

**Call for Papers: 22nd Annual Conference of the Gesellschaft für
Hochschulforschung (German Association for Higher Education Research)
2027**

Higher Education Institutions in Democracy – Scholarly Standards and Societal Responsibility

The 2027 Annual Conference of the Gesellschaft für Hochschulforschung is dedicated to the multifaceted relationship between higher education institutions and democracy. How can higher education institutions uphold their scholarly standards while simultaneously assuming societal responsibility? What institutional, structural, and individual preconditions are required for this? How are the conditions underpinning scholarly work changing in a democracy under pressure? And what responsibility does higher education research itself bear in analysing and shaping these interrelations?

Higher education institutions are central institutions of democratic societies. They not only produce knowledge, but also educate people who assume societal responsibility as citizens, as professionals and leaders, and as critical voices. At the same time, they themselves stand in a complex relationship to democracy: they depend on academic freedom, in many cases on public funding, and on institutional autonomy—conditions which in turn presuppose a democratically constituted framework, although it remains an open question whether such formal framework conditions alone are sufficient. Added to this is a constitutive tension within the institution itself: higher education institutions are, at their core, meritocratically constituted—access, careers, and reputation follow the principle of selecting the best and of scholarly performance assessment. This performance principle is, on the one hand, a prerequisite for scientific quality assurance; on the other hand, it stands in a relationship to democratic claims to equality and participation that requires clarification, and it is at the same time the subject of fundamental critique from the perspective of democratic theory (Sandel 2020). It would, however, be reductive to conceive of higher education institutions per se as places that sustain democratic societies and to interpret possible deficits solely as effects of negative developments in their environment. Rather, it is necessary to inquire, in an empirically open manner, into the democratic culture within higher education institutions themselves—for instance, into the state of academic self-governance, about whose actual functioning little reliable knowledge is currently available. The historical perspective, too, counsels self-criticism: higher education institutions have by no means always been bulwarks of democracy; rather, as the history of German-speaking universities under National Socialism in particular demonstrates, they at times acted as willing collaborators of anti-democratic regimes (Grüttner 2024). In times of increasing polarisation, resurgent populism, and growing hostility towards science and its representatives, the relationship between higher education and democracy is once again coming under pressure: empirical findings from the DACH region show that while trust in science remains high among the majority, it is unequally distributed

along social and political lines, and that science scepticism is increasingly being discussed as a problem for democratic politics (ÖAW 2025; Schäfer et al. 2025; Wissenschaft im Dialog 2025). This multilayered set of conditions calls for renewed reflection. What role do higher education institutions play in preserving and further developing democratic societies? And how do societal and political developments affect higher education institutions, their structures, and their members?

Closely connected to this is the question of access to higher education, which is the subject of processes and debates concerning opening and closure. While the expansion of higher education and initiatives promoting equitable access to higher education and continuing education have enabled broad participation, the social selectivity of access to higher education remains empirically well documented (cf. for Austria Unger et al. 2024): the opening of higher education institutions to groups that have traditionally been underrepresented or excluded is in many respects still outstanding and varies considerably across institutional types and disciplinary fields. In this context, it must also be discussed how admission restrictions and selection mechanisms are to be assessed from the perspective of democratic theory—restriction alone is not per se undemocratic, but it does raise questions of legitimacy. At the same time, opportunities emerge: higher education institutions can serve as sites of open discourse, evidence-based deliberation, and democratic negotiation—understood as spaces in which controversial societal questions are debated argumentatively and in a rule-governed manner—and can thereby contribute to societal resilience, that is, to the capacity of democratic societies to cope with crises and polarisation without losing their fundamental principles.

It would, however, fall short to posit a necessary connection between the innovative capacity and excellence of scientific research and democratic structures. A look at history and at other regions of the world shows that cutting-edge research and technological progress are also possible under authoritarian conditions and can be internationally competitive. Scientific performance is therefore not sufficient evidence of the superiority of democratically constituted science systems. And yet the coexistence of democracy and higher education practice is a precious good and a long-cherished practice: the two stand in a relationship of mutual dependence. Democracies guarantee the freedom of research and teaching, protect open discourse, and enable critical self-correction; higher education institutions, in turn, educate autonomous and responsible citizens, provide evidence-based knowledge for societal negotiation processes, and can contribute to the stability and development of democratic cultures. Precisely because this relationship is neither self-evident nor without alternatives, it is essential to reflect on its value and to identify and safeguard its preconditions.

The scholarly commitment to the pursuit of truth, methodological rigour, and critical scrutiny stands in a productive, yet at times tension-laden, relationship to the societal responsibility and democratically legitimised missions of higher education institutions. In what ways should and can scholars and higher education managers intervene in public debates, thereby potentially risking their ascribed neutrality? What is to be understood by this neutrality is itself contested: the concept of neutrality is increasingly being instrumentalised as a polemical device to delegitimise scholarly positions, and the demarcation between epistemic authority and political statement is the subject of current debates in the sociology of science (Bogner 2021). Or does their knowledge in fact oblige scholars to take a societal stance—for instance, in view of the climate crisis, the rise of anti-democratic movements, or threats to academic freedom (Scholars at Risk 2025)? How can higher education institutions fulfil their educational

mandates, as set out in various higher education and university acts, without lapsing into actionism or even political indoctrination?

A particular role arises from all of this for higher education research itself. It is not merely a detached observer of the relationship between higher education and democracy; as a scholarly subdiscipline, it is itself part of this field: its concepts, methods, and findings feed into higher education policy, governance, and public discourse, and help shape how higher education institutions are thought about and how decisions concerning them are made. How, then, should higher education researchers position themselves in relation to the questions raised here? Is it their task to provide normative orientation and to advocate for the democratisation and preservation of democratic higher education institutions—or does such engagement jeopardise the analytical credibility of the discipline? How do they reflect on their own positioning, their dependence on third-party funding and political commissioning bodies, and their role in policy advice? These dependencies are relevant from the perspective of democratic theory because they shape research programmes and agendas and may affect the independence of scientific policy advice—and thus a precondition of science-informed democratic decision-making. With this conference, we explicitly invite higher education research to engage self-reflexively with its relationship to democracy and societal responsibility.

Through their mandate for teacher education, moreover, higher education institutions act as a link—a "transmission belt"—into society, in that they pass on not only subject-specific and didactic knowledge but also democratic values to future generations. What student teachers learn at higher education institutions about democracy, plurality, and societal responsibility indirectly shapes the democratic consciousness of entire cohorts of school pupils.

Overall, we would be very interested to learn more about which forms of good practice exist at higher education institutions—in teaching, research, and the third mission—for advancing democracy-promoting and civic education, and for reflecting on and further developing democratic practice within higher education institutions themselves. We therefore invite you to contribute to this reflection. Both theoretical-conceptual and empirically based or practice-oriented contributions are welcome. In particular, we wish to address the following thematic fields:

1. Democracy, Meritocracy, and Science: Theoretical and System-Comparative Perspectives

- What is the relationship between scientific innovative capacity and excellence, on the one hand, and democratic or authoritarian political framework conditions, on the other, and what can be learned from the comparison of science systems about the preconditions of free research?
- What tensions exist between meritocratic principles of scholarly performance assessment and democratic claims to equality and participation (cf. Sandel 2020)?
- What do agonistic and post-foundationalist theories of democracy (Laclau, Mouffe, and others) imply for the self-understanding of higher education institutions and the practice of scholars?
- How does the scientific claim to validity—which, in the mode of organised scepticism, institutionalises dissent and plurality (Merton 1973), yet to which public discourse frequently ascribes expectations such as unambiguity or consensus—relate to a

conception of democracy that regards conflict, plurality, and the balancing of interests as constitutive?

- Which hegemonic orders shape science (policy) and higher education, how are they contested and shifted, and wherein lies the specific value of the reciprocal relationship between democracy and higher education practice?

2. Opening Up Higher Education Institutions and Democratising Access

- How can access to higher education be expanded for traditionally underrepresented or disadvantaged groups (e.g., first-generation students, people with a migration background, people with disabilities)?
- Which structural barriers persist, and which measures (such as permeability, alternative pathways to admission, diversity-sensitive teaching) contribute to an equitable opening of access to higher education?
- What tensions arise between opening up access and claims to excellence or meritocracy, between inclusion and selection, and how can these be addressed productively?

3. Academic Freedom, the Public Sphere, and Societal Pressure

- What threats to academic freedom can currently be observed—also in light of international experiences (Scholars at Risk 2025)—and how do higher education institutions respond to attempts at political co-optation, funding cuts, or attacks on individual members?
- Which protective mechanisms and institutional strategies safeguard the autonomy of research and teaching and strengthen the resilience of higher education institutions as democratic actors?
- What role do higher education institutions and scholars play in public discourse and in policy advice, and how can they counter disinformation and science scepticism?
- Where do the boundaries lie between scholarly expertise, societal engagement, and political positioning, and how do scholars balance their freedom of research with external political, economic, or societal expectations?

4. Democratic Education, Educational Mandate, and Teacher Education

- What specific contribution does higher education make—alongside other educational sectors and agents of socialisation—to fostering democratic competences and autonomous civic agency, and how can democratic education be anchored in teaching and curricula?
- What responsibility do teaching staff bear for the democratic socialisation of students?
- What role does teacher education at higher education institutions play as a "transmission belt" in passing on democratic values to future generations, and how are prospective teachers prepared to deal with societal conflicts, plurality, and political controversy in everyday school life?
- What normative tensions arise between scholarly disciplinarity, education policy requirements, and the socio-political mandates of higher education and teacher education?

5. Higher Education Institutions and Higher Education Research in Self-Reflection: Democratic Constitution, Historical Responsibility, Disciplinary Positioning

- What role do academic self-governance and participation play for the democratic culture at higher education institutions, and how do higher education institutions deal with internal conflicts and the negotiation of controversial positions?
- What can be learned from the historical entanglement of higher education institutions with anti-democratic regimes—such as the collaboration of German-speaking universities under National Socialism (Grüttner 2024)—for institutional self-reflection and the culture of remembrance today?
- How should higher education researchers position themselves in relation to the relationship between higher education and democracy—as detached analysts, as engaged actors, or both?
- What role does higher education research play in developments within the higher education sector and in the democratisation of higher education institutions, how does it reflect on its own positioning, dependencies, and influence, and how does it preserve its scholarly integrity vis-à-vis political and societal expectations?

6. Open Track

An opportunity to present current findings of national and international higher education research independently of the conference theme. Such contributions should demonstrate verifiable relevance to the discussion within higher education research.

Structure and Formats

Submissions are possible in German and English. Participation in the conference is exclusively on site. The following formats are envisaged:

- **Individual paper:** 15-minute presentation followed by discussion (5 minutes).
- **Symposium:** Several thematically coordinated contributions on an overarching topic. A total of 120 minutes is available for presentations and discussion.
- **Poster session:** A concise presentation of a research project or example of practice on a designed poster. Visitors move freely between the posters and engage in small-group conversations with the presenters.
- **Elevator pitch:** A 60-minute session comprising concise short presentations of initial research ideas and conceptual contributions of a maximum of 5 minutes each. All pitches are followed by a joint discussion of the presented contributions.

Individual paper, poster presentation, or elevator pitch: Please submit an abstract of no more than 300 words (excluding references). A maximum of two abstracts on different topics may be submitted per author.

Symposium: Proposals for a symposium must include, in addition to the abstracts for the individual papers (each no more than 300 words, excluding references), an introductory text of no more than 200 words outlining the overarching theme and framework of the symposium.

Important Information

Abstracts must be submitted (exclusively) via the conference management system ConfTool. The submission period for all conference formats begins at the end of September 2026 and ends in **mid-November 2026**. All submitted abstracts will undergo a peer-review process. When submitting, please indicate whether you are available to serve as a reviewer. The results will be announced at the beginning of 2027.

Submissions are possible in German and English.

Please submit your contributions exclusively via ConfTool at:

<https://www.conftool.com/gfhf2027>

Continuously updated information on the conference can be found at: www.aau.at/gfhf-2027

Conference dates: 17–19 March 2027.

The HoFoNa Day (early-career researchers' day) will take place on 17 March 2027. The main conference begins on 18 March 2027; the general assembly and the award ceremony of the Ulrich Teichler Prize will follow in the evening.

Organising committee: Pascal Angerhausen, Eva Cendon, Andreas Hudelist, Susanne Huss, Martina Merz, Ada Pellert, Peter Schlögl, Uwe Wilkesmann

Conference venue: University of Klagenfurt, Universitätsstraße 65–67, A-9020 Klagenfurt am Wörthersee, Austria

Contact: GfHf@aau.at

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