

Strategy for Life-Accompanying Learning in Austria

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Abstract: A comprehensive “Strategy for Life-Accompanying Learning” was developed in Austria and will continue until 2020. Since the strategy’s objectives are formulated in a very concrete way, it will be able to verify whether they have been reached. Prior to the publication of this strategy, a process of discussion with a broad base of participants had gone on for a couple of years. Practice will show to what extent the strategy can be implemented.

Key words: Life-Accompanying Learning, strategy in Austria, perspective 2020.

1 The national significance of the strategy

In a process of discussion that lasted several years, a national “Strategy for Life-Accompanying Learning” was developed in Austria. This process rested on a very broad base: the experts in educational policy as well as the scientists and educational practitioners were involved. The significance ascribed to the result of the process emerges from the fact that it was presented to the public on 5 July 2011 by the Austrian Federal Minister of Education together with the Ministers of Science and Research; Labour and Social Affairs; and Economy, Family and Youth.

2 Characterisation of the strategy

“LLL: 2020” is a short title of the strategy. It implies that the strategy will continue until 2020. The brochure “*Strategie zum lebensbegleitenden Lernen in Österreich*” (Vienna, 2011) gives a very clear overview of and detailed information on the entire strategy. One sentence in the foreword to the brochure reads as follows: “The Austrian strategy for life-accompanying learning ‘LLL: 2020’ links different areas of politics to one common objective for the first time, and as a result they strengthen each other reciprocally.” This sentence also emphasizes what is unique here in Austria: one does not speak of “lifelong” but rather of “life-accompanying” learning. The much softer word “life-accompanying” is substituted for the word “lifelong”, which is often perceived as a threatening concept. Practice will show whether there is more to this than merely a semantic difference. A very important message of the brochure is that life-accompanying learning is a national and political concern that fits into a European perspective. Again, practice will show if this is more than just a mere declaration.

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For nearly two decades, life-accompanying learning has not been equated with adult education; instead, it has been understood to refer to different age groups – practically “from the cradle to the grave”. What is new about this strategy is the fact that it has been designed for a clearly structured and precisely determined period of time. It contains clearly stated objectives that arose from international comparisons. It can be verified whether the objectives have been reached since they are phrased very specifically and in many cases they are quantifiable. The entire strategy is linked to a financial prospect. According to the OECD indicator, expenses for education should be increased from 5.4 percent of the gross domestic product in 2007 to 6 percent in 2020.

3 Objectives

In detail, the objectives are as follows:

- To pass a federal law providing guidelines for kindergartens by 2014.
- To halve the share of high-risk pupils in reading from 28 to 14 percent.
- To reduce school and training drop-outs from 8.7 to 6 percent.
- To increase the percentage of apprentices who complete their vocational matriculation examination from 2 to 10 percent.
- To increase the quota of gainfully employed people between the ages of 55 and 64 from 41.1 to at least 50 percent.
- To increase the quota of participants in non-formal continuing education in sparsely populated areas from 35.7 to at least 45 percent.
- To increase the percentage of people between the ages of 30 to 34 who have completed a university degree to 38 percent.
- To increase participation in continuing education compared to the European LLL structural indicator from 13.7 to 20 percent.
- To establish quality standards for educational offerings and instructors' qualifications in the post-employment educational phase by 2015.
- To implement the National Qualifications Framework (NQR in German) by 2012 and a validation strategy for recognising non-formal and informal learning by 2015.

4 Structure of the strategy

The presented strategy document is comprehensively structured and contains four basic principles, five guidelines, ten action lines, as well as “the eight key competences for lifelong learning” as a continuous reference point. All follow the recommendation of the European Council and the European Parliament.

4.1 Basic principles

The four basic principles are as follows:

1. Gender and diversity. This means learning to act in a gender-sensitive way and implementing these actions as well as perceiving and exploiting the potentials of diversity.
2. Equal opportunities and social mobility. This means the permeability of the education system and the promotion of equal opportunities.
3. Quality and sustainability. This primarily refers to the professionalisation of teaching staff and evidence-based policy.
4. Efficiency and innovation. This includes safeguarding the efficiency of the education system and its timely restructuring.

4.2 Guidelines

The five guidelines are as follows:

1. Life phase orientation. Enable educational processes that do not depend on age and are suitable for different age groups.
2. Putting the learners in the centre. Connect different learning locations, develop new learning architectures and new teaching and learning forms, make learning more flexible and develop the role of instructors.
3. Life Long Guidance. Provide comprehensive support for learners, improve and expand counselling and professionalise consultants.
4. Competence orientation. Assure transparency and comparability of qualifications, develop competence portfolio instruments and recognise informal knowledge and competences.
5. Promoting the participation in LLL. Strengthen the motivation for and joy of learning and education, incentive and promotion measures.

4.3 Action lines

The ten action lines range from “strengthen pre-school education as a long-term basic requirement” of every strategy to “enhance quality of life through education in the post-employment life phase” and create “procedures for the recognition of non-formally and informally acquired knowledge and competences in all educational sectors”.

4.4 Key competences

The eight key competences include:

- Native language competence.
- Foreign language competence.
- Mathematical competence and fundamental natural science and technical competence.
- Computer competence.
- Learning competence.
- Interpersonal, intercultural and social competence as well as civic competence.
- Entrepreneurial competence.
- Cultural competence.

Achievement of objectives

Objectives and measures that are as concrete as possible about all aspects have been phrased in great detail, thus averting the danger of creating “strategy papers” that become lost in platitudes and buzzwords. A whole bundle of measures was determined for implementing this comprehensive and very complex strategy. One measure includes annual monitoring in order to determine the level of implementation and success. An annual report to the Council of Ministers is also planned; it will present the state of implementation and identify any deviations.

Critical remarks

This strategy, which has been presented here in excerpts, is a novelty in Austria. It indicates that the education policy has taken a great step forward. However, there is also criticism. It can be established that there is no or too little reference to concrete educational and learning *content*. What has largely been omitted is the area of a political education that can be understood broadly, for example. One also has to critically remark that due to the frequent quantification of objectives there is the danger of introducing a “quantity over quality ideology” to the educational landscape.

Perspective

On the whole, the education policy in Austria has taken a great step forward with the “Strategy for Life-Accompanying Learning”. Concrete results will depend strongly on the political implementation of the strategy and on the financing of its implementation. However, it will also require making as many people as possible who are working in education aware of this strategy and anchoring it sustainably in order to motivate people to act accordingly. Only a few days after the presentation of the strategy, a first step was taken in this direction. The Austrian Federal Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture published a paper entitled “*LLL-Strategie in Österreich – Praktische Überlegungen zur Entwicklung und Umsetzung*” (“LLL Strategy in Austria – Practical Reflections on its Development and Implementation”, Vienna 2010) in its publication series “*Materialien zur Erwachsenenbildung*”, issue 2/2010. It is very likely that this publication will be followed by many related events and discussions which all aim at influencing the practical actions of as many people as possible in the spirit of the strategy.

Literature

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