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International schools in Austria

The current choice of schools and its impact on the country's attractiveness as a business location

A mere glance at national education systems reveals their different structures and focuses. These issues are closely associated with the entitlements obtained by holders of formal qualifications. Both of these dimensions are especially relevant for children of the internationally mobile workforce in particular because they often face considerable difficulties when moving to another country, thus switching to another school and education system. On the one hand, their problems are related to the language of instruction, on the other to the question at what level they can change to which educational programme (and for which of their previous educational qualifications and successes from their country of origin they will be granted credits). This is also where the potential benefit of 'international' schools and 'international' qualifications can be found – not least also by enhancing the attractiveness of business locations¹ – as they can make changing schools between countries easier.

Education systems in an international comparison

Initial education and training systems often have a very different structure in an international comparison. Differences range from the typical age of children entering primary level, onto the structures of education systems at pre-school, primary and lower secondary level, to upper secondary level and the higher education (HE) sector. These segments differ between countries in terms of their duration, the number of available pathways/school types, their content (general vs. vocational) and finally in terms of interfaces and formal qualifications as well as entitlements associated with them.

The differences between education systems can be illustrated at a meta-level with the rough characteristics of the following three 'ideal types'.

- *The Anglo-American high school model*

The structure of the education systems under this heading is characterised by its focus on general education contents until almost the end of upper secondary level. In addition, the primary level is usually not structurally separated from the lower and upper secondary levels. Such systems lead to relatively high rates of holders of the higher education (HE) entrance qualification and therefore also of study beginners and HE graduates. Professional qualifications can mainly be obtained in a highly differentiated HE sector.

Due to historic developments, the British (and meanwhile also the American) education system has had and continues to have substantial international impact – particu-

larly in many non-European countries. Relevant examples include the USA, Canada, Great Britain, New Zealand, Hong Kong and Japan.

- *The qualification-oriented model*

This model is found in some countries of continental Europe. It is characterised by an early outward differentiation by school types as early as during the compulsory school period and by a high share of professional qualifications at upper secondary level (often also in the form of apprenticeship training). This additionally implies that the part that is overwhelmingly oriented to general education is clearly shorter than in the typical high school systems and represents only one of several possible education and training pathways at upper secondary level (such as the upper cycle of secondary academic school in Austria). This structure is frequently accompanied by relatively low rates of holders of the HE entrance qualification and therefore also of HE students and HE graduates. Relevant examples include Germany, Austria, Switzerland, the Czech Republic and the Netherlands.

- *The intermediary model*

In the international comparison it is also possible to identify a third model, which combines key elements of the educational structures of the two previously described ideal types and is therefore termed intermediary model or mixed model here. This model is found in countries where the compulsory school period with general education focus is structured without any outward differentiation into school forms/types. These countries' upper secondary levels have widely differing structures: as well as

countries which mainly offer general education pathways (such as Portugal, Greece, Ireland), there are also countries where professional qualifications are increasingly provided, in most cases in full-time school-based forms (for example France, Sweden, Italy).

As described above, these three models represent ‘ideal types’ along which it is possible to roughly characterise the respective national education systems². They also illustrate the fundamental problem of children/youths who (need to) switch between such systems as their parents move to another country and/or work there temporarily: The question is if there are any school types or education and training pathways at all which can be compared between the country of origin and the target country in terms of educational objectives, curricula, time structure and classification based on age/school year. Even school forms that can be considered as being similar based on external criteria can be non-comparable due to the education systems’ inherently different logic. And even where a certain similarity is found, the question arises of how easy or rather difficult it is to change school.

Even this comparison reveals that the possibility/lack of friction of a change of school will strongly depend on whether the child has attended or will attend a general-education school type. This point is of major relevance particularly for a change of school by pupils at upper secondary level.

The potential of ‘international’ schools must also be seen in this light and the major criterion is the question: in how many other countries will pupils find schools with a comparable content orientation, curriculum and qualifications? In general two statements/assessments can be made in this respect:

- Either the school is part of a network of schools (with a similar content orientation, curriculum and qualifications). Membership in such a network guarantees that pupils can switch between schools that belong to the network basically without experiencing any friction. IBO schools³ are a relevant example.
- And/or it is a school abroad. This is a school with the curriculum and qualifications of another country. Classic examples – also in terms of their global distribution – are US, ‘British’, but also French and German schools in other countries.

‘International’ qualifications

One major characteristic of formal qualifications is their integration into the respective national education system. Formal qualifications consequently have a primarily national orientation and/or the focus on the respective country. Based on the already mentioned differences in focus of national education systems, credits for formal qualifications can therefore be obtained often only to a limited degree when changing to a school in another country and thus to another education system, or holders of qualifications face difficulties before credits are awarded (and frequently based on bilateral agreements). According to common Austrian legal practice, for exam-

ple, the following applies: a certificate that proves completion of a US high school (a high school diploma) is usually not considered equivalent to an Austrian certificate of secondary education (*Reifeprüfungszeugnis*). This is also common practice in most other European countries.

Here ‘international’ qualifications prove their worth. It must be noted, however, that there is basically no clear-cut and generally applicable definition of the term ‘international qualification’.

A wide definition would simply imply that it is a national educational qualification which is recognised in many other countries based on the education systems’ similar basic structures. This allows a ‘smooth’ change of schools between the countries involved and the national qualification thus also acts as a *de facto* international qualification. A narrower definition of the term ‘international’ can be applied to those educational qualifications that have evolved simultaneously to national qualifications and are recognised both by national systems and in other countries. Such qualifications are oriented or based on a supranational prescribed standard. The two internationally most widespread such qualifications are awarded by the IBO (International Baccalaureate Organisation) and as part of the Advanced Placement Program (by the College Board).

To what extent do international qualifications promote the international mobility of the workforce?

Anticipating the outcomes of the next chapter it can be stated that the ‘international’ qualifications awarded in Austria most often relate to the level of *Reifeprüfung*. As these qualifications are recognised by a large number of countries (and HE institutions), holders acquire *de facto* worldwide access to the HE sector. The advantage of these qualifications is therefore their almost universal recognition⁴ – particularly for the Anglo-American higher education area and the HE systems with a relevant orientation (such as Australia, Hong Kong, etc.).

These international qualifications at *Reifeprüfung* level therefore play a role particularly for youths who want to continue their educational career by pursuing an HE pathway outside Austria, especially those who want to study at a non-European HE establishment. Consequently these qualifications probably constitute a major criterion on which internationally mobile researchers, experts and managers who have children with related future educational aspirations base their decisions for a specific business location.

Due to their nature, educational qualifications can only exert a **direct influence** on the options of further educational careers following successful completion of the previous educational level. Before that they have no direct relevance for making it easier for pupils to change school (between different countries and thus between education systems). Nevertheless a certain **indirect influence** is possible in that international qualifications signal a certain curricular orientation and the school’s adaptation to the

education system. It should consequently be easier and smoother for pupils to change to host schools which have a related orientation – although there is no general guarantee or entitlement for this. Rather, the effect of school networks as described above is relevant in this connection – which means a school is part of a (worldwide) network that gives an internal 'guarantee' that such a change of schools is possible.

Similarly different assessments must therefore also be made concerning the effect of qualifications as attractors for the business location, because this will depend on the age group of children of internationally mobile researchers, experts and managers.

'International' schools in Austria

Although there is no clear-cut and generally applicable definition of the term 'international school', a review of offers in Austria⁵ reveals that related schools are characterised by the following criteria:

- Non-German working language and/or language of instruction⁶ (mainly English as a *lingua franca*)
- Curricula and educational objectives are oriented towards an internationally specified standard or a 'foreign' curriculum
- Qualification based on an internationally prescribed standard (in addition to the Austrian qualification)

Based on this definition it is currently possible to list **nine schools across Austria** as international schools in the narrower sense (cf. the list below). The regional focus is on Vienna, where four schools are located. In addition, there are **another seven schools** in Austria whose curricula and educational objectives are oriented towards an internationally prescribed standard and/or which teach according to a 'foreign' curriculum. But **none** of these schools **offers an international qualification**.

In some cases the survey among these different schools revealed clear **differences between the school locations**. On the one hand, there are differences in the level and depth of the school programmes' international orientation. This relates to aspects such as the importance of English as a language of instruction (bilingual models versus English as the only language of instruction), the orientation of the educational structure towards an Anglo-American high school curriculum, and the (additional) offer for pupils to acquire an internationally recognised qualification. On the other hand, the survey also showed marked differences in the schools' forms of organisation. These differences are mainly that school providers are either private or public, which results in different funding options and requirements (which not least has an effect on the amount of school fees to be borne by parents), as well as specifications and scopes of freedom granted by the public school administration in teacher recruitment (and their formal qualification requirements).

The content-related and organisational aspects addressed above (regarding the latter, mainly the amount to be paid by parents) apparently also exert a strong structural impact on the socio-economic composition of

classes at the respective school locations. This is because most private schools (need to) collect relatively high tuition fees, which requires a corresponding financial background and willingness to pay on the part of parents. Accordingly, such schools not only recruit many of their pupils from a high-income segment of the population (which most often is also a group boasting higher formal educational attainment) but frequently also have a high share of 'foreign' pupils (some 80%).

Before setting up new internationally oriented school programmes it is therefore necessary to consider issues related to educational content (language of instruction, the international recognition of qualifications, high school curriculum) and also issues related to the school's organisation form (the school's provider, funding, teacher recruitment, establishment of completely new offers vs. linking to the existing school programme/s). The combination of these elements also has substantial impact on the target group of pupils which is to be addressed and/or that can be reached.

More detailed information and analyses can be found in the ibw study quoted above. The entire study can be obtained from ibw and/or KWF (ibw research report no. 166, ISBN 978-3-902742-48-3) [online](#).

¹ This *ibw research brief* is based on the latest ibw research report no. 166 by Schmid Kurt, Gruber Benjamin: "Internationale Schule für Kärnten" ("International School for Carinthia", commissioned by the Carinthian Economic Promotion Fund *KWF*), which surveyed demand for and acceptance of an international school for the province of Carinthia.

² Cf. for example EURYDICE, 2010: The structure of the European education systems 2010/2011.

³ These are schools with curricula and qualifications specified by IBO (International Baccalaureate Organisation).

⁴ Although the Austrian certificate of secondary education, for example, also grants HE access qualifications in many countries, this is based on bilateral agreements (often additional administrative recognitions/confirmations are required before its holder is entitled to enrol at a specific HE establishment). IBO/APP qualifications, however, are used worldwide and are recognised by a large number of HE establishments/universities without any further administrative requirements/proofs/recognition procedures.

⁵ Some schools use the word 'international' in their names. Others offer education and training programmes and/or award qualifications that can be rated as being 'internationally' oriented.

⁶ Where English is specified as the working language in the classroom, classes are mainly held in English. Where difficulties in understanding arise, however, German is used. Where English is stated as the sole language of instruction, however, such a use of German is not foreseen or is not practised.

Overview of 'international' schools in Austria

School	Province	School provider	Educational levels (ISCED)	Internat. qualification	Tuition fees
International schools in the narrower sense					
Vienna International School	Vienna	private	0, 1, 2, 3	IB	high
The American International School Vienna	Vienna	private	0, 1, 2, 3	APID, IB	high
Danube International School Vienna	Vienna	private	0, 1, 2, 3	IB	high
International Christian School of Vienna	Vienna	private	1, 2, 3	APID	high
Lower Austria International School	Lower Austria	public	3	IB	high
BG/BRG Klosterneuburg	Lower Austria	public	2, 3	IB	low
Linz International School Auhof	Upper Austria	public	2, 3	IB	low
The American International School Salzburg	Salzburg	private	2, 3	APID	high
St. Gilgen International School	Salzburg	private	2, 3	IB	high
Schools with an 'international/foreign' curriculum/educational objective but without international qualification					
Vienna Elementary School	Vienna	private	0, 1	no	average
Junior High School Carlberggasse	Vienna	public	2	no	0
Lycée Français de Vienne	Vienna	private*	0, 1, 2, 3	French certificate of sec. ed.	average
Mayflower Christian Academy	Vienna	private	1, 2	no	average
International School St. Pölten	Lower Austria	private	1	no	average
Graz International Bilingual School	Styria	public	2, 3	no	low
Innsbruck Elementary School	Tyrol	public	1	no	0

Source: ibw research; * Agency for French Teaching Abroad

Notes:

Educational levels (ISCED classification): The education segments/areas offered by the schools:

0...nursery school

1...primary school

2...lower secondary level: almost exclusively offered as lower cycle of secondary academic school

3...upper secondary level: only offered as upper cycle of secondary academic school

International qualifications:

IB...qualifications of the International Baccalaureate Organisation

APID... Advanced Placement International Diploma

Tuition fees:

high: over EUR 8,000 a year (up to max. EUR 25,000)

average: EUR 1,000 to EU 8,000 a year

low: below EUR 1,000 a year

All figures excluding any one-off fees for registration