

Against the Closure and Unaffordability of Austrian Cafeterias

The increasing financial pressure on students across Austria, exacerbated by inflation, rising costs of living, and the closures of campus cafeterias, have left many without affordable and/or healthy dining options. Access to reasonably priced meals is essential for the well-being and academic success of students, yet the current state of the cafeteria system in Austrian higher education is failing its primary users.

Recent closures of cafeteria locations in Innsbruck and Graz highlight the systemic issues plaguing the Austrian Mensen GmbH, which is responsible for operating campus dining facilities. Instead of serving as a cost-effective option for students, these facilities are becoming increasingly inaccessible due to profit-driven practices. The absence of affordable dining options forces many students to rely on fast food or supermarket meals, undermining their nutrition and financial stability.

At the same time, the increasing number of cafeteria closures at higher education institutions also significantly reduces essential student spaces. Cafeterias are integral to student culture, serving as vital social and communal spaces that foster interaction, collaboration, and a sense of belonging within the student community, offering welcoming environments for students to connect, share ideas, and form support networks. For marginalized or international students, these spaces play a crucial role in easing social integration. Their closure exacerbates isolation, fragments campus life, and undermines the quality of the overall student experience, harming students on a social dimension as well.

The cost of meals in Austrian campus cafeterias is significantly higher than in neighboring European countries. While students in Finland, Belgium and Germany enjoy subsidized or capped meal prices, Austrian students are left to contend with escalating costs. The Österreichische Hochschüler_innenschaft (ÖH) has called attention to this disparity, advocating for price caps and financial support to make meals affordable.

The Austrian Mensen GmbH is fully owned by the Federal Ministry of Education, Science, and Research (BMBWF), which makes pricing, menu planning, and sustainability measures also a political decision – a decision-making process, which students are not included in. This lack of representation exacerbates dissatisfaction with cafeteria offerings, including inadequate portion sizes, limited options for vegan and vegetarian meals, and high prices and sparks the need for a restructuring of the organisation (especially to allow for student participation).

The closures of campus cafeterias are unacceptable and undermine the essential services students need. The European Students' Union supports the ÖH's demands to halt further closures and reopen closed facilities. The Austrian Federal Ministry for Education, Science and Research must implement price caps and subsidies to ensure that meals in campus cafeterias are affordable for all students. These measures should take inspiration from other European nations with other, more affordable and student-friendly cafeteria systems. Cafeteria management should adopt a democratic structure, with significant student representation in pricing, menu selection, and operational decisions. Campus cafeterias should prioritize environmentally friendly operations and expand vegan and vegetarian options to reflect diverse student needs. Efforts must be made to increase cafeteria capacity, extend operating hours, and open new locations to meet the demands of growing student cohorts. As the sole owner of the Mensen GmbH, the Austrian Federal Ministry for Education, Science and Research has a responsibility to prioritize student welfare over profit. What it needs is a full reorganisation of the cafeteria system in Austria to ensure that the Mensen GmbH fulfills its purpose as an affordable provider of student meals.

PROPOSERS: ÖH

SECONDERS: VSS-UNES-USU, UDU, fzs, FEF, USI, LÍS