

Austrian Teacher Education System

Teacher Education in Austria

There is wide-spread agreement throughout Europe on the needs for change in the educational landscape. Keywords like "a Europe of knowledge" and "lifelong learning" are ubiquitous and form recurring motifs in most papers on educational policies.

The Austrian government has reacted on these demands and challenges on various levels. On the one hand, school laws have enabled schools to work within a more autonomous framework, the curricula for compulsory schools and those leading to A-level have been redesigned (put into operation in 1999 and 2000 respectively), and laws have been passed that regulate the integration of pupils with special educational needs into mainstream schooling (*SchOG (Schulorganisationsgesetz) 15th amendment, 1993; and SchOG 17th amendment, 1997*). On the other hand, teacher training is being redesigned and developed across the country since the pertaining laws were passed in 1997 (*UStG: Universitätsstudien-gesetz*) and in 1999 (*AStG: Akademien-Studiengesetz*) respectively.

1. The structure and programmes of initial teacher education

At the moment we are going through a phase of transition where established practices and regulations are being critically assessed and challenged, thereby losing their unquestioned and mandatory status. What seems unquestioned, however, is the division of teacher training into two main strands according to the type of school where the trainee will eventually work. Teachers who work in schools for 10-to-18-year-olds (Allgemeinbildende Höhere Schule) or in schools for 15-to-18-year-olds (Oberstufen-realgymnasium, Berufsbildende Höhere Schule) with A-level qualification as a school leaving certificate and schools offering an intermediary professional qualification (Mittlere Höhere Schulen) are trained at the university. Those who teach pupils aged 6 to 10 or 11 to 15 (Volksschule, Hauptschule und Polytechnische Schule) are trained at teacher training colleges (Pädagogische Akademien).

Whereas the first group of teachers goes through a 4,5 or 5-year programme with strong emphasis on academic subjects and ending with a first degree (e.g. Mag. phil.) at university level, the second group does a three-year programme, which is much less academic and strongly practice-oriented and leads to a teacher diploma, but not to an academic degree. After the present transition period, however, these programmes will also be degree courses on a higher education level lasting 3 or 4 years.

It needs to be stated here that nursery school teachers are still trained in the upper-secondary sector. At the moment, no changes are imminent in this area. The status quo has been well described by Buchberger and Seel 1999 (2.1, Figure 1: Systems of ITE).

1.1. Teacher education at teacher training colleges

Although it is extremely difficult to give a lucid picture of teacher training at this point of transition, we will attempt a description that contains elements of past practices and others that will emerge in the (near) future. It makes sense to first look at the legal framework, which came into operation on 1 September 1999 and regulates Initial Teacher Training at Austrian teacher training colleges (compulsory schooling).

We need to keep in mind that by 2007 the status of these Colleges will have changed and they will be constituted as "Hochschulen für pädagogische Berufe" (a provisional title not yet agreed on). This means that they will be institutions of higher education with university-like status and degree-conferring power, a stronger focus on (practical) research and a great degree of autonomy.

In the course of the next seven years the colleges will have to redesign their training programmes and develop their own and indistinguishable profiles. It could well be that in 2007 there will not be four-

teen "Pädagogische Hochschulen" (the present number of colleges), but any lower number. This process of nation-wide institutional development will be monitored by a newly installed "Evaluation and Planning Committee" (*AStG* 1999, §2) and decisions will be taken by the Minister of Education on the advice of that committee.

The legal framework defines the limits of desired autonomous change and development (*AStO 2000: Akademien-Studienordnung*).

- The first limitation is the fact that training programmes have to consist of 164 units (lectures, seminars, tutorials, etc.). This means an average of 27 teaching units per student per week. This figure of 164 units has been taken over into the new framework without change. It can be suspected that this did not happen on the basis of needs assessment or a general policy, nor on well-founded pedagogical thinking, but rather on account of pressure from the teachers' union, who want to preserve the teaching jobs as they are now. These limitations based on realpolitik severely curtail any educational visions that might exist.
- Another legal stipulation includes a degree of freedom within a clearly fixed low and high point. The total of 164 teaching units has to be allocated to four areas:
 - The humanities 25-45
 - Subjects and didactics 65-80
 - Additional courses 10-30
 - School practice 25-30
- The third legally fixed point is the number of ECTS credits to be obtained in the course of the programme. The law prescribes an exceedingly high number of 100 credits with examination status. Efforts have been made to reduce this number by bundling exams and the introduction of other corollary measures.

Within the new legal framework and the restrictions outlined there, the individual institutions will be in a position to make autonomous decisions with regard to the programmes they offer and the way they design these programmes. It has to be pointed out, however, that executive power does not rest with the top executives of the College (Principal and Director of Studies), but with the Study Commission (*Studienkommission*) consisting of 6 members of staff, 3 student representatives and 1 member of the regional education authority (the Principal and the Director of Studies having only advisory functions). The study commission is also responsible for designing tools for quality assurance and evaluation of courses and examinations.

At the moment there is a remarkable diversity of autonomous solutions and regulations at teacher training colleges throughout Austria. The number of final oral exams, for instance, ranges from 3 to 6, that of written finals from zero to 2; term-length varies from 15 to 17 weeks. Course attendance varies from no requirement to 75% and 100%. The proportion of self-access learning, autonomous learning, open and distance learning varies greatly.

It is these areas where institutions will gain their individual profiles and become distinguishable from each other. Throughout the teacher training colleges great efforts have been made by all different groups of staff to redesign programmes and incorporate the principles listed in the new law (cf. *AStG*, §5 and *AStO*, §8). Five points seem of special importance:

- Research, which used to be an appendix at teacher training colleges rather than a central activity of staff, will become an integral part of the teacher's profile in the future. Moreover, teaching at the teacher training college is to be connected with research and development in all fields related to teaching and learning.
- Study programmes need to be practice-oriented including the integration of practical experiences of students and teachers.

- The European dimension needs to be emphasized in teaching as well as through national and international mobility.
- Study programmes have to include creative and artistic components, which seems to signal a step towards more holistic approaches.
- There has to be some emphasis on modern communication and information technologies, which clearly includes the Internet as a learning and teaching resource as well as new settings like video conferencing.

1.2 Teacher education at universities

The new study law passed in 1997 (*Universitätsstudien-gesetz*) has opened up new directions for the design of studies at Austrian universities at large and teacher education in particular. Previously, studying at university level to become a teacher mainly meant to become a specialist in (mainly) two subject areas, based on the masters programmes in the respective scientific disciplines. Therefore, academic training in the disciplines of the chosen subject areas disconnected from the demands of school curricula used to dominate the teacher education study programmes. Only 15% of its total used to be dedicated to special didactics, pedagogy and school practica.

Although studies in the subject areas still remain dominant in the new curricular framework, the new study law opens up new perspectives for the future initial teacher education at university level, which are briefly characterised here.

- The study programme for ITE will be separate from the one leading to a degree in the academic discipline.
- A qualification profile for the teaching profession sets the standards for the curriculum development, giving clear objectives of societal expectations of a future teacher and informing employers of what they can expect.
- Representatives of the profession become part of the study commission to take the needs of the employer (i.e. the regional education authorities) into consideration.
- The academic training has to be built around the demands of school curricula by linking the hitherto isolated training elements, the didactical, the pedagogical and the school practical training into a holistic system.
- The first study year is built along a self-assessment concept which should provide students with sufficient authentic school experience to rethink the decision to become teachers.
- The academic requirements for the final exams leading to the master's degree are based on the practical requirements of the academic's future profession.

2. Steering and governance of ITE

2.1 Colleges of Teacher Education

Since 1 September, 1999, when the new Academy Study Law came into operation, the educational landscape has been restructured. The law itself and the decree connected with it (*AStO*: passed on 11 January, 2000) stipulate the framework within which autonomous decisions of the individual Colleges of Teacher Education are possible and necessary (see 1.1).

So it is the local study commissions that decide on the number of teaching units assigned to one of the four areas of study. Curricula are designed by the individual departments, but have to be decreed by the study commission of the teacher training college, which is also the body responsible for quality assurance and quality management. Respective measures are to be carried out in joint responsibility with the director of studies at the teacher training college.

Financial issues are decided on two levels. On a central level, the money available for all teacher training colleges is allotted to the individual institutions on the basis of a mutually agreed distribution

scheme. Whereas the overall budget is a central issue, the allotment is an autonomous procedure among the 14 Colleges of Teacher Education. All further financial decisions are taken locally with the restriction, however, that any new programmes must not cost more than the ones already in operation.

2.2. Universities

The changes outlined in 1.2 are being implemented at present by special study commissions dedicated to initial teacher education in the faculties where subjects for teaching in secondary schools are offered. The new study programmes have to become law by 1 October 2002 at the latest at all Austrian universities.

The qualification profile (see 1.2) is a strong steering device leading closer to fulfilling the demands of the professional challenges in the career of a teacher.

The new study law also includes the obligation that the study commissions have to evaluate teaching and learning in all courses offered. This is usually done by means of a standardised feedback scheme asking students to assess their university teachers' course delivery. Personnel management measures have been introduced as a support structure.

Moreover, each university department has to undergo a rigorous research evaluation both in teaching and research: All lectures or seminars are evaluated by the Dean of Studies, as is the research output of each department. These measures become an important steering device for the programmes offered in initial teacher education. Moreover, an evaluation of the suitability of university education for the demands of the schools will take place after every five years.

3. Induction

Austrian teacher training colleges base their programmes on the concurrent model, which provides professional and practical training of teachers at the same time as their general course (cf. *Key data on education in the European Union* 1996, p. 83). As teaching programmes include actual teaching from the second semester onwards, there is no need for an induction phase in the first year on the job or at any other time.

The teaching degree from the university does not yet fully qualify for definite employment. An additional induction phase as a probationer organised by the regional education authority leads to the very final requirements for becoming a fully qualified civil servant in the teaching force.

4. In-service education of teachers

In analogy to teacher education in Austria, INSET is also organised by two separate institutions, one catering for teachers of compulsory schools (6-15), the other for teachers of upper level secondary schools (15-18/19). Basically, INSET is regionally organised in every federal state in Austria, although there are nation-wide one-week seminars or seminars for participants of the eastern and the western provinces respectively.

INSET programmes are frequently organised as half-day or one-day seminars with an emphasis on new approaches, new methodologies, overviews on the latest developments in a given field of study, aspects of professionalisation and networking, learning techniques, to name the most important areas.

The offer is there, but participation is (still) voluntary. Teachers who are committed to life-long learning find it relatively easy to access these resources. On the other hand, there is no formal requirement for qualified teachers to undergo any additional training once they have their teaching diplomas.

In order to enable schools to run their own in-service training days the ministry has introduced a scheme which allows schools to use 5 days of their teaching time for such INSET activities. Only few schools, however, use all five days for that purpose!

5. Further education of teachers

The situation is different when we look at the further education of teachers in which they may acquire certificates and diplomas in addition to a basic certificate for teaching. This is an area where there is a clear overlap since the new legal situation created in 1999. While courses leading to new qualifications can now be offered at ITE institutions or at INSET institutions, the law requests the institutions involved to negotiate these programmes and make use of resources available and possible synergy effects. So there has been an important move away from competition towards co-operation and a bundling of resources.

Universities have only recently started offering post-graduate training programmes for formal degree options. Teachers who take up these new possibilities of post-graduate education can thus gain additional academic degrees.

6. Career prospects for teachers

Within the Austrian system of education, career prospects for teachers are slim. The main reason being that our hierarchical structures in schools are extremely flat. In practical terms this means that there are between 10 and 200 teachers plus one headmaster/director and at some types of schools also an administrator. This leads to an extremely slim executive level (1 or 2 posts) and the large and unstructured area of equally qualified teachers. A level comparable to that of middle management (head teachers, subject co-ordinators) is missing.

Career, then, is possible in three directions. First, a teacher can apply for a leading position at one of the schools, which means that he/she actually moves from teaching into school management and school administration. Second, a teacher can aim for tenure, which implies some career aspirations in the first phase as tenure is at least in some way connected with merits and performance. Third, the only proper career options for teachers are moves into teacher education either in ITE or INSET. Most often this is not a new post, but additional work on top of the teaching load, in other cases it may be part of it. Qualification is often acquired through years of "good practice" and, eventually, has to be proved on the open market.

A very small number of teachers gets the chance to move into institutionalised teacher training and get employment at a teacher training college or one of the practice schools attached to the college or university teacher training. A very good teaching record, a minimum of six years of teaching experience and some research papers are the basic requirements.

7. The role of higher education institutions in initial teacher education

ITE in Austria takes place at universities and at teacher training colleges, which are now being transformed into institutions of higher education according to the stipulations of the Academy Study Law of 1999.

After the three-year diploma courses at Colleges of Teacher Education, teachers are fully qualified and are then employed by the local or regional education authorities without any further induction phase. (For the universities see under 3. Induction.)

8. Recruiting

Generally recruiting is the business of the body that offers employment, which is the local or regional education authority. But whenever there is a special need or a new area that needs to be covered, then the INSET institutions, and in some cases also the ITE institutions, offer programmes for teachers to qualify in that area or even in a third subject. When a new area of learning is given priority by the Ministry of Education, the teachers can be required to get the necessary qualification through INSET programmes (e.g. English for primary school teachers).

9. Particular strengths of teacher education in Austria

In teacher education at the teacher training colleges practical aspects have high priority. The students are shown lessons on a regular basis in their first semester, and from the second semester onwards they teach and observe individual lessons regularly. In doing so, they are supported by an experienced teacher, who guides them through preparation and gives detailed feedback after the lesson taught. In addition to this team of two students and one teacher, there is a supervisor from the teacher training college, who frequently joins the lessons and also the feedback sessions afterwards. This hands-on approach leads the students carefully from simple teaching tasks into more complicated procedures and, eventually, totally independent and autonomous teaching. This system of teaching practice is generally seen as one of the strengths.

There is not much disagreement on the opinion that teacher education at teacher training colleges is generally less academic than that at universities. Whereas this might be considered a weakness by some people, there are also good reasons for viewing this as a strength. Theories need to be grounded in practice, they must be relevant to the reality of a primary or secondary school; subject teaching must offer analogies, give transfer possibilities, or broaden a student's subject knowledge in a relevant way. (It might not be all that purposeful to deal with James Joyce's *Ulysses* for a whole semester and write seminar papers on it, when later on that teacher will mainly deal with children's literature, mainly short stories and a few poems.) In this context "less academic" means more down to earth and oriented on the actual needs of the future teachers.

In university teacher education, a closer co-operation between universities and school authorities has created closer interconnections of theory and practice. This has led to various models of enhancing development, implementation and evaluation of innovative programmes. Recent developments in linking teacher training with school development and quality management can be seen as exemplary models.

On a nation-wide scale two year part-time courses in up-grading special didactic and educational competences by means of inquiry based training elements have had a strong impact on the Austrian training scene, as have the possibilities of environmental education in reconstructing initial teacher education.

10. Challenges

In their 1999 paper *Teacher Education in Austria: Description, Analysis, and Perspectives* Buchberger and Seel mention "new needs in teacher education" and they see wide agreement on the need of "transforming Colleges of Teacher Education from the post-secondary sector of the education system into the higher education sector" (Buchberger/Seel3). This process is well under way now, but it remains a challenge and will pose a number of knotty problems to be solved in the coming years. One of these is certainly that a certain number of staff "seems to hold rather low (formal) qualifications" (cf. Buchberger/Seel 3.2.1.e). Programmes to upgrade staff qualifications will need to be implemented on a large scale.

The second challenge is definitely the sharply increasing need for life-long learning in the teaching profession. The times when a teacher could be equipped with everything s/he needed for her/his teacher's life through ITE belong to the past. Rapid and drastic changes in our society, globalisation, challenging technologies will demand continuous learning on the part of the teachers as well as other professionals. We need to develop structures that make this kind of life-long learning easy to access and difficult to forego.

Nowadays, programmes at teacher training colleges are tightly structured and demand an extremely high degree of student time and actual attendance. There is not enough freedom to learn, nor is there enough choice. We need to relax here, develop alternative forms of instruction, open up ways of open and distance learning, and trade standards of high attendance against standards of high performance. This might imply a change from a three-year programme to a four-year programme without adding new modules (cf. Buchberger/Seel 3.2.1.b).

One of the hot spots at the teacher training colleges is definitely the area of the humanities. While the contribution of the humanities to teacher education is undisputed, the inner structure of the five disciplines involved needs to be improved. Quite often there is a lack of shared goals and an amount of redundancy we cannot afford in the long run.

When we claim that teachers must embrace the concept of life-long learning, we need to go further and demand that our institutions give up their static character and change into learning organisations. Teacher training as a whole will have to adapt to changing needs and demands, and this cannot happen fast enough in static and slow-moving institutions. The concept of change must be recharged with positive energy, and it must be applied to the life of teacher training institutions as well as to the people working there.

Quality management has become a new buzzword, but it will still take some time and great effort for all levels of course design, actual course work, and examination procedures to be fully included.

Whereas reflective teaching and action research have become mainstream methodological tools in a number of European countries, we have some experts in this field in Austria, but the large majority of practising teachers are catching on rather slowly and a great effort will be needed to change this situation.

This will be enhanced by a ministerial research commission which was installed in April 2000 working out further guidelines concerning a stronger research orientation at the teacher training colleges. First joint courses led by teachers from both teacher training colleges and university are promising starting points in this direction.

11. The European Dimension

The Erasmus programme has introduced student and staff mobility to teacher training colleges and universities on a comparatively large scale. Meanwhile, it has become institutionalised and turned into an important and attractive feature in teacher training. Due to ECTS, students can study abroad for a term and get their work recognised as part of their programmes at their home institutions.

As far as the learning of community languages is concerned, there have been significant changes in the primary sector in recent years. In a number of primary schools English is introduced as early as age 6, which from 2003/2004 will be prescribed by law. In addition, there is a possibility to learn French starting at age 8. Teacher training colleges have responded to this need. While English is integrated into the mainstream programmes, French is offered as an option in a number of teacher training colleges.

12. Strategic targets

1. Teacher training programmes are being redesigned and restructured both at universities and at teacher training colleges at present. One strategic aim is higher permeability and compatibility of the respective programmes. With regard to degree courses in initial teacher education this could mean closer co-operation in the area of school practice and in master programmes. First steps have been taken by the acknowledgement of the degree from a teacher training college as the first part of a university master's programme.
2. Similar to other countries, Austria is faced with the need for the training in information technology. This has also put some pressure on both institutions of teacher training in exploring and enhancing the possibilities that ICT offers to schools, teachers and pupils. Therefore, building the confidence of teachers in the useful possibilities of ICT is one of the strategic targets facing both initial and in-service teacher training. Apart from equipping all (future) teachers with the necessary skills, new study programmes for the qualification of special teachers in modern information technology are under discussion at university level.
3. Recent developments in the study of school effectiveness and international comparative tests have lead to a higher awareness in quality assurance and quality development. Almost all institutions in

the public sector have become strategic targets for the implementation of quality assurance programmes as already hinted at in 2.2. Teacher training institutions have not only become targets of evaluation procedures of some kind or other, but are also asked to incorporate the topic of quality development in their study programmes.

4. The restructuring of teacher education has affected all parts of teacher training – not only the initial training system. Thus the new laws for the development of new institutions of teacher training (cf. 1.1) asks for a merger of pre- and in-service training institutions. This has caused compatibility problems because of the fragmentation of the system so far: They had so far greatly existed apart from each other and built up their own client-oriented subsystems paying little attention to the other subsystems.

References

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