A Brief History of ISTA

The idea to establish a new top-level research institute was first presented by the later Nobel Prize–winning physicist Anton Zeilinger at the European Forum Alpbach in August 2002. The City of Vienna. under its [Social-democratic] mayor Michael Häupl. supported the project from a very early stage and sponsored a feasibility study in 2004. During its preparation, the concept received strong backing during a workshop with renown scientists including several Nobel laureates and heads of internationally successful universities and research institutions. The consensus of the workshop was that, unlike the Max Planck system, Austria should have an institute in one location that should award its own PhD degrees. Moreover, Zeilinger succeeded in gaining the backing of leading figures in Austrian industry, which in turn helped convince the Austrian federal government under Chancellor Wolfgang Schüssel.

The basic idea – to establish a new research institute in Central Europe with highest standards to attract excellent scientists – harmonized with the general optimistic spirit of the early 2000s: the EU's eastern expansion opened new opportunities, national borders lost significance, and the economy prospered until the 2008 financial crisis. In Europe, there were debates about the growing importance of research for economic and societal development, and about the necessity to remain attractive in the global competition for the best brains and to bring European researchers from the USA back to Europe. Many countries (e.g., Germany) launched "Excellence Initiatives," and the EU founded the European Research Council (ERC). In this environment, supporters of the project expected a surge of innovation and modernization that would strengthen Austria's attractiveness as a research location and would serve as a model of best practice for Austrian universities.

On the national level, Zeilinger's proposal triggered the most intense public debate on research policy in Austria so far in this century. Many representatives of Austrian universities opposed the project because of the worries about funding being diverted to the new institute. Resistance also came from the provinces, which opposed concentrating resources in Vienna. In 2005, the Austrian federal government decided to hold a competition for best candidate sites and for pushing up financial support from federal states. One of the offers came from Erwin Pröll, governor of Lower Austria, who strongly pushed for the site of a soon-to-be-closed psychiatric hospital in Maria Gugging (part of Klosterneuburg). The offer also included very generous financial support. During the process, the political authorities altered the evaluation criteria in a way that favored this site over Vienna.

While members of the scientific community called for more time to reach a consensus, politicians pushed for a quick decision in favor of Lower Austria. This led Zeilinger and other scientific promoters of the project to withdraw. The media and the political opposition responded with ridicule and criticism, and few believed the project would succeed. To make matters worse, the first draft of the founding law prescribed strict political control over the Institute. In March 2006, the Federation of Austrian Industries — in agreement with the government and the scientists around Zeilinger — commissioned physicist Haim Harari to prepare a position paper for the Institute's establishment.

As long-time president of Israel's Weizmann Institute of Science, Harari brought relevant experience. He had already spent considerable time in Austria and had been active on major evaluation panels for basic and applied research funding. Harari managed to take the discussion out of nationalistic contention. While the site was no longer up for debate, he persuaded politicians that ISTA could only succeed if it enjoyed complete autonomy in academic and personnel matters. Together with Olaf Kübler (former president of ETH Zurich) and Hubert Markl (former president of the Max Planck Society), Harari formed the "International Committee," which outlined the guiding principles for the Institute's future development in a report. The starting point was Harari's "Ten Commandments," that stated that the institute should be:

- dedicated to basic research;
- cover many fields of the natural and exact sciences in one campus;
- choose its professors on the basis of their personal quality, rather than a pre-determined list of scientific fields;

- emphasize a multidisciplinary approach;
- have a graduate school and award its own PhD degrees, but have no undergraduates;
- be financed by diversified sources of income;
- exploit its intellectual property, whenever possible;
- collaborate with other Austrian and international research institutions;
- communicate with the public and contribute to science education.

The ISTA Act and the funding agreement between the Republic of Austria and the State of Lower Austria were adopted in May 2006. They guaranteed the Institute broad autonomy and long-term financial stability. The law contained few details, thus offering great flexibility in design and governance. The Weizmann Institute of Science served as the main model. Successful and proven concepts from leading US universities, the ETH system, and research centers such as the Max Planck Institutes were also implemented and adapted to the Austrian context. As a result, structures and processes innovative by Austrian and European standards could be implemented. These included a tenure-track career model allowing early independence, a graduate school providing comprehensive — rather than narrowly specialized — training, and incentives for interdisciplinary collaboration through programs, architecture, funding mechanisms, and events. The size of PI-led research groups was limited to fifteen people, and scientific equipment and technological expertise pooled in scientific service units. Disciplinary divisions were avoided to encourage a free exchange between research areas.

The Institute's Board of Trustees, chaired by industrialist Claus Raidl, was formed the same year, and Harari remained the driving force as Chair of the executive committee during the early development phase. After the last patients were relocated, many of the old buildings were demolished or renovated, and new ones were constructed. A memorial was erected that commemorates the crimes during the Nazi era in Austria from 1938 to 1945, when thousands of mentally ill patients were killed or deported from the clinic to extermination centers.

The new campus was officially opened in June 2009. At the same time, internal rules and procedures were established, and the search for the first scientists began. While local politicians liked to call it an "elite university," for international researchers it was a "no-name" institute. It was attractive to some because it combined the best of both worlds: little teaching responsibility due to the absence of undergraduates, but talented PhD students from around the globe eager to work with them. Evolutionary biologist and geneticist Nick Barton became the first professor in 2008, and computer scientist Tom Henzinger took office as the first president in 2009.

Since then, the institute has grown steadily, as has a range of research fields. Its hiring policy has consistently followed the principles "quality before speed" and "person before area." Calls for applications were open to all natural sciences and mathematics; even when thematic focuses were later introduced, no professorships were tied to specific sub-fields. The order in which research areas were added was therefore opportunity-driven: in the beginning with computer science and evolutionary and developmental biology; later came neuroscience, mathematics, physics, biochemistry, chemistry, materials science, earth sciences and, most recently, astronomy and astrophysics.

At the same time, the PhD program developed further: the first graduation ceremony was held in 2012. While the Institute maintained a unified, interdisciplinary training model, the introduction of tracks allowed for cautious diversification. For several years now, master's degrees can also be earned en-route to the PhD.

After the first patent applications in 2013, technology transfer activities grew quickly. Under the joint brand XISTA, the Institute now operates a subsidiary supporting researchers in knowledge transfer, a technology park for science-based start-ups, and funds for financing such ventures.

Outreach efforts began early as well. The annual Open Campus Day has been held since the campus opening in 2009; the first Summer Campus for schoolchildren took place in 2014. In subsequent years, additional formats

were launched. Even before the opening of the VISTA Science Experience Center in 2025, the Institute offered numerous science communication activities.

Internationally, networking and recognition followed. On ISTA's initiative, the BRIDGE Network was founded, bringing together peer institutions including the Weizmann Institute of Science (Israel), OIST (Japan), Rockefeller University (USA), and the Crick Institute (UK). International evaluations in 2011, 2015, and 2019 consistently attested to the Institute's outstanding performance. In 2019, *Nature* magazine — for the first and so far only time — published a "normalized" index to measure research quality independently of institutional size. In this ranking, ISTA placed third worldwide.

Within Austria, the harsh criticism of the founding phase has long subsided. Federal President Alexander Van der Bellen, who in 2006 had called the planned institute a "shattered mess," referred to it in 2019 as an "Austrian miracle." Molecular biologist Martin Hetzer succeeded Henzinger as president in 2023. He continued to lead the Institute on an expansionary path and introduced a broader management structure. Positive evaluations formed the basis for policy decisions securing the Institute's long-term funding and allowing for further growth through 2036.