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**Schooling for Tomorrow
2nd International Forum
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Country Note *Austria*

A) A glimpse back

Until recently the Austrian school system showed most of the features outlined in the OECD “Future of Schooling” Scenario 1:

- a high degree of bureaucracy and legalism permeating all domains of educational decision-making,
- strong centralism and elaborate, prescriptive curricula,
- most teachers (except very young ones) holding tenure as civil servants,
- low priority for the reduction of the inequalities of educational opportunity.

This “bureaucratic robustness” - in itself not conducive to innovation - was exacerbated by the fact that any substantial change in the school system requires constitutional legislation that has to be passed by a two-thirds majority in parliament. Given that the relationship between the two major parties, the Social Democrats and the (conservative) People’s Party, for decades has been characterized by ideological polarisation and mistrust there was little common ground for shared visions, long-term planning and pro-active change.

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B) Current policy context

Over the past few years a number of developments have begun to challenge the status quo of the Austrian educational policy discourse and to introduce “the future” as a long-term frame of reference (indeed, the Ministry of Education has adopted the label “Das Zukunftsministerium” - “The Future Ministry”):

*** *The goals of the European Union and the year 2010***

The EU’s so-called Lisbon Declaration of March 2000 propagated a number of goals and benchmarks which the European school systems should reach by the year 2010. In December 2002 a national conference debated strategies, concepts and priorities for the implementation of the EU goals in Austria. In 2003 an “Actionplan for Education, Training and Youth” was formulated and the Taskforce “LLL:2010” was set up with the specific brief to develop Life Long Learning strategies up to the year 2010. Since then a series of expert groups have been working on a wide range of issues such as the upgrading of teachers competencies, the improvement of pupils’ literacy, numeracy and modern language skills, the widened utilization of ICT across the curriculum and the recognition of competences and skills acquired by learners individually and informally.

*** *The “Zukunftskommission”(“Future Commission”) and its report***

In spring 2003 the Minister of Education asked a group of four professors of education to prepare a report on the state of the Austrian school system which identified its strengths and weaknesses and proposed strategies for a comprehensive reform. The main recommendations

of the report which was presented to the public in October 2003 were the establishment of a national system of school monitoring and the setting of performance standards, initially for German, Mathematics and the modern languages. (More about this activity further down.)

*** *PISA 2000 and national “standards”***

The publication of the OECD’s PISA 2000 results got extraordinarily wide media coverage. The Ministry of Education and the experts of the “Zukunftskommission” used the raised public awareness of school quality, standards and assessment to shift the emphasis of educational quality assurance from the traditional input-regulation and teacher centredness towards output-orientation and standardized testing. In May 2004 the first experimental set of mathematics standards were presented to the teachers and to the public and from September 2004 one hundred schools will give these standards a trial run.

*** *The University Reform of 2002***

In 2002 Austria’s universities were turned into “autonomous”, public corporations with multi-year budgets and a new type of managerial governance. The civil servant status and tenure of university personnel were abolished. Evaluation and accountability have become central features of academic life. Many teachers see these changes as “the writing on the (school) wall”.

*** *The Upgrading of Pre-and In-Service Teacher Training***

By the year 2007 the transformation of the hitherto post-secondary but non-university teacher training academies into proper higher education institutions should be completed. It is expected that the “new identity” of these institutions will support the ongoing programmes to raise the professionalism of the teaching force. Especially among mathematics, science and modern language teachers networks of innovative teachers have developed in the wake of intensive in-service courses. A new career structure for teachers with better paid “posts-of-responsibility” is seen as one of several ways of activating the professional commitment of teachers.

*** *The “LEONIE”-Project***

Austria is participating in the EU-Socrates co-financed project “Learning in Europe-Observatory on National and International Evolution”. This 8-country-project which began in 2003 is carrying out two forecast studies, a top-down “Delphi Survey” and a bottom up “Weak Signals Survey”, with the ambitious goal “to identify major drivers of change in economy and society which affect the present and future development of education and training” and “to identify and develop a capacity to monitor the innovation processes taking place within education and training systems”. A seminar for researchers and educational decision makers will present the first findings in June 2004.

*** *The “Austria Convent”***

By the end of 2004 a parliamentary body of constitutional experts and politicians is expected to draft a new Austrian constitution. Among the probable recommendations might be a redistribution of educational decision making powers between the national level and the regional/local level, the abolition of the two-thirds parliamentary majority requirement for educational legislation, a new mode of school financing and the abolition of the present system of school inspection.

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C) A brief comment on the “Zukunftskommission” and its report

The Austrian “flagship” initiative of recent years was/is undoubtedly the “Future Commission” and its report. Initially the Minister of Education asked four professors

- to present a comprehensive analysis of the status quo of the Austrian school system;
- to identify “educational problem areas”;
- to (re)formulate system goals and quality standards;
- to develop a coherent set of strategies for the implementation of the proposed innovations and
- to describe concrete measures for change at system, school and classroom level.

The experts came forward with a bouquet of sweeping reform proposals. (They sidestepped however the controversial issues of early selection at the age of ten and the resulting social segregation and inequality.)

The “leitmotivs” of the report are “output-orientation”, “quality control” and “accountability”. The core innovations (which may be established practice in other OECD-countries, but which represent a radical break with the Austrian school tradition which leaves “output control” to the professional ethos and discretion of the individual teacher) are

- the establishment of a system of national monitoring of the school system’s performance and efficiency;
- the introduction of testable standards for the three critical points of transition in Austrian school careers (age 10 - end of primary school, age 14 - end of lower secondary education, age 18/19 - end of upper secondary education), and
- more accountability and personal responsibility of teachers for the quality of learning in classroom.

After a rather grand launching of the report it was made available to the public in hard copy and on the Internet web-site “klasse:schule”(an untranslatable German pun). The invitation to all stake-holders in education to express their opinions via emails to this web site partially compensated the criticism that the experts team did not include practitioners who would have contributed the perspective of practicability and implementation of the proposals. The adoption of elements of a “bottom up” approach (or at least the opportunity of the teachers and the wider public to air their views on envisaged or impending change) is a novelty in Austrian educational policy formation.

Presently (May 2004) the responses to the web-site (which has been closed) are being evaluated. Both the Ministry and the experts declared that the feedback would be taken into consideration for the final version of the report expected later this year.

All of these initiatives are work-in-progress with unpredictable outcomes. A ministerial task force titled “Schule 2010”(“School 2010”) will have to integrate them into a coherent set of long-term strategies. Considering the fundamental changes inherent in the OECD-“Future of Schooling” scenarios 2 to 6 the Austrian developments may look comparatively modest and incremental. Still, probably the greatest challenge will be to win the trust of the teaching force whose collective “feel-good-factor” does not seem to be very high at the moment due to a raising of the pension age and a general uncertainty about the consequences of quality control and standards for the teachers’ role. Many educational traditions, cherished beliefs and “self-evident truths” are being subject to unprecedented scrutiny as to their suitability for “tomorrow” with a heightened awareness of the quality, fairness and efficiency of the education system, not least with an eye on what other OECD member countries are doing.

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D) Relevant Austrian web-sites

- The Ministry of Education: www.bmbwk.gv.at and www.bildung.at
- The “Zukunftskommission”(“Future Commission”): www.klassezukunft.at
- The Austrian PISA Project Center: www.pisa-austria.at
- The school quality programme “Q.I.S.”: www.qis.at
- The Mathematics, Science and Technology Network: www.imst.uni-klu.ac.at
- The Modern Language Initiative: www.sprachen.ac.at
- The ICT-Network: www.eFit.at
- The LEONIE-Project: www.education-observatories.net/leonie/
- The Institute for Advanced Studies, Vienna: www.his.ac.at

