

Back to campus – vaccinated or unvaccinated?

After the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in an extended period of online and hybrid teaching at universities around the world, students and faculty finally returned to the classroom in many places for the 2021/22 winter semester. The primary goal here is to make teaching and learning as safe as possible and to maintain face-to-face teaching. In this context, many are wondering what role mandatory vaccinations should play, writes **Edeltraud Hanappi-Egger**

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In the 2020 and 2021 academic years, most teaching had to be held online or in hybrid formats. As long as no vaccine was available in the early days of the pandemic, online teaching was the only option, but as vaccines became more readily available and the number of infections subsided, students were slowly able to return to the classroom. Since students in Austria fall into the age group that had to wait the longest for vaccination, distancing and mask requirements were also still necessary even in hybrid mode in the spring of 2021.

Online teaching has its limits, return as soon as possible

Of course, online teaching is not ideal for most universities in the long run. After all, a university should always be a place to meet, to discuss with one another, and to explore and develop ideas. The university experience also means traveling for continuing education, going to conferences to exchange ideas, networking, holding meetings, hosting large events and conferences, and graduation ceremonies. Countless people are involved in different places. All of these different aspects that make up a university have had to be cancelled or take place in digital formats for long enough. The burden on everyone involved has been, and continues to be very high, and this is why many universities switched back to face-to-face teaching as quickly as possible, even in the face of the necessary safety measures, as there was no end to the pandemic in sight. The availability of the vaccine raised hopes that normality would soon return to universities as well. From both scientific and medical perspectives, vaccination is currently the best solution for combating the pandemic, as been proven by numerous studies and also by the experience with the vaccinations to date. Nevertheless, mandatory vaccination is not an easy decision to impose on universities, as the worldwide protests against the COVID-19 measures show that discussions about the pandemic and the necessary measures to end it can be ideological and highly aggressive, especially when it comes to the issue of mandatory vaccination.

What speaks against mandatory vaccination?

A look across national borders shows that there are some universities that require their employees and students to be vaccinated against COVID-19, grant access to the unvaccinated only in clearly defined, exceptional cases that must be approved in advance. This is especially evident in the US and Anglo-Saxon countries, where proof of vaccination of all kinds has been a tradition for a long time and is legally watertight. Students who cannot show proof of vaccination are ex-matriculated or not admitted in the first place. This exclusion is also often heavily criticised: Some see vaccination itself as a matter of ideology and a very individual decision. This makes the exclusion of the unvaccinated an act of ideological purification. These people feel that by imposing mandatory vaccination at universities, only those who think alike will be admitted: they believe that critical voices and those who think differently will be banned from the university environment, and only the mainstream is accepted. According to these arguments, universities would then no longer be pluralistic, open to freedom of speech and opinion, or capable of discourse. Instead of engaging in a dialogue about civil liberties and the right to physical integrity, these uncomfortable topics are banned by excluding the unvaccinated.

In addition, critics argue that mandatory vaccination makes access to education more difficult, limiting the right to education. Universities, they claim, are sorting out those who do not blindly submit to politically motivated rules. In Indiana (USA), students filed a lawsuit against their university. They believed their right to personal autonomy and bodily integrity was being threatened because of the COVID-19 vaccination requirement, and also felt that the university was violating their right to refuse medical treatment. However, the court upheld the university's policy on the grounds, among others, that students have the option of either attending another university or availing themselves of religious and medical exemptions.

Data from Austria indicates that willingness to get vaccinated increases with one's level of education, and the vaccination rate among students and the rest of the WU community is accordingly high (over 90%). Any country with such a high vaccination rate would probably not need to take any further actions at all – except, perhaps, to make sure citizens get their booster vaccinations. With such a high vaccination rate, it is debatable whether it is even necessary to deny such a very small percentage of the community access to the university.

What speaks in favour of mandatory vaccination?

There are, however, convincing arguments that legitimise mandatory vaccination. After all, universities are scientific institutions. Scientists concur that vaccination is the best solution for combating the pandemic. Is it not, then, legitimate to ask whether those who reject all of the scientific arguments in favour of vaccination are a good fit for universities at all? It seems justified to expect that university employees, teachers, and prospective graduates demonstrate a certain level of reason and, above all, recognise the merit of scientific findings.

Especially during a pandemic, it is not individual motives and arguments that should count, but social responsibility. In their spirit of solidarity, each individual should make a contribution to society. The demand that personal freedom should not be restricted is often misinterpreted in the context of the pandemic. After all, freedom always goes hand in hand with great responsibility. If a segment of the population is not prepared to assume this responsibility – for example toward health care workers in hospitals, toward immunosuppressed people, or toward children who cannot yet protect themselves with a vaccination – then clear rules and, indeed, strict guidelines are needed. Because personal freedom ends where it puts other people at risk.

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During the pandemic, Austrian universities were given the legal option of requiring proof of a low epidemiological risk before admitting students to courses. Based on this regulation, WU allows access to people who are vaccinated, have recovered from a COVID-19 infection, or who can present a negative PCR test result. In Austria, PCR tests are conveniently available and free of charge. Since WU is one of the largest business universities in Europe with more than 21,000 students, and up to 15,000 students on campus every day, in ever-changing groups, the number of security staff had to be increased to enforce these entry requirements. Because universities cannot store health data due to very strict data protection guidelines in Austria, students were also unable to submit or upload their proof of vaccination in advance, which would have made enforcement easier. However, these entrance requirements have two unpleasant side effects: First, they are very expensive to enforce, and second, they result in long waiting times. Establishing a comprehensive access control system on the entire campus would have cost around €2.5 million (!) per semester – and even the random checks WU is carrying out based on student traffic patterns still cost more than €300,000 per semester. The risk of long waiting times and data protection considerations led to the idea of a “fast lane” for vaccinated and recovered students. Students (and employees) who were vaccinated or recovered, and had the





Mandatory vaccination as an exit strategy

The pandemic does not seem to be over yet. Mutations of the virus and the need for booster vaccinations will probably stay with us for some time. Lockdowns and social distancing are not adequate solutions for dealing with COVID-19. With regard to universities, as well, when weighing both options – to open universities only for the vaccinated/recovered or for everyone, but with entry requirements – vaccination offers a clear advantage. Not only from a solidarity perspective, but also from the point of view of economic efficiency, mandatory vaccination for all, including the members of the university community, is the order of the day. Unfortunately, in many countries, it is currently left up to individual institutions to require vaccination. When they do, they are often confronted with intense, aggressive reactions, sometimes even from within their own ranks – because, as has been shown, not even universities are ideology-free zones.

As scientific institutions, however, universities rely on research results – for this reason alone, mandatory vaccinations for all should be demanded insistently, and subsequently implemented at all universities. Requiring mandatory vaccination certainly requires political courage, but legally there is no objection, experts believe. This was also demonstrated by lawsuits brought before the European Court of Justice long before the pandemic, all of which were rejected. In any case, the pandemic and the accompanying discussion about vaccinations have taught us one thing: There is an urgent need for courageous and, above all, science-based decisions. Universities are therefore called upon both to act as a voice of reason and to be role models.



corresponding certificate that was valid beyond the duration of the winter semester, could voluntarily obtain a tamper-proof fast-lane sticker for their student or employee ID. Thanks to this solution, a quick glance at the ID card with a photo was all that was needed to fulfil the entry requirement. As a result, students were able to move on more quickly and fewer security staff were needed. This voluntary service was generally very well received, although it was not uncontroversial, because a small right-wing populist group within the Austrian Students' Union saw it as a way to publicly mark the unvaccinated and create division among the student body. The protests soon died down, however. The infection situation in Austria became very difficult over the course of the fall, with numbers increasing fast. Despite this, WU recorded hardly any infections, and there were no clusters that could be traced back to the university. Mandatory vaccinations would allow universities to save on these expenses.



About the Author

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