Higher Education Reform in Vichteria

Vichteria[1] ratified the Revised European Social Charter on 30 March 2021, accepting all of its provisions. It has also accepted the 1995 Additional Protocol providing for a system of collective complaints. It has not yet made a declaration enabling national non-governmental organisations to lodge collective complaints. Vichteria has also been a member of the European Union since 2016.

National context

Since the Covid-19 crisis, Vichteria's public finances have been in a very precarious state. In recent years, the country has faced a succession of nationwide problems: natural disasters, collective redundancies and factory closures[2], shortages of certain raw materials, etc., which have only increased public spending and squeezed the room for manoeuvre on public revenue, ruling out any prospect of recovery in the short and medium term. At the same time, national Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has been stagnating for a long time, weighed down by rising raw material costs, falling household consumption (heavily affected by the rising cost of living and housing), an ageing population and high unemployment rates among young workers[3] as well as among so-called "senior" workers[4], among other factors. This situation has led successive governments to gradually cut public spending in all areas, particularly in the major budget items of social assistance, health, education and higher education. The deterioration of teaching conditions and of the support provided to students in public institutions led to a mobilisation of university teachers and students that was particularly massive and striking in the eyes of the Vichterian population. The length of the movement, and the tensions and violence arising from the blockades and demonstrations, split public opinion into two opposing camps, depending on whether people strongly supported the movement or were completely opposed to it.

The parliamentary elections of January 2025 were thus marked by this divide and brought the Common Sense Party to power, advocating a rapid and drastic restoration of the national public finances. With record public debt (around 130% of GDP) and a public deficit of around 6% of GDP, the Vichterian Government is under increasing pressure from the institutions and the other Member States of the European Union because of this excessive deficit. The Government and the majority of members of parliament, belonging to the coalition led by the Common Sense Party, therefore consider restoring the State's finances to be an absolute priority, since the burden of debt is worsening the country's financial and economic situation. Since its election, the Government has adopted numerous austerity measures and laws in record time, thanks to its large majority in the Assembly, which has agreed to the use of every procedural tool available to the Government for shortening parliamentary debate.

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[1] "Vichteria" is merely the name of a fictional State. There is no connection between the fictional cases of different editions of the moot court competition.

[2] The industrial production, banking and public administration sectors have been particularly affected as a result of labour cost reductions in favour of automation and the use of artificial intelligence tools.

[3] The unemployment rate among 16-25 year old is close to 30% of economically active young people.

[4] The unemployment rate among those over 55 is close to 15%.

The reform of public higher education

Among the laws aimed at urgently reducing public spending, Act No. 2025/25 on Safeguarding the Quality of Public Higher Education was adopted on 15 February 2025 and implemented from the start of the 2025-2026 academic year.

Its main changes are as follows:

- **Drastic cut in the number of places** offered by universities and public higher education institutions, of around 30%. The number of first-year places has thus fallen from 500,000 to 350,000. This figure does not absorb the number of prospective new entrants to public higher education, which is around 450,000 each year, not counting requests from other students wishing to change course, or foreign students wishing to enrol.
- **Territorial redistribution of the course offer**: general academic degree programmes are now offered only in the country's two largest cities. Technical and vocational programmes, by contrast, are offered throughout the country. In order to train students as closely as possible to labour market needs, the courses offered in each region are now decided by local bodies in which representatives of local businesses hold a majority of seats.
- **Higher tuition fees** and differentiated fees for foreign students who are not EU citizens. Annual tuition fees at a public university for a national or EU citizen rise from 500 euros to 5,000 euros. Foreign students from outside the European Union must now pay 8,000 euros. The higher fee also applies to nationals of non-EU States Parties to the Charter who are lawfully resident in Vichteria. Grant eligibility does not depend on nationality.
- **Fewer education grants** and stricter renewal conditions. Students whose assessed household income falls below the national poverty line (60% of median living standard in Vichteria) are eligible to apply for a State grant (consisting of exemption from enrolment fees and free access to student housing). Previously, the grant was awarded automatically once the income criteria alone were met. From now on, the total number of grants available in each academic year, including renewals, is capped at 50,000. Where there are more eligible applications than grants, an algorithmic platform helps select the beneficiaries by producing a ranking based on predicted academic success, the applicant's cover letter and socioeconomic circumstances. The predicted probability of success carries the greatest weight.
- **More effective and efficient public spending** through the use of algorithmic and artificial intelligence tools. Admission decisions to public institutions are assisted by the SUPWAY algorithmic platform. Support for decisions on awarding grants, as well as the monitoring of compliance with the conditions for award and renewal, are carried out through the SOLIDSUP algorithmic platform.
- **End of direct public subsidies to private higher education institutions**, and end of access to State grants for students enrolled in private institutions.

Through this reform, the Government hopes to save 10 billion euros a year, but also to improve the quality of the public education service and to guarantee better working conditions for teaching staff (higher salaries, lighter workload owing to the reduced number of students, etc.).

Despite protests, strikes and demonstrations by very large numbers of staff, higher education students and secondary school pupils, the law was applied in record time. **The consequences were immediate.** Official figures released by the Ministry of Higher Education show that, of

the 400,000 applications from prospective new entrants, resident in Vichteria, only 200,000 received offers. The remaining 150,000 first-year places were allocated to 110,000 students changing course and 40,000 students applying from abroad (EU and non-EU). Of the 350,000 offers made, 345,000 resulted in completed enrolments. Furthermore, according to a survey commissioned by student associations, 35% of new entrants reportedly accepted a place in a subject that was not their first choice, for fear of losing their place in public higher education.

In addition, many articles and opinion pieces have been published in the general and specialist press, as well as on social media, criticising the results of this round of admissions for their inconsistency and for the opacity of the SUPWAY algorithmic platform, which allocates and manages the flow of applications and responses. Numerous testimonies compare apparently similar applications that did not obtain the same outcome, or applications that were accepted despite appearing less deserving than others that were rejected. A widespread sense of unfairness is spreading among unsuccessful applicants and their families.

This feeling is all the stronger as documented accounts of students in economic hardship begin to circulate. Some students were unable to complete their enrolment because they could not obtain a grant, given the limited number available. Others, whose situation did not meet the eligibility criteria, began their studies but had to abandon them because they could no longer afford the cost of student life. Still others were forced to take full-time jobs to cover the costs and are struggling enormously to keep up with their course and the personal study it requires.

Strong criticism has therefore been voiced about the excessively small number of grants, but also about the lack of transparency of the SOLIDSUP algorithmic platform, which handles grant applications and checks the award criteria. Scandals have also erupted over SOLIDSUP's role in monitoring compliance with the criteria. Grant holders must provide evidence, at the end of each semester, that they are continuing their studies and of their results. The grant is conditional on the effective pursuit of studies (proven by sitting all examinations, unless absence is justified) and on a sufficient prospect of success (proven by an examination average of at least 4/10, compared with a pass mark of 5/10). From February 2026, some students saw their grant not renewed because of a document missing from the platform or an average below 4/10, without adjustment for the overall examination results or pass rate in the programme concerned.

Anonymised testimonies from State grant holders describe the heavy pressure they feel because of monitoring through SOLIDSUP. Communication takes place primarily through the platform, and students report considerable difficulty obtaining individual assistance with missing documents or exceptional circumstances. They also report disparaging remarks from some members of administrative and teaching staff, who suggest that students risk losing their grants if their marks or attendance are inadequate. There are even groups on social media criticising the grant system and its recipients in a hostile and defamatory manner. These students are portrayed there as 'privileged' and 'welfare dependent' who do not deserve to benefit from national solidarity.

As regards teaching staff in the public sector, the reform has in practice led to a reduction in their numbers. The Ministry of Higher Education required universities not to replace any retiring staff and introduced an incentive scheme for early retirement for teachers over 55. At the same time, the teachers still in post underwent a massive redeployment: where their subject was no longer taught at their institution, they were offered the choice of continuing to teach in their field of expertise at another institution, or remaining at their institution but teaching

subjects lacking specialist teachers. These career changes were painful for many, particularly in the humanities and social sciences, which are mainly taught in the country's two largest cities and where the number of posts was limited. The first assessments published by the Ministry of Higher Education show that the number of teacher-researchers in post has fallen from 30,000 to 20,000. 7,500 teachers have retired or taken early retirement, and 2,500 chose to resign, more or less under pressure. Of the remaining 20,000, 15,000 continue to teach in their field of specialisation, and 5,000 have had to switch to new subjects. Of the remaining 20,000, around 50% have had to move to a different city. Occupational surveys paint an alarming picture of teachers' mental health and of psychosocial risks. 30% of teachers (whether departing or remaining) show symptoms of severe depression, and 255 suicide attempts have been recorded. The doctors and psychologists employed by universities are too few to see all the colleagues who ask for help. Teachers are forced to turn to doctors and psychologists in private practice, who are in severely short supply in several Vichterian regions. Waiting times for an appointment regularly reach one month for a general practitioner, four months for a psychologist and more than eight months for a psychiatrist. No additional resources were allocated to university occupational-health services before the redeployment, and no sector-wide assessment of its psychosocial risks was undertaken.

Finally, the private sector has also undergone major changes. The number of first-year enrolments in private institutions, including students changing course and students from abroad, has jumped from 200,000 to 275,000. It is expected to rise further in the coming years owing to the growing number of new entrants. The sector has expanded rapidly, with the creation of many new institutions and the opening of new programmes. It has also recruited heavily, but has faced a shortage of graduates in certain subjects, which has led to lower recruitment requirements. More generally, the very rapid growth of the sector has produced wide disparities between institutions in the quality and content of teaching, in enrolment costs, and in the recognition of their degrees. The State has accredited some of these institutions' new degrees and others are in the process of accreditation, but the procedure is slow because the Ministry department responsible for it and for the related checks is overwhelmed. At the start of the 2025-2026 academic year, only 20% of programmes offered by private institutions were accredited. For the 2026-2027 academic year, the Ministry announced an increase to 30%. Institutions may enrol students while accreditation is pending, but must disclose that status; an unaccredited degree does not confer access to regulated professions in Vichteria. Annual private tuition fees generally exceed the public-sector fee of 5,000 euros. Apart from the recognition of degrees and the safety and health rules applicable to establishments open to the public, staff recruitment, fees and institutional policy choices are not regulated by the State. The offer is therefore highly uneven, and students and their families find it very difficult to identify reliable criteria for comparison other than price.

No comprehensive public study has yet been carried out on the impact of the reform on access to higher education, or on changes in its cost and quality. The Ministry has, however, published the total number of students enrolled in higher education institutions for 2025-2026: 1.945 million students in total (930,000 continuing students and 345,000 first-year students in public institutions; 670,000 in private institutions, including 275,000 in first year). For the previous year, 2024-2025, the total was 2.09 million (1.5 million in the public sector and 590,000 in the private sector).

Some opposition parties have released figures from unofficial sources, not yet officially acknowledged by the Government, according to which several tens of thousands of Vichterian students have left to enrol in programmes abroad, including in other European Union countries. In addition, a collection of testimonies carried out by an independent study suggests a plausible estimate of 50,000 to 80,000 secondary school graduates who gave up on higher education after an unsuccessful application on SUPWAY.

In the face of criticism, the Government defends its reform in its entirety.

It points out that such a reform was indispensable given the serious public finance crisis the country is going through. In its view, the reform has ensured the survival of a public service that the country could no longer have afforded had it continued to operate as in previous years. While aware of the sacrifice of personal aspirations that the reform may have entailed, it recalls that all public services are undergoing difficult reforms affecting the whole Vichterian population.

Regarding the situation of teacher-researchers, the Ministry recalled that the statute governing State employees expressly provides that their post may be abolished or modified by the State at any time in the general interest, and that financial assistance has been provided for staff who had to move house because of their reassignment. Staff required to change subjects were offered short retraining courses. Refusal of both reassignment options could lead to termination under the ordinary rules governing public employment. Universities were also instructed to refer staff experiencing difficulties to their occupational-health services; staff representatives dispute whether these measures were adequate.

Regarding the platforms, the Ministry states that SUPWAY merely directs the flow of applications according to criteria set by the institutions, and that applications are examined, and admission and rejection decisions taken, by the officials in charge of the relevant bodies. Furthermore, the algorithm's source code is available as open source on the Ministry's website. SOLIDSUP, likewise, merely automates the checking of the required information in order to facilitate the work of the officials handling grant applications and renewals. As to the criteria used to estimate grant applicants' probability of academic success, the Ministry acknowledges that this score is calculated by an artificial intelligence tool, considered more reliable and objective than officials who are inevitably subject to cognitive, social and cultural biases. It further points out that, here again, the final decision is taken by a human being, and that the probability of success is only one of the decision criteria, alongside the applicant's cover letter and economic and social situation. Applicants may request reasons and seek human reconsideration of admission or grant decisions within 30 days, including by supplying missing documents or evidence of exceptional circumstances. The Ministry states that these safeguards allow errors to be corrected; student associations report delays that can leave students without a place or financial support when teaching begins.

Regarding the courses offered by private institutions, the Ministry gives assurances that monitoring of the content and quality of programmes is under way and gathering pace through the accreditation procedures. It maintains that, once the new course offer has stabilised, experience will lead students and their families to turn away from less serious programmes, leaving only reliable institutions.

Finally, the Ministry says it is aware of the difficulties faced by the most disadvantaged students and states that it is working on new regulations to encourage the sponsorship of students by companies and foundations, which should make up for the number of State grants, should it prove insufficient, and also make up for the abolition of grants for students enrolled in private institutions.

Alerted and supported by local Vichterian associations, **the international non-governmental organisation HEY – Higher Education for our Youth[5] lodged a collective complaint on 1st November 2026** with the European Committee of Social Rights. It considers that the reform and its implementation constitute a violation of Articles 1§2, 3§4, 10§1, 10§5 and 30 of the Revised European Social Charter, as well as of Article E read in conjunction with each of these articles.

In parallel, the Vichterian Government has appointed a team of social rights experts to represent it before the European Committee of Social Rights.

[5] The organisation holds participatory status with the Council of Europe, is included on the special list maintained by the Governmental Committee, and specialises in issues relating to young people and their access to education and training.