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Short bio: Dr **Ulrike Najar** is an expert in quality enhancement in higher education and works in research & development at the Austrian quality assurance agency AQ Austria. She is responsible for the preparation of analyses and reports and engages, among other areas of interest, with scientific and artistic integrity at Austrian higher education institutions. She completed her master's degree at the University of Leipzig and her doctorate at the University of Glasgow on the subject of intercultural education. Ulrike worked for many years as a program coordinator and teacher trainer at the University of Melbourne and in quality assurance of school education in Asia.

Paper

Title: Strengthening Integrity: Austria's Strategic Approach to Proactive Quality Assurance

Abstract

Since the implementation of the Austrian Higher Education Law Package 2024, **scientific and artistic integrity** has become a central quality theme of quality assurance for Higher Education Institutions across Austria. Recent amendments to the Higher Education Quality Assurance Act (HS-QSG) introduce a systematic approach that encompasses the entire higher education landscape, including the artistic sector. This paper discusses the process and outcomes of this policy approach for proactive quality assurance, which is deeply rooted in the European understanding of academic integrity as a fundamental value crucial for public trust and the global standing of Higher Education Institutions as "ethical institutions."

Specifically, the paper will outline Austria's quality assurance initiative to promote a **"culture of scientific and artistic rectitude and quality"** that goes beyond basic "good scientific practice." This move towards establishing holistic and preventative quality assurance mechanisms aims to position academic integrity as a strategic asset for both the higher education sector and individual Higher Education Institutions. Practical support measures and stakeholder processes will be discussed based on a survey conducted with all Austrian Higher Education Institutions in early 2025. This survey's findings will highlight the Higher Education Institutions own outlined scientific and artistic integrity governance structures and initiatives as well as challenges and opportunities.

Building on these insights, the discussion will centre on the argument that **systematically integrating scientific and artistic integrity into quality assurance frameworks is essential** for enhancing

institutional resilience and strengthening progressive policies in challenging times. When leveraged strategically, quality assurance can importantly protect academic freedom and critical inquiry, ensuring an environment conducive to robust academic work and diverse perspectives. This case study offers transferable lessons on how quality assurance can be used to proactively strengthen institutional rigor and ethical governance.

Reorienting integrity in Austrian higher education

The integrity of the higher education sector is paramount: as a non-negotiable prerequisite for scholarly work but also for public trust and the perception of higher education per se. This paper outlines the recent, legally driven strategic paradigm shift in Austrian governance and quality assurance, which aims to move from a primarily reactive model toward an increasingly proactive approach to safeguard academic integrity in Austria. Given the increasing complexity of the higher education-sector alongside rapid digital transformation, the continuous rise of Artificial Intelligence and intensified global collaboration, the overarching objective of this paper is to position integrity not merely as a regulatory compliance element, but as a foundational characteristic of quality and a necessary investment in the long-term future of higher education in general.

The foundation for this process in Austria is the amendment of the higher education Act in 2024. This regulatory move strategically strengthened the legal context for academic integrity by systematising and streamlining the terminology and respective concepts used across relevant laws for the higher education sector. Concretely defined were the terms “academic integrity” and “academic misconduct” as well as “*artistic integrity*”¹, the latter being defined as “compliance with legal regulations, ethical standards and the current state of knowledge in the respective field within the framework of the tasks and objectives of the respective educational institution”². Equally important has been the introduction of the concept of “a *culture* of academic and artistic integrity and quality”, which “determines the actions of those involved in these educational institutions in science and research, development and exploration of the arts, as well as teaching and study”³. This culture of integrity is positioned as a central element in the amendments of the higher education act and therefore a crucial point for re-orientation for higher education institutions (HEIs) in Austria. Consequently, the quality assurance of academic integrity and artistic integrity is now at the core of a cross-sectoral policy strategy that intentionally moves beyond the historical scope of focusing (mainly) on the rules and regulations of “good scientific practice” and toward a proactive, holistic and preventative approach.

The context and “integrity imperative”

The Austrian higher education system is characterised by its diversity, comprising to this date 23 public universities, 21 universities of applied sciences, 14 university colleges of teacher education and 19 private universities. These institutions served in 2024 around 402 000 students⁴ and differ based on their legal foundations, funding structures, and specific educational focus. Furthermore, Austria has a long history of artistic education in specific higher education institutions for music and arts. This sectoral diversity necessitates a quality assurance approach that is both coherent in its ethical demands and

¹ The term “artistic integrity” as well as related uses of the phrase have been debated intensely in the past months and is therefore only used as a functional term in this paper.

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<https://www.ris.bka.gv.at/GeltendeFassung.wxe?Abfrage=Bundesnormen&Gesetzesnummer=20007384>, accessed on 4th November 2025.

³ Ibid.

⁴ <https://www.bmeia.gv.at/kf-mexiko/bildung-wissenschaft/hochschulen-in-oesterreich>, accessed on 4th November 2025.

flexible in its implementation. The amendment of the higher education Act in 2024 meant that integrity was not an option anymore but a compulsory on both an institutional and quality assurance level.

AQ Austria has hence made academic and artistic integrity - as an integral part of the quality of a higher education institution - a focus topic and has integrated the topic into its accreditation processes. The broad objective of this decision is to support HEIs in defining, developing, and strengthening their own culture of scientific and artistic integrity through internal and external quality assurance and quality development. Through these efforts, AQ Austria aims to operate as a "bridge" connecting the legal mandate with concrete institutional practice and serving as a "motor" driving the necessary cultural changes forward, with and through the support of external and internal quality assurance measures.

Framing a proactive approach: Objectives and mechanisms

At the core of AQ Austria's approach and commitment to integrity at HEIs is the development of a structured, three-year project, that is based on and informed by a Theory-of-Change framework. The project is build on four phases – research, data collection/analysis, knowledge transfer and evaluation -and is furthermore guided by the following strategic objectives:

1. Establishing academic and artistic integrity as a key quality feature: Elevating the topic to a formal, measured dimension within relevant quality assurance frameworks.
2. Strengthening a positive and preventive culture: Shifting institutional focus towards creating structures that proactively support ethical behaviour rather than predominantly focusing on sanctioning misconduct.
3. Creating a platform for cross-sectoral exchange: Facilitating structured dialogue among different HEI-sectors, as well as with non-HEIs and student stakeholders.

To achieve these objectives, AQ Austria has implemented several robust practical support mechanisms, ensuring the project is both strategic and actionable. As already mentioned, the topic of academic and artistic integrity has been explicitly incorporated into accreditation processes and will be integrated into future audit processes. Additional measures supporting the framework include a) the establishment of an internal AQ Austria task force to address academic and artistic integrity strategically and in the long term, b) a stronger focus on national and international networking through increased cooperation with, for example, the Austrian Agency for Scientific Integrity (ÖAWI), as well as membership in the Global Academic Integrity Network (GAIN) or the European Network for Academic Integrity (ENAI) and c) the AQ Austria annual conferences (2024 and 2025), which serve as a central platform for dialogue and concept development on a cross-sectoral level (with a conference publication due in 2025/26).

These annual conferences on the topic of integrity played a decisive role in generating discussions among all stakeholders, building awareness of the legal changes and its implications on HEIs. Equally important, these conferences served as a "tool" for consolidating key thematic focus points and areas for action as discussed and articulated by representatives of HEIs themselves, such as:

- The call for increased attention to discuss the concept of a "culture of academic and artistic integrity," focusing on positive and preventive structures.
- The desire for a stronger central anchoring of concrete measures in university strategies and in monitoring processes based on data analysis.
- The need for holistically structured coordination of internal university departments and measures, combined with active and preventive communication, collaboration, and training.
- A stronger focus on the specific concept and needs of artistic integrity.

These consolidated themes now form the non-negotiable basis for AQ Austria's chosen approach, ensuring its direct relevance to the sector's needs. One argument that has been strongly articulated by HEIS and taken up by the agency is, that there is no "one" culture of integrity but instead as many cultures as there are HEIs. That means, structures and processes that are shaped differently depending on the individual context. An understanding of an "integrity-culture" as such is firmly anchored in the identification and analysis of those points without holistic practices cannot emerge, such as a monitoring system, relevant training for teachers and students on the use and abuse of scientific integrity and artistic integrity, appropriately adapted examination and admission regulations, adequate personnel selection, adapted statutes and guidelines, the dissemination of know-how on AI, but also sanctions in study and personnel law, etc.

Understanding praxis at HEIs in Austria

One "elephant in the room", that has consistently been discussed and addressed in debates on the topic, has been the lack of data in terms of a lack of information on statistics regarding academic misconduct at HEIs in Austria. Not only "numbers" but also processes and structures regarding academic or artistic integrity were difficult to access or use to generate an evidence-based approach for to inform quality assurance practice. Collecting data and understanding HEI practice has hence been at the core of AQ Austria's agenda.

In preparation of the second annual conference on academic and artistic integrity in 2025, a survey had been designed and integrated into an overall data-gathering phase, that also planned, for example, focus groups with students⁵. In March 2025, AQ Austria launched the survey, "Academic Integrity and Artistic Integrity: A Look at Practice," specifically designed to collect detailed information from the Austrian higher education sector. The insights gained directly informed the thematic development of the subsequent 'call for contributions,' which formally invited institutional participation for the annual conference in September 2025 that further deepened the insights of the previous conference by focusing almost entirely on the sharing of good practice examples.

The survey was sent to all 77 HEIs in Austria and ensured broad and voluntary participation. A total of 127 representatives from 50 institutions participated, providing a robust and representative insight. 14 of the participating institutions specialised in the arts, additionally ensuring sectoral relevance. The survey incorporated a total of 17 questions, which were mainly structured around the two dimensions of "what works?" and "where is space for improvement?" and five thematic blocks:

- General questions (e.g. type of university)
- Measures to protect scientific and artistic integrity in higher education strategies, monitoring processes and data analyses
- Communication, collaboration and training measures for higher education management, staff and students
- The specific concept and requirements of artistic integrity
- Further comments.

The following table shortly summarises key outcomes of the survey⁶:

⁵ Not yet completed.

⁶ These findings will be presented in more detail in an upcoming paper in 2026.

Strengths ("what works?")	Challenges ("space for improvement")
Stable Foundation: Good institutional policies, processes, and training are established.	Fostering intrinsic student motivation: Less information was provided on how students are involved in integrity processes beside the communication of rules and regulations.
Top-level commitment: Integrity is often already anchored at the highest level of a HEI.	Getting everyone on board and connected: Clarifying the strategic collaboration of all stakeholders at one HEI and the monitoring of strategies were often less clearly defined.
Communication & training: Robust communication and training measures are reported to be in place at many HEIs.	Capacity constraints: The work of HEIs is often constrained by a lack of human resources.
Low-threshold offers: Early and continuous discussion of the topic is facilitated via academic writing centers and libraries.	AI and "culture" in focus: Artificial Intelligence and the establishment of a comprehensive "culture of integrity" are the most discussed areas for future development.

The results of the survey can be synthesized into three major insights that define the subsequent project focus: (1) *Constructive foundation*: HEIs report functioning and solid guidelines, processes, and training structures in place, viewing the new legal wording as a constructive starting point. More discussions were asked for in terms of the particular concepts of "artistic integrity" or "artistic misconduct". (2) *Key development areas*: *Artificial Intelligence* was identified as the most crucial development area for HEIs. This is followed by the need for processes to *raise awareness* of the topic internally and establish a more comprehensive "culture of integrity" on a practical level. (3) *Strategic gaps*: Responses concerning student motivation were notably less detailed, referencing mostly "one-way" scenarios of providing rules and regulations, rather than the initiation of intrinsic motivation and personal responsibility. Furthermore, monitoring processes of academic or artistic integrity were described less clearly, with current monitoring-structures often limited to the documentation of actual misconduct cases.

Academic integrity as a strategic asset: Where to next?

As we speak, AQ Austria is re-evaluating its approach to academic and artistic integrity and carefully outlines the next steps - the implementation of the three-year plan will directly address the gaps identified in the HEI practice survey above. What we have learned so far is that the relationship between quality assurance and integrity at HEIs is more than just a regulatory necessity; it is a shared responsibility and a vital strategic asset for the Austrian higher education sector and its position within the European Area/EHEA. Moving forward, our focus shifts entirely to fostering a proactive culture of integrity, a process intrinsically reliant on strategic quality assurance.

The following key questions remain crucial at this point in time and should be continuously addressed by institutions and quality agencies alike:

- Shifting to culture: How can quality assurance mechanisms be strategically embedded before academic misconduct incidents occur, effectively transforming integrity from a set of external rules and regulations into a living culture within the institution?
- Measuring academic and artistic integrity: Beyond checking for basic compliance, how can we develop reliable methods to effectively measure a "culture of integrity" at a HEI, assessing its true depth and impact?
- Promoting robustness: What specific and innovative mechanisms within quality assurance can be used not just to enforce standards, but to actively promote a robust "culture of integrity" that builds institutional resilience and has students at its core?

- Adapting to Change: Finally, given the rapidly evolving research landscape, especially with emerging technologies like Artificial Intelligence and data science, how can quality assurance frameworks adapt quickly to integrate and address these new integrity challenges?

Successfully navigating these questions will be essential for ensuring that integrity remains at the core of quality assurance and that Austrian higher education continues to merit public trust and maintain its ethical standing internationally.

References

See footnotes in-text.

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