UAS as research institutions and their role in the Austrian higher education and research and innovation system, and general accounts on the knowledge produced within these institutions. Articles about specific UAS research projects or presenting outcomes of UAS research were excluded to maintain a broader focus on institutional and sector-wide perspectives. Within this scope, I aimed to capture a wide range of perspectives and experiences (*maximum variation*). The first criterion for variation was the diversity of authors. There were two general groups: accounts from within the UAS (12, including UAS research managers, researchers, and representatives of the sector) and accounts about UAS from individuals not engaged in UAS themselves (15, including funding agencies, evaluators and scholars in higher education studies, representatives of regional and federal governments and ministries, industry representatives, and journalists). In this regard, the forum discussion (1, with a total of 420 postings[2]) holds a special position. It consists of reactions to a comment advocating for state funding for research activities at UAS. The authors (discussants) in this forum are an anonymous crowd interested in the discussion of UAS research, about whose background and positions no specific information is available[3].

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1   Distribution according to years: 2002:1, 2006:1, 2012:8, 2013:1, 2014:1, 2018:1, 2019:2, 2020:2, 2022:4, 2023:5, 2024:2

2   Checked on 2024/08/01

3   Despite this contrast, the analysis recognizes the value inherent in forum posts, which provide access to narratives typically exchanged in casual conversations or private settings rather than in formal publications. It is acknowledged that while forum posts lack attribution to specific individuals, they nonetheless contribute to shaping public discourse and revealing underlying societal attitudes.

The second criterion was the variety of positions. Based on an initial analysis using Clarke's positional mapping (Clarke et al. 2018), which identifies different positions articulated in a discourse along two dimensions (e.g., Quality and Relevance), I sought to identify popular, minor, and absent positions. This final phase of selection involved a conscious search for perspectives not yet represented in the selected documents, ensuring a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the discourse surrounding UAS research in Austria.

The dataset exhibits a wide disparity in narrative forms ranging from strongly formalized publications akin to scientific journal articles to online forum posts characterized by informal and often contentious discourse[4]. Notably, all narratives within these documents are directed toward an unspecified public audience, reflecting a broad spectrum of communication styles and purposes.

The analysis proceeded through several iterative steps. First, key narratives had been identified within the dataset, encompassing both explicit and implicit themes present across the documents. Second, these narratives were contextualized within their respective settings, considering the socio-cultural and historical factors that influence their emergence and reception. Additionally, attention has been paid to the identities and perspectives of the narrators, recognizing their role in shaping the narrative discourse. Finally, the narratives have been situated within broader social, cultural, and historical frameworks, elucidating the meta-narratives that underpin societal understandings of research, research institutions, and researchers. By systematically analysing the narratives present in the diverse range of documents, this methodology seeks to uncover the complex interplay of discourses surrounding research at UAS in Austria and its societal implications.

RESULTS

Reading the stories about UAS research reveals many different narratives, formulated by different people, at different times and with different intentions. However, two stood out in the analysis as they were particularly persistent and regularly repeated over the years, very consistent in themselves, but characterised by a certain ambivalence in comparison with each other. I would like to label them as "situated narratives" (Felt 2007, p. 73) as they are both locally

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4   Distribution according to format: journal articles: 14, reports: 6, press releases/position papers: 5, newspaper articles/comments: 2, online forum discussion: 1

and historically contextualised as well as influenced by broader narratives and underlying imaginaries.

TWO PREVAILING NARRATIVES ABOUT UAS RESEARCH IN AUSTRIA

The first dominant narrative is *"Stick to your knitting – UAS are teaching institutions, not research entities".* This narrative underscores the perception of UAS primarily as teaching-focused institutions, with limited emphasis on research activities. The following vignette is representative of this narrative.

> *"UASs are teaching institutions. […] If you want to promote innovation, you should promote technical institutes and universities. UASs are educational institutions. That's how they are designed, and that makes sense. It makes no sense to build infrastructure for applied research somewhere in the provinces."*
> [Forum post, 2022, translated by the author]

Central to this perspective is the idea that UAS lack the necessary organizational structures and resources to support high-quality research. Faculty members, burdened by heavy teaching loads, often struggle to dedicate sufficient time and energy to research endeavours. Additionally, the absence of adequate basic funding hampers the establishment of robust research groups and the cultivation of a vibrant research culture. As a result, in this perspective, UAS research is viewed as peripheral and ineligible for public funding, further reinforcing its marginalized status within the academic landscape.

The second dominant narrative I would like to refer to as *"UAS research is a catalyst for innovation and regional development".* This narrative highlights the distinctive character of UAS research, emphasizing its applied nature and relevance to innovation and regional development. Here is just one example of this narrative from the data.

> *"Austria's universities of applied sciences are important players in knowledge and technology transfer, especially in regional ecosystems. Accordingly, their position in publicly funded structural programmes and the associated development and expansion of applied/collaborative research, including the training and further education of specialist skills and personal abilities (keyword: transversal skills) is also of key importance."*
> [Ecker et al. 2023, p. 2, translated by the author]

Unlike traditional academic research, UAS research is seen as deeply embedded in collaborations with industry partners and local communities. This close engagement allows UAS researchers to address real-world problems and con-

tribute directly to the socio-economic advancement of their regions. Moreover, the interdisciplinary nature of UAS structures enables researchers to bridge the gap between theory and practice, facilitating the translation of scientific knowledge into tangible outcomes.

Both prominent narratives about UAS research are coherent in themselves and are constantly repeated by their proponents, thus achieving consistency of the years. Further, their persuasiveness is also due to the fact that they are based on more fundamental societal ideas about universities, academic knowledge and perceptions of 'good' research and researchers (Felt et al. 2017). Consequently, as a next step, drawing on insights from higher education studies, science and technology studies, and local historical context, I aim to shed light on their cultural and historical foundations of the debate surrounding UAS research in Austria.

THE CONTEXTUAL FABRIC OF NARRATIVES ABOUT UAS RESEARCH IN AUSTRIA

The contextualisation of the prominent narratives about UAS research identified earlier reveals how they both reflect and shape social realities, norms and ideologies. They are embedded in a deeper conflict between traditional understandings and new paradigms in the evaluation and framing of academic research and its role in society.

TRADITIONAL UNDERSTANDINGS

The narrative *"Stick to your knitting - UAS are teaching institutions, not research entities"* challenges the research role of UAS, emphasizing their focus on teaching within the higher education system. It critically evaluates UASs' research ambitions against the ideals of a 'good' research organization, often comparing them unfavourably to the traditional research university model as an organisational archetype (Vaira 2009, p. 145). This model envisions several key features, including prioritizing research alongside teaching, offering diverse graduate programs, implementing a tenure system, employing highly qualified faculty engaged in cutting-edge research and publishing scholarly articles, and providing top-notch research facilities – qualities typically not found in institutions like UAS. Consequently, this narrative implies *a deficit perspective* that denies UASs necessities and qualities of a good research institution.

"The necessary critical mass of people, expertise and resources for good research exists [at universities], but not at universities of applied sciences."
[Forum post, 2022, translated by the author]

On the outset, the debate surrounding the suitability of UAS as research institutions centres on their alignment with these idealized standards. Beyond structural differences, however, the 'stick to your knitting' narrative is also informed by ideas and ideals that are deeply embedded in the implicit *status system* of the academic world.

"There are hierarchies of knowledge and of knowledge producers, as everyone who works in universities is aware. Some knowledge—knowledge that is produced in specific languages (for example English, before that Latin or German); knowledge produced from certain locations; and knowledge in certain forms (for example leading journals)—has long been valued more highly than other knowledge, in a process that spans national borders."
(Marginson 2011, p. 10)

Status hierarchies, i.e. shared understanding of what is considered to be more or less valuable (Sauder et al. 2012), reflect societal values and shape funding allocation, career trajectories, and knowledge dissemination practices. Such hierarchical orders also exists in relation to organisations and types of institutions within the higher education sector (Bloch and Mitterle 2017). In broad terms, the academic hierarchy is topped by the "comprehensive Anglo-American English language science university" (Marginson 2011, p. 17), while at the bottom are locally focused organisations with a strong teaching emphasis, such as universities of applied sciences. Benchmarking with the research university model perpetuates hierarchical structures within academia, favouring research-focused institutions over teaching-focused ones (Blackmore 2016; Vaira 2009), with basic research often privileged over applied research (Bentley et al. 2015; Sapir 2017). The following statement from the data reflects the feeling of devaluation and marginalisation of UASs arising from this status hierarchy.

"'The 21 universities of applied sciences in Austria [...] feel like stepchildren of the Ministry of Education. Some universities leave no doubt in their attitude towards the industry-orientation of the UASs - a Hochschule can only be something without an 'F' in front of it. And that application-orientated UAS research is inferior to basic university research."
[Bauer 2022, translated by the author]

In the realm of research, universities of applied sciences find themselves in an even intensified competition, spurred by market-like activities and the pursuit

of external funding, which have made academia a battleground for both resources and status (Slaughter and Leslie 1997; Hazelkorn 2008). In such competitive environments, status becomes paramount (Marginson 2011; Brankovic 2018), especially where the quality of research is uncertain (Sauder et al. 2012; Podolny 1993).

In this regard, UAS encounter a structural disadvantage. Current global indicators predominantly emphasize traditional disciplinary, basic university research, prioritizing metrics such as journal publications and citation hierarchies (Godin 2003, 2009; Marginson 2017; West 2009; Hazelkorn 2008). While these indicators inform socio-technical frameworks shaping perceptions in higher education (Bloch and Mitterle 2017), they inadequately capture the quality of applied research and third mission activities. Despite initiatives like the FIFTH project[5] aiming to bridge this gap, they have yet to be fully institutionalized. As a result, either the generally lower status is used as a proxy for quality, or UASs are exposed to unequal competition based on indicators tailored to traditional universities when attempting to measure quality. Here is a perfect example of the latter logic.

"It's actually quite simple. You simply have to compare the externally funded university projects with those of the UAS and see who has published more often in journals with a high impact factor. If the universities of applied sciences are very far behind here, then you have to consider whether funding here makes sense at all and whether you might run the risk of letting Austrian research decline even more if you invest a lot of money there."
[Forum post, 2022, translated by the author]

In the absence of objective measures of quality, narratives about UAS research gain importance, as "perceptions of status fluctuate and vary; they travel as rumors among students, as reminiscences of alumni, or as recognition within the scientific community." (Bloch and Mitterle 2017, p. 933) As we have seen in the theory section, narratives are subject to revision and reinterpretation. Similarly, hierarchies are not unchangeable; rather, they can be regarded as "open ordering processes "(Bloch and Mitterle 2017, p. 930). Actors can use various strategies to either maintain or change their status (Brankovic 2018). One strategy employed by individuals belonging to a higher status category is the strengthening of boundaries within the group, whereas those belonging to a lower status category seek to gain membership within a higher status group. An additional strategy employed by those within a lower status category is the

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5   https://www.che.de/projekt/fifth-facetten-von-und-indikatoren-fur-forschung-und-third-mission-an-haw/

pursuit of vertical status improvement for their group. The following example illustrates this strategy in action.

„With regard to applied research, it should be noted that many universities of applied sciences also conduct cutting-edge research in the fields of social sciences, health sciences or clinical research - which is largely used for evidence-based research in the health sciences - that does not involve product or prototype development or market launches. It remains questionable why only products and prototypes are associated with applied research."
[Press release FHK, 2023, translated by the author]

In terms of Austrian politics, the *'stick to knitting'* narrative is also evident in the federal government's ambivalent stance towards UAS research, reflecting concerns about *academic drift* (Burgess and Pratt 1970; Burgess 1972), i.e. the striving of non-university higher education institutions for higher academic status and recognition, and rights comparable to those of universities (Griffioen and Jong 2013, p. 174). This cautious approach arises from the belief that UAS should prioritize vocational teaching and the fact that, at least initially, "research was believed to be the domain of the academic, 'scientific' world" (Hackl 2008, p. 29). Despite requirements for UAS to align with higher education standards (Hochschulförmigkeit, Berka 2013) and facilitate research activities (FHSTG 1993), state support for UAS is still perceived as limited and hesitant. Only recently, the FHK, which represents the interests of Austrian UAS, expressed its anger at this attitude.

"The academia is shocked that the word research is completely omitted from the vision, mission and positioning of this plan for a higher education sector [UAS development plan]. The strong anchoring of our colleagues in the scientific community is thus massively negatively affected. This makes education at university level impossible. An institution that does not conduct research is not a higher education institution!'
[Press release FHK, 2023, translated by the author]

However, although not to the extent and with the consistency demanded by the FHK, the state also recognizes the benefits of UAS research (Hackl 2008), as evidenced by special structural funding programmes for UAS research (Warta and Geyer 2012). This positive assessment is closely related to the second dominant narrative discussed in the following.

NEW PARADIGMS

In contrast to the first more deficit-oriented narrative, the second prominent narrative, *"UAS research is a catalyst for innovation and regional development,"* situates UAS research within the context of the broader research and innovation landscape. It underscores the growing importance of scientific knowledge for economic purposes within the knowledge-based economy framework (Sørensen et al. 2016) and reflects a changing ontological understanding of "how science will produce knowledge that contributes to business innovation and thus national economic growth." (Lee 2015, p. 208). Accordingly, it causes "a radical change [in the nature of university research] since it is transforming from the traditional discipline-based basic research into transdisciplinary, problem-oriented project research carried out with external funding" (Ylijoki 2005, p. 557). In this context, scholars speak of new knowledge regimes (Bleiklie and Byrkjeflot 2002; Felt et al. 2016, p. 737), as the shift affects both the level of ideologies and guiding myths, institutions and their logics, i.e. the ideas and practices shared by them, as well as the people and actors themselves. An example of this is the concept of "mode 2" knowledge production, characterized by its application-oriented, transdisciplinary nature, diversity of production sites, reflexivity, and new forms of quality control (Gibbons et al. 1994; Nowotny et al. 2001). Similarly, the "triple helix" model highlights the increasing intertwining of academia, industry, and the state in driving innovation. This has led to calls for the emergence of entrepreneurial universities, with a heightened focus on practical applications, university-industry collaboration, and the creation of new organizations, like spin-offs (Etzkowitz et al. 2000).

In the *'catalyst'* narrative, many of the characteristics of mode 2 knowledge production and entrepreneurial universities are seen as inherent in the configuration of UAS (Lepori and Kyvik 2010). Those range from the structure of teaching and research in line with professional fields or fields of application, to highly institutionalized contacts with industry (e.g. based on staff hired from industry, contract research, mandatory internships of students), to a prior emphasis on applied research. In the data, one author formulates the special suitability as follows.

"Companies are not structured according to faculties, and their questions are usually not either. UAS research will be better adapted to the boundary conditions of industrial processes because of the training orientation of the degree programmes. A researcher in basic research certainly achieves more depth of detail and is much better acquainted with all the special literature in his or her narrow subject area;

the broader horizon, on the other hand, comes from a broad perspective, as is found at UASs due to the system."
[Bobik 2013, pp. 138–139, translated by the author]

These new paradigms offer strategic and practical benefits for UAS research, emphasizing its *strength* as driver for innovation. Unlike traditional academic research, applied research prioritizes practical solutions over theoretical exploration, thus gaining increased recognition for its ability to address real-world issues and produce tangible benefits for society. This perspective contrasts with criticisms of traditional university research, as *ivory tower* and home to *Orchideenfächern* (rare and exotic disciplines) which is often seen as disconnected from societal needs (Felt et al. 2017, p. 35; Lepori and Kyvik 2010).

"When weighing up the importance of research for the country and its society, [I consider] the relevant activities of the UAS [...] to be more significant than the considerations of the university [...] on the phenomenon of the 'Jesuit rhetoric' [as an example for an exotic research topic]"
[Forum post, 2022, translated by the author]

The 'catalyst' narrative and the underlying call for societal and economic relevance of research are also evident in the state's perception of UAS research in Austria. Initially, research activities were viewed with scepticism, but have increasingly been considered valuable assets. In 1997, government funding for collaborative projects with industries was introduced (Warta and Geyer 2012). This shift has been driven by Austria's historically lower investment in research and development (R&D) compared to other countries, prompting efforts to boost non-university research through initiatives such as cooperative R&D projects with firms. The changing attitude towards UAS research has been reflected in legislative amendments and government funding criteria, indicating a growing recognition of the importance of research alongside teaching (Hackl 2008, pp. 29–30)

In a nutshell, as we can see in this contextualisation, the dominant narratives surrounding UAS research are deeply embedded in broader ideological frameworks concerning the organization of research, its role in the world and its significance for societal and economic development. From this, they derive their persuasiveness and long-term viability. The argument that UASs are primarily educational institutions lacking the necessary organisational and institutional infrastructure for meaningful research, which justifies a lack of public investment in research endeavours, is as convincing as the alternative narrative that research at universities of applied sciences can drive swift and tangible innovations within industries, thus holding economic value. Each narrative constructs

its own framework of significance, knowledge, and authority, which shapes individuals' perceptions and discussions surrounding UAS research from their unique vantage points. Through this internal coherence, these narratives gain resilience and can be wielded to advance specific political objectives and agendas, albeit amid inevitable counter-narratives and challenges. This explains why certain beliefs and myths about UAS research persist and are ingrained in people's minds.

THE ARENA OF DEBATE

For analytical purposes, this article identified two distinct narratives that have characterised the discussion about research at universities of applied sciences in Austria in recent years. However, it's important to note that these narratives are not isolated; they coexist within a complex landscape of public discourse, power dynamics, and social inequalities. They are often intertwined with other narratives, forming a dynamic arena of debate where the legitimacy and evaluation of research at UASs are continually contested. At this juncture, it is imperative to stress certain characteristics of the debate.

First, individual narratives cannot be neatly attributed to specific actors. Instead, different aspects are strategically combined and reshaped depending on the situation and intention. A prime example is the argument regarding the structural weaknesses in research within UASs. This argument is not solely advanced by critics of UAS research, who advocate for a focus on teaching and avoidance of academic pursuits. Conversely, proponents of UAS research highlight these weaknesses as a structural disadvantage compared to traditional universities, arguing for the need to adapt UAS research structural capacities to realize its full potential.

It is similarly unreasonable, and that is the second point, to suggest that there is this one dominant power position with uncontested interpretative authority in the social arena. Rather, on the one hand, those in favour of UAS research are, at least in terms of the number of documents in the sample of this analysis, more vocal and often have regional political or economic advocates in the background who support their cause (at least rhetorically). On the other hand, those who oppose UAS research appear to rely on the authority of a widely accepted status order and quantifiable indicators to bolster their arguments and actions, which could be perceived as a sense of complacency.

Third, there is at least one counter-narrative to each dominant narrative. For example, the thesis of useful applied research is countered by emphasising the importance of basic research as the basis of all innovation or the value of an

autonomous academia that is separate from economic interests. We can also observe spillover effects in which, for example, the quality of the organisation in teaching is used to draw conclusions about the quality of research. And the evaluation framework itself is not static, but rather subject to constant renegotiation and change, as there is not only a discourse about UAS as research institutions, but also about universities.

So far, the discourse on research at universities of applied sciences has been outlined as characterised by opposing positions, as a discursive arena in which demarcation and boundary work play a major role. However, and that is my final point in this regard, it is also evident that there are a number of positions and actors who emphasise connecting elements and characterise universities and UAS in the field of research not as competitors but as useful complements to each other.

In conclusion, it can be posited that the discourse surrounding UAS research seems messy, marked by broad generalizations stemming from individual experiences and preconceived notions, leading to comparisons that don't quite fit. Upon closer reflection, however, this apparent chaos reveals its value and follows a political logic. As the analysis show, the understanding of UAS research evolves through a discursive process, embedded in a complex narrative infrastructure that constantly adapt to changing realities. Within these circumstances, there is a purposeful interpretive flexibility (Pinch and Bijker 1984) of UAS research as a concept that allows for adaptation to specific situations, goals, and future trajectories. These two aspects sustain the debate about UAS research in Austria.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper addressed the question of why research at Austrian universities of applied sciences (UAS) continues to be suspect, despite its three-decade history in Austria. Based on a comprehensive document analysis and drawing on insights from science and technology studies and higher education research, the study uncovered prevailing situated narratives that are interwoven with broader discourses. Although these narratives appear internally consistent, their simultaneous existence gives rise to contradictions and tensions that perpetuate the public debate on UAS research. The objective of the analysis was not to provide an exhaustive account; rather, it aimed to delve beneath the surface and offer a more nuanced understanding of the debate as a dynamic

process within the field of political discourse. This approach illuminates several facets of the story about UAS research in Austria.

IT IS A STORY OF IDENTITY-SEEKING AND SENSE-MAKING.

At the very beginning of the discussion about UAS research was the basic question of whether research is necessary and essential for a HE institution at all. In this respect, a certain consensus seems to have emerged in recent years that research activities are crucial for the quality of tertiary education. The current discourse revolves around defining UAS research, a task that appears straightforward but reveals complexities upon closer examination. Questions arise: What kind of research is considered legitimate UAS research and what is not? When does research truly begin? What delineates applied from basic research? Despite this ambiguity, the term 'UAS research' has become a distinct category that is evaluated and assigned a specific status within the academic community and beyond – a status that may extent to organisations, the knowledge produced, and the individuals engaged in conduction research at UAS.

IT IS A STORY ABOUT VALUES, QUALITY, AND EVALUATION.

The criteria for assessing UAS research quality mirror the complexity of its categorization. Various notions of 'good' research exist alongside differing quality markers, adding layers of nuance to evaluation processes. While diverse indicators are employed, their establishment and application vary, illustrating the multifaceted nature of quality assessment within the UAS research landscape. In this context of ambiguity and diverse interpretations, the narratives surrounding research at universities of applied sciences (UASs) are particularly significant. They have the potential to reinforce specific social orders, norms, and values, thus providing essential social coordinates for orientation.

IT IS A STORY OF DELINEATION, POSITIONING, AUTHORITY, AND STATUS.

Central to these narratives is the comparison with traditional universities, serving as the ultimate benchmark. While alternative comparisons exist, the emotional battleground lies in juxtaposing research at UASs with that of universities. This comparison not only influences practical aspects like research funding and career organization but also shapes the institutional identity and role of UASs within the research ecosystem. Thus, the discourse on research at UASs extends beyond the mere evaluation of its epistemic merits; it becomes a political process of establishing authority, status and material resources

through the continual definition and redefinition of boundaries. These boundaries, however, remain fluid, are contestable, and driven more by ideological convictions than by conscious calculation.

IT'S A STORY ABOUT THE ROLE OF RESEARCH IN SOCIETY.

We have seen that the controversies surrounding UAS research serve as a platform for negotiating deeper societal norms and ideals about academic research and universities, and its societal role. In this respect, the debate functions as a 'proxy discourse' in which arguments about UAS research are used as a way of expressing one's views on deeper issues. These more fundamental debates are an integral part of socio-political processes and progress. The imperative, therefore, is not to silence this discourse, but rather to understand its roots and complexities and, where necessary, to actively engage in steering its trajectory. Furthermore, in a country like Austria, where a large proportion of research funding continues to go to industrial research, one should also ask to what extent the strong focus on demarcating university and UAS research does not obscure the potential and challenges of research in the much broader Austrian research and innovation area.

THERE COULD BE ALTERNATIVE STORIES.

In this regard, the discourse analysis (Foucault 1972; Clarke et al. 2018) also prompts us to consider which voices are currently marginalised and which alternative narratives are still possible. By paying more attention to these marginalised actors and positions, we may be able to identify alternative stories that could carry and develop the discourse in the future. For me, this is the case with the researchers themselves, whose stories about their everyday research might provide a new perspective on the UAS as a research site.

In summary, the narratives about UAS research in Austria can be described as tales of conservation and transformation, of maintaining a position and attaining a new one, of advocating for or against certain rights, privileges, and resources. It can be viewed as an endeavour for establishing a new entity within an academic world characterised by traditional values and undergoing a period of significant transition. As this discourse continues to unfold, it will remain a dynamic process of constructing meaning, evaluating and shaping status in the academic world and beyond.

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