

Country report

Austria

Glossary of Abbreviations

AHS	<i>Allgemeinbildende Höhere Schule</i>	General Academic Secondary School (upper secondary, prepares for university).
AMS	<i>Arbeitsmarktservice</i>	Public Employment Service Austria. Provides labour market services, career guidance, and training support.
AK	<i>Arbeiterkammer</i>	Chamber of Labour. Represents employees' interests and offers counselling and training.
BHS	<i>Berufsbildende Höhere Schule</i>	Higher Vocational School. Five-year programme leading to both vocational qualification and university entrance (Matura + Diploma).
BIBer	<i>Bildungsberatung für Erwachsene</i>	Educational Counselling for Adults (regional guidance service).
BIS	<i>BerufsInformationsSystem</i>	Career Information System (database of occupations and competencies, offered by AMS).
BIZ	<i>BerufsInformationsZentrum</i>	Career Information Centre (run by AMS, offering guidance and counselling).
BMAW	<i>Bundesministerium für Arbeit und Wirtschaft</i>	Federal Ministry of Labour and Economy.
BMBWF	<i>Bundesministerium für Bildung, Wissenschaft und Forschung</i>	Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research.
BO-Lehrer:innen	<i>Berufsorientierungslehrer:innen</i>	Career Guidance Teachers (in lower secondary schools).
BMS	<i>Berufsbildende Mittlere Schule</i>	Intermediate Vocational School (3–4 years, provides vocational skills and general education).
BRP	<i>Berufsreifeprüfung</i>	Vocational Maturity Exam. Provides university entrance qualification for graduates of vocational pathways or apprenticeships.
FH	<i>Fachhochschule</i>	University of Applied Sciences. Offers practice-oriented tertiary education.
HTL	<i>Höhere Technische Lehranstalt</i>	Higher Technical College. Provides technical and engineering education, leading to Matura + Diploma.
IBOBB	<i>Information, Beratung und Orientierung für Bildung und Beruf</i>	Information, Counselling and Orientation for Education and Career. National school-based guidance framework.
LLG	Lifelong Guidance	Part of Austria's Lifelong Learning Strategy. Focus on career guidance across the lifespan.
NEET	Not in Education, Employment or Training	Indicator for young people disengaged from education and the labour market.
NMS	<i>Neue Mittelschule</i>	Secondary School (lower secondary, ages 10–14).
OeAD	Österreichische Agentur für Bildung und Internationalisierung	Austrian Agency for Education and Internationalisation. Hosts Euroguidance Austria.
PTS	<i>Polytechnische Schule</i>	Pre-vocational School (one-year orientation after compulsory schooling, preparing for apprenticeships).
WIFI	<i>Wirtschaftsförderungsinstitut</i>	Institute for Economic Promotion (training institution of the Austrian Chamber of Commerce).
WKO / WKÖ	<i>Wirtschaftskammer Österreich</i>	Austrian Chamber of Commerce. Represents employers and businesses, provides training and career guidance support.

Executive summary

The Austrian country report provides an integrated view of the education system and career guidance landscape, combining system-level analysis with qualitative insights from students, parents, and teachers. Austria's education system is characterised by its strong vocational orientation: approximately three quarters of young people choose vocational or pre-vocational pathways after lower secondary education, with the dual training system serving as a cornerstone of the school-to-work transition. While this ensures close links between education and the labour market, it also increases the pressure on young people to make career decisions at an early stage. Regional disparities exacerbate these challenges, particularly in rural areas where access to upper secondary and tertiary institutions is limited, often driving youth outmigration.

Career guidance in Austria is delivered through a dual structure: school-based guidance via the IBOBB model and labour-market-related services provided by the Public Employment Service (AMS) and social partners. Tools such as the 18plus "Berufs- und Studienchecker," AMS Career Compass, and regional counselling networks provide a broad range of support. However, implementation is fragmented, depending heavily on teacher engagement and local resources.

The research findings reveal strong demand for more practical, real-world experiences and clearer frameworks for cooperation between schools, parents, and external stakeholders. Strengthening coordination, improving counsellor training, and addressing regional inequalities are essential to ensure equitable access to guidance and to enhance young people's transitions into further education, training, and the labour market.

Objectives of the country report

The Austrian country report aims to provide an in-depth analysis of the national education and career guidance systems, with a particular focus on regional disparities within the Danube area. At the national level, Austria's education system is marked by a strong vocational orientation: approximately three quarters of students follow vocational or pre-vocational pathways after lower secondary education, while the dual apprenticeship system ensures close links to the labour market. At the same time, structural differences between urban and rural regions affect access to educational opportunities and contribute to youth outmigration, especially in remote areas such as Waldviertel, Osttirol, Kärntner Unterland, and Murau.

The objectives of this report are fourfold: (1) to map education and training opportunities for young people, especially in regions with limited institutional infrastructure; (2) to identify and analyse target groups, including students, parents, teachers, and vulnerable populations such as NEETs; (3) to explore systemic challenges such as early career decision-making, information gaps, and regional inequalities; and (4) to outline the roles of relevant stakeholders, including schools, the Public Employment Service (AMS), social partners, NGOs, and regional initiatives.

Methodologically, the report combines system-level desk research and statistical data with qualitative evidence from 25 interviews and two focus groups. This mixed-methods approach ensures a comprehensive understanding of both structural frameworks and lived experiences of career guidance in Austria.

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1. Main characteristics at addressed territories

1.1. Focus Region: Waldviertel (Lower Austria)

Territorial and demographic profile

The Waldviertel is a rural region in the northwestern part of Lower Austria, covering approximately 4,900 km² and including the districts of Gmünd, Horn, Krems-Land, Waidhofen an der Thaya, and Zwettl. With fewer than 50 inhabitants per square kilometre, it is among the most sparsely populated regions in Austria. The Waldviertel region shows clear signs of long-term demographic and economic transformation. While the overall population in Lower Austria has grown by approximately 6%, the Waldviertel has experienced a decline of 3%, reaching a population of 133.885. The district of Waidhofen an der Thaya alone has lost over 20% of its residents in the past 50 years, highlighting a trend of continuous outmigration, particularly among young people (AK Niederösterreich 2024; Wohnen im Waldviertel 2024a). Particularly the population size among young people is of central importance in this context. Between 2004 and 2024, the Waldviertel region experienced a significant demographic decline in both children and young adults. The number of residents aged 15 to 29 fell by 19.4%, from 39.437 to 31.792, reflecting a sustained trend of youth outmigration. The number of children under 15 declined by 21% during the same period, from 35.766 to 28.255. In contrast, the southern region of Lower Austria (Niederösterreich-Süd) showed only marginal decreases of 4.8% (15–29 years) and 6.1% (under 15 years), indicating greater demographic stability (Statistik Austria 2024).

Socio-economic status

Due to its rural structure and geographical isolation, the Waldviertel faces several structural disadvantages: The local economy is dominated by small and medium-sized enterprises, with limited availability of apprenticeship placements or employment prospects for young people. This economic fragility has contributed to increasing youth unemployment rates. In 2024, Lower Austria recorded a 10.6% increase in youth unemployment, with 4.415 individuals under the age of 24 registered as unemployed. Around 8% of young people aged 15–24 are classified as NEETs (Not in Employment, Education or Training) as well, underscoring the need for early career guidance and targeted support measures (Arbeit plus Niederösterreich 2024).

Labour market conditions are characterised by a high number of out-commuters: many residents work outside the Waldviertel due to limited local employment opportunities. This dependence on external labour markets weakens regional resilience and makes career prospects within the region less attractive for young people. At the same time, income levels in the Waldviertel remain below the Lower Austrian average. Many households are dependent on social transfers, indicating regional disparities in economic opportunity (AK Niederösterreich 2024).

Access to education in the Waldviertel is further limited by a lack of local upper secondary and tertiary institutions. Most schools offering advanced general or vocational education are located in larger towns such as Zwettl or Waidhofen an der Thaya, requiring long commutes for students from smaller municipalities (Stadtgemeinde Zwettl 2024; Stadtgemeinde Waidhofen/Thaya, 2024). Public transport services are often insufficient, which further exacerbates regional disparities in educational participation (AK Niederösterreich 2024).

Educational attainment levels also reflect these structural limitations. According to the 2023 school statistics, educational pathways in rural districts of the Waldviertel are structurally limited when compared to urban areas. In the district of Zwettl, only 260 students aged 14–19 attended an academic upper secondary school (AHS), and there is no reported data for dual vocational schools, suggesting limited access or missing infrastructure in this area. In contrast, the neighbouring district of Gmünd shows a strong dominance of vocational education: 610 students are enrolled in dual-track vocational schools, compared to just 105 in AHS, meaning that nearly 6 times as many youths pursue vocational rather than academic pathways. These patterns reflect a structural bias toward early vocational orientation in rural areas, and the limited availability of academic and specialised secondary schools (e.g. technical or agricultural colleges) may encourage outmigration of youth to urban centres like Vienna, which offers vastly greater diversity with over 20.000 AHS students and 11.700 in technical colleges alone (Statistik Austria 2023).

1.2. Focus Region: Osttirol (Tyrol)

Territorial and demographic profile

Osttirol is a mountainous and predominantly rural region located in the eastern part of the Austrian state of Tyrol. Covering approximately 2.020 km², it encompasses the district of Lienz and is characterized by its alpine terrain and low population density. As of 2025, the district has an estimated population of 49.025, reflecting a relatively stable demographic trend over recent years (CityPopulation 2025). Particularly the population size among young people is highly relevant in the case of Osttirol. Between 2004 and 2024, the number of residents aged 15 to 29 declined by 22.2%, from 10.038 to 7.809. During the same period, the population of children under 15 decreased by 25.8%, from 9.450 to 7.012. These figures demonstrate a steep demographic contraction, especially among younger cohorts. In comparison, the neighbouring Tiroler Oberland region experienced more moderate population losses of 15% (15–29 years) and 12.6% (under 15 years) (Statistik Austria 2024b). Demographically, Osttirol has a higher average age compared to national figures, with an average of 43.8 years as of 2021 (UrbiStat 2021). The youth population (ages 15–29) constitutes a smaller proportion of the total population, indicating potential challenges in sustaining the local labor force and ensuring generational renewal (Statistik Austria, 2025).

Social services, including healthcare and public transportation, are less accessible in remote areas of Osttirol. The aging population increases demand for healthcare services, while the dispersed settlement pattern poses challenges for service delivery. Improving infrastructure and service accessibility is crucial to meet the needs of residents and enhance quality of life (AK Tirol 2024; UrbiStat 2021).

Socio-economic status

The region's economy is primarily driven by small and medium-sized enterprises in sectors such as agriculture, forestry, tourism, and craftsmanship. Tourism, especially eco-tourism and winter sports, plays a significant role, with destinations like Matrei in Osttirol serving as key hubs (Osttirol n.d.). Despite these strengths, Osttirol faces challenges related to its geographic isolation. Limited accessibility, especially in winter, restricts economic diversification, and many workers commute to job centers outside the region, weakening local labor market resilience (AK Tirol 2024). Income levels in Osttirol are generally lower than in urban Tyrol. Labour market indicators for Osttirol reveal a concerning trend: as of April 2025 1.129 people were registered as unemployed in the

Lienz district - a 6.5% year-on-year increase, which is significantly higher than the Tyrolean average of +2.7% (AMS Lienz 2025).

In terms of education, access to upper secondary and tertiary institutions is limited within the region. Students often need to commute to larger towns or relocate to pursue higher education opportunities, which can contribute to youth outmigration (AK Tirol 2024; Statistik Austria 2025). The 2023 school statistics for the district of Lienz (Osttirol) reveal a clear structural bias toward vocational education. Only 206 students were enrolled in academic upper secondary schools (AHS), compared to 1.806 in the urban district of Innsbruck-Stadt - a difference of nearly 90%. Vocational pathways dominate in Lienz: 281 students were enrolled in apprenticeship-based vocational schools and another 335 in business-focused secondary colleges. The educational landscape in Lienz reflects its rural economic base and limited access to general academic education. In contrast to Innsbruck, where educational diversity and density are far greater, Osttirols youth face a more constrained choice of secondary education (Statistik Austria 2023b). A recent study by the Tyrolean Chamber of Commerce projects a looming labour shortage in the district of Lienz. By 2033, the region is expected to lack approximately 1.300 workers, due to demographic ageing, outmigration of youth, and a shrinking local training base. The most affected sectors include crafts, healthcare, tourism, and technical professions. These projections highlight the urgent need for integrated strategies combining career guidance, local youth retention, and skilled labour migration (Kleine Zeitung 2023).

1.3. Focus Region: Kärntner Unterland (Carinthia)

Territorial and demographic profile

The Kärntner Unterland refers to the eastern lowland districts of Austria's southernmost federal state Carinthia, including Klagenfurt-Land, Feldkirchen, and Spittal an der Drau. Situated in a mixed urban-rural setting, this region is home to approximately 147.000 inhabitants (first quarter of 2025), representing about 26% of Carinthia's population (Statistik Austria 2025b). Smaller municipalities in districts such as Völkermarkt and Wolfsberg tend to experience population decline, while areas adjacent to Klagenfurt see relatively stable or slowly rising populations due to commuting and suburbanization (Statistik Austria 2024). Between 2005 and 2025, the population of 15- to 20-year-olds in Unterkärnten declined by 26.7%, from 11.813 to 8.657. This drop reflects ongoing youth outmigration and demographic contraction, raising concerns about future labour market potential and regional vitality. In contrast, the number of residents aged 60 to 74 increased by 39.6%, from 22.915 to 31.986. While similar trends can be observed across the federal state, the situation in Unterkärnten is more pronounced: in all of Carinthia, the number of 15- to 20-year-olds decreased by 19.9%, and the number of 60- to 74-year-olds increased by 43.6%. This demographic shift highlights the rapid ageing of the region, with implications for care services, social infrastructure, and the intergenerational workforce balance. The combined trends point to a growing mismatch between the region's age structure and its long-term development needs. (Statistik Austria 2025).

Socio-economic status

The Unterland's economy is anchored in a healthy ecosystem of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs): the Spittal an der Drau district alone houses around 2.500 companies employing 22.500 people, with half operating as micro or small firms. Tourism is another pillar, with high-quality infrastructure around Lake Millstätter See, Lake Weissensee, and the Katschberg ski

area drawing visitors year-round (Kärnten.com n.d.) Economic performance mirrors these strengths: Carinthia's GRP per capita reached around 40.300€ in 2021, rising by +7.3% that year, though it still remain below the national average at 45.400€ per capita (Statistik Austria 2022).

The labour market in the Kärntner Unterland reflects broader regional dynamics in Carinthia, with both strengths and vulnerabilities. As of 2024, Carinthia recorded an overall unemployment rate of 4.3%, which is below the Austrian average, alongside a strong employment rate of 73.5%. However, data from Unterkärnten indicate a higher reliance on commuting to urban job centres like Klagenfurt and Villach, reflecting a shortage of local employment opportunities, especially in industrial and service sectors. Youth unemployment remains a concern: Carinthia's youth unemployment was approximately 12.2% in 2016. NEET figures (15–29 years old) in Carinthia stand at 7.8% in 2024, indicating that nearly one in thirteen young people are neither in education, employment, nor training (Employment Institute 2024).

Education in the Kärntner Unterland is diverse, spanning from primary schools and vocational training to tertiary institutions, contributing significantly to regional development and labour market preparedness. The presence of bilingual and multilingual schools (German–Slovenian and German–English) reflects the region's cultural openness and supports language competence (Kärnten.com n.d.). Secondary education is strengthened by the presence of the Carinthia University of Applied Sciences (FH Kärnten) at Feldkirchen and Spittal an der Drau, featuring over 30 degree programs in technology, health, social work, and business (Study in Austria n.d.). In addition to the FH Kärnten, the University of Klagenfurt serves as the main public university in the region. However, enrolment figures from the summer semester 2024 indicate that student participation remains comparatively low. Only 3.418 students under the age of 25 were enrolled at the University of Klagenfurt, compared to 14.320 at the University of Innsbruck (Tyrol) and 40.057 at the University of Vienna. Particularly in the 18–19 age group, those typically entering higher education directly after secondary school, only 532 students were registered in Klagenfurt, while Innsbruck hosted 1.874 students of the same age (Statistik Austria 2025b). These numbers suggest that many young Carinthians may choose to study outside the region, particularly in larger urban university centres. Possible reasons include limited programme diversity, perceived prestige, or migration patterns following upper secondary education.

1.4. Focus Region: Murau (Styria)

Territorial and demographic profile

The district of Murau, located in the western part of Styria, is one of Austria's most rural and sparsely populated regions. Covering an area of approximately 1.385 km², it had a population of 26.898 residents in the first quarter of 2025, resulting in a low population density of roughly 19 inhabitants per km². The district is characterised by alpine landscapes, small municipalities, and limited transport connectivity, which create structural disadvantages in terms of accessibility and service provision. Demographic trends in Murau reveal a pronounced population decline and ageing process. Between 2001 and 2022, Murau experienced a 13.2% decrease in total population, making it one of the most demographically shrinking districts in Austria. As of 2025, only 17.6% of the population is younger than 20 years old, whereas 26.1% are aged 65 and above, clearly indicating youth depletion and a growing elderly population (Landesstatistik Steiermark 2025). Outmigration among young people is a significant factor driving these trends. Many adolescents leave the district after completing compulsory education to attend secondary schools or

universities in larger urban centres such as Judenburg, Leoben, or Graz. This educational migration often results in permanent relocation, which further accelerates depopulation (Landesentwicklung Steiermark 2022). Without targeted measures to improve local education and training infrastructure, Murau risks a continuous cycle of demographic contraction and reduced economic vitality.

Socio-economic status

Murau's economy reflects its rural character and is dominated by small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Approximately 28% of the local workforce is employed in micro-enterprises with fewer than 10 employees, significantly above the Styrian average. Key sectors include agriculture, forestry, wood processing, tourism, and small-scale manufacturing. Murau has built a strong regional identity around its "Holzwelt Murau" initiative, which focuses on sustainable forestry and timber-related industries as the backbone of its economic structure (LAG Holzwelt Murau 2023). Tourism is another important economic pillar. Destinations such as the Kreischberg ski area attract visitors year-round, complemented by summer tourism based on hiking and cycling. However, the seasonal nature of tourism results in fluctuating employment opportunities and limits the availability of full-time positions (Statistik Austria 2024c). Despite its local strengths, Murau's economic performance lags behind national averages. The district's gross regional product (GRP) per capita remains below urban Styrian regions, and disposable household income is comparatively low (Statistik Austria 2024c). This is largely due to the dominance of SMEs and the absence of larger industrial employers or research-driven businesses.

The NEET rate (youth not in employment, education, or training) in rural Styria, including Murau, is estimated at approximately 8%, reflecting limited access to vocational training and career guidance. NEET rates vary significantly across regions: Salzburg and Vorarlberg record the lowest levels (6.5 %), while Vienna reaches 11.3 %, and Styrian/Carinthian regions report around 8.4 %. These figures illustrate that youth disengagement occurs even in regions with strong vocational pathways, and highlight the importance of targeted career guidance in rural areas with limited infrastructure and mobility options (OECD Austria 2024).

Social infrastructure further illustrates the rural-urban divide. While healthcare provision in Murau's main towns is sufficient, remote villages experience shortages of medical specialists and must contend with long travel distances to hospitals (Landesentwicklung Steiermark 2022). Public transportation is limited, which exacerbates challenges for education and job access. Addressing these issues will require investments in education, transport, and digital infrastructure to make Murau a more attractive region for both young people and skilled workers.

2. Overview of the education system of Austria

2.1. Composition of the education system

The Austrian educational system provides a wide range of educational pathways, taking account the diverse needs and interests of pupils and students. The school year comprises ten months, running from September to June. Learners can choose between public and private schools, with public school being free of charge (European agency 2020; Eurydice, n.d.).

In Austria, children can voluntarily attend kindergarten from the age of three. Upon reaching the age of five, attendance becomes compulsory in a half-day format. However, kindergarten is not formally part of the school system. In Austria, compulsory education begins at the age of six and lasts for nine years. To promote equal opportunities and employability, there is also a training obligation (Ausbildungspflicht) until the age of 18. This means that young people are required to participate in an education or training programme until they turn 18 (Bildungsministerium n.d.; Eurydice, n.d.).

a. Primary Level

Every child's educational journey in Austria begins with a four-year primary school education (Volksschule). Primary schools provide all pupils with a broad general education aimed at fostering their social, emotional, intellectual, and physical development. For children who have reached compulsory school age (i.e. six years old) but are not yet ready for school (for example, because they struggle to follow lessons), a preparatory stage is available. Children with special educational needs may attend either a special needs school tailored to their individual requirements, or an integrated class within a regular primary school. In both cases, pupils receive a basic general education supported by specially trained teaching staff and adapted teaching methods (Bildungsministerium n.d.; ibw 2019).

b. Lower Secondary Education

At the lower secondary level, the Austrian school system begins to differentiate. Students can choose between two types of schools, both of which last four years: the Neue Mittelschule (NMS) and the lower cycle of the Allgemeinbildende Höhere Schule (AHS Unterstufe), also known as lower Gymnasium. Students with special educational needs may continue their education in special schools for grades five through eight. The Neue Mittelschule targets students aged 10 to 14 and aims to prepare them according to their interests, talents, and abilities for transition to further education or dual vocational training, and for entry into working life. The AHS Unterstufe provides a broad and advanced general education. It is offered in three main academic tracks: humanistic, scientific, and economic-oriented and includes specialised programs in areas such as music, sports, or foreign languages (Bildungsministerium n.d.; ibw 2019).

c. Upper Secondary Education

The final year of compulsory schooling coincides with the first year of upper secondary education. Compulsory education ends upon completion of the ninth school year. At this stage, students can choose between pre-vocational, vocational, or general academic programs. Roughly three-quarters of students opt for a vocational or pre-vocational pathway after completing lower secondary education. These programs combine theoretical learning with practical skills and often lead directly into employment or further qualifications within Austria's well-established vocational education and training (VET) system (Bildungsministerium n.d.; ibw 2019).

Pre-vocational Education

Pre-vocational schools in Austria provide students with a combination of general education and, depending on the school type, either basic or more advanced vocational skills. These schools help students prepare for future training paths through targeted subject areas, company visits, and practical training days. The most common path leading into the dual vocational training system is the Polytechnische Schule (PTS), which serves as a one-year orientation program after lower secondary education. In addition, one- or two-year Berufsbildende Mittlere Schulen (BMS) offer focused vocational preparation. These schools introduce students to specific vocational areas, such as agriculture, social care, or nutrition, guiding them directly toward labour market integration (Bildungsministerium n.d.; ibw 2019).

Vocational Education and Training (VET)

Vocational qualifications in Austria can be acquired either within the school system or through the dual system, which combines company-based training with part-time vocational schooling. The dual training model is the standard format for apprenticeships: apprentices spend around 80% of their training in the company and the remainder in vocational school. Vocational schools are responsible for deepening students' general education and complementing the competencies acquired in the workplace. Depending on the occupation, apprenticeships last between two and four years, though most are completed in three years. At the end of the apprenticeship, students can take the final apprenticeship examination (Lehrabschlussprüfung). To better support disadvantaged youth, it is possible to extend the training period or to obtain partial qualifications. Another vocational option at the upper secondary level is offered by three- or four-year BMS schools, which provide students with both job-related skills and a general education, preparing them for work at the intermediate qualification level. A third major pathway in vocational education is the Berufsbildende Höhere Schule (BHS). These higher-level vocational schools offer advanced training in a range of fields, including tourism, mechanical engineering, electrical engineering, and business administration. The five-year program leads to the Reife- und Diplomprüfung (Matura), granting graduates both a vocational qualification and general university entrance eligibility, a so-called double qualification (Bildungsministerium n.d.; ibw 2019).

General Academic Education (Gymnasium)

The upper cycle of general secondary education / Gymnasium (AHS-Oberstufe) typically follows the lower cycle of the Allgemeinbildende Höhere Schule (AHS Unterstufe). This type of school is primarily designed to prepare students for academic studies at universities. Like the lower cycle, the AHS-Oberstufe is offered in three main academic tracks and several areas of specialisation, including humanistic, scientific, and economics-focused programs. The AHS-Oberstufe lasts four years and culminates in the Reifeprüfung (Matura). Graduates receive a general university entrance qualification, allowing them access to all types of higher education institutions in Austria and many other European countries (Bildungsministerium n.d.; ibw 2019).

d. Tertiary Education

Tertiary education in Austria is offered at universities, universities of applied sciences (Fachhochschulen), and university colleges of teacher education (Pädagogische Hochschulen). While universities offer both general academic and professionally oriented degree programs, Fachhochschulen focus primarily on applied, labour market-oriented training. University colleges

of teacher education, in cooperation with universities, are responsible for the training of teachers for both primary and secondary levels. All three types of institutions offer three-year bachelor's programs, which can be followed by master's programs of at least two years. Graduates with a master's degree may pursue a doctoral program at universities. In most cases, admission to tertiary education in Austria requires a university entrance qualification (Hochschulreife/Matura). This qualification can be obtained either through the Matura examination at an academic secondary school (AHS) or through the Reife- und Diplomprüfung at a higher vocational school (BHS). Additionally, graduates of intermediate vocational education can gain access to tertiary institutions by passing the Berufsreifeprüfung (BRP), a standardized exam consisting of four subjects: German, Mathematics, a modern foreign language, and a vocational subject. Successful completion of the BRP provides general access to all forms of tertiary education. Apprentices also have the option to prepare for and take the BRP during their apprenticeship, a path known as "Berufsmatura". Another route to tertiary education is the Studienberechtigungsprüfung (higher education entrance exam), which allows access to a specific field of study or related disciplines, but not to all programs. Further access can be obtained by completing an Aufbaulehrgang, a post-secondary program that ends with the Reife- und Diplomprüfung, equivalent to the BHS diploma. For those without a directly relevant apprenticeship background, a preparatory course must be taken before entering this path. The Kolleg is another post-secondary vocational program that also leads to a BHS-level diploma. It requires the Matura as an entry qualification and concludes with the Diplomprüfung. In addition to higher education institutions, Austria offers non-university tertiary education in the form of foreman schools (Werkmeisterschulen) and construction trade schools (Bauhandwerkerschulen). These programs are open to individuals who have completed an apprenticeship or a BMS and wish to deepen their theoretical and practical knowledge. They typically last one to two years and end with a final examination (Bildungsministerium n.d.; Eurydice, n.d.; ibw 2019).

2.2 Governance and Financing of the Austrian Education System

Austria's education system is characterized by a federal governance model melding strong national oversight with significant roles for regional authorities. The Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research (BMBWF) is charged with crafting the overarching legal and policy framework for all education levels, including primary, secondary, and tertiary education (Bildungsministerium n.d.). However, implementation, school operation, and oversight, including approval of curricula, teacher deployment, and compliance, are the responsibility of the Federal States governments, ensuring that regional needs and contexts inform schooling practice. The financing structure closely follows this dual governance. Teacher salaries and strategic funding for academic secondary schools, higher vocational schools, and teacher training institutions are covered at the federal level, while school maintenance and infrastructure costs are typically shared between the federal and provincial or municipal authorities, depending on the school type and region. For example, in primary, lower-secondary, and special schools, the federal government funds teacher salaries, while municipalities or provinces largely shoulder building upkeep and operational costs (European Agency 2020). This composite financing ensures both national standards and regional adaptability. Regulation of educational content and professional qualifications mirrors the governance breakdown. Federal legislation, often requiring a two-thirds parliamentary majority, establishes statutory educational requirements such as the *School Act* of 1962, which codified compulsory schooling and teacher training frameworks (Eurydice n.d.). Moreover, this high threshold for lawmaking contributes to the system's continuity and stability. It ensures that

foundational educational reforms - especially those related to the regulation of vocational and professional content, are pursued with broad consensus and long-term perspectives.

At the tertiary level, universities and Fachhochschulen enjoy moderate autonomy. They operate under a dual governance model: a government-appointed board oversees strategic direction and financing, while an internal senate is responsible for academic self-regulation and curriculum development (BMBWF n.d.). This model enables adaptation to societal needs while respecting academic rigor. Additionally, professional education content, particularly within the dual vocational education and training (VET) sector, is co-designed by social partners, including employers' associations and labour unions, ensuring alignment with labour market requirements (CEDEFOP 2020; Eurydice n.d.; OECD 2026).

The private sector, including denominational and reform-oriented private schools, plays a smaller but meaningful role in Austria's educational landscape. Approximately 40% of kindergartens are privately operated (mostly by church organisations or private associations). These schools may be established by entities such as the Catholic Church or alternative pedagogical movements (e.g. Waldorf schools) and, while curriculum must meet national standards, financial responsibility often falls entirely on the founder body for schools that follow alternative pedagogies (Education Profiles 2023). Importantly, the federal government remains obliged to fund teacher salaries in officially recognized private schools that conform to national curricula.

When it comes to vocational education funding, Austria's VET system operates under a public-private partnership model. Apprenticeship placements are largely financed by employers, who bear the bulk of costs through practical training provision, while training-related coursework in vocational schools is state-funded (BMAW 2024). This approach reflects Austria's broader social partnership culture, where employers, trade unions, and the state co-govern training systems, both regulating quality and sharing funding responsibility.

In sum, Austria's education governance and financing structure tightly blends federal standard-setting and financial provision with regional administration and tailored funding, especially for infrastructure and vocational pathways. Regulation of professional and vocational content is highly collaborative, integrating social partners into governance frameworks. While the private sector makes up a minor share, especially in early education and alternative pedagogy, its presence adds choice within a largely state-funded system. The combination ensures both national consistency and regional adaptability, although persistent challenges such as equitable resourcing, navigating complexity, and enabling systemic innovation remain topics of policy attention.

2.3. Statistical Data on the educational system

Austria's educational system benefits from a robust and well-documented teacher workforce, spanning primary through tertiary levels. According to Statistics Austria, in the 2023/24 academic year, the total number of teaching staff across public and private institutions - encompassing schools, universities, universities of applied sciences, and teacher training colleges, reached 126.649 in general and vocational schools, a 1.8% increase compared to the previous year. Meanwhile, university-level staff totaled 77.161, reflecting a 1.1% rise (Statistik Austria 2024d). These figures underscore a stable year-on-year expansion in teaching capacity, indicative of a growing demand for educational services or policy-driven recruitment.

A significant share of teachers in Austria is employed on a part-time basis. Specifically, 23% of male and 34% of female teachers work part-time in Austrian schools, which exceeds the national average across all professions (21%). Regional disparities are evident: the part-time employment rate among teachers is particularly high in Tyrol (43.8%) and Vorarlberg (43%). One possible explanation for this pattern is the limited availability of comprehensive, full-day childcare services in these provinces, which may influence working time preferences, especially among female staff. Beyond school levels, structural disparities persist: secondary school teachers are overwhelmingly female – 70.9% nationwide, with 73.2% in Mittelschule and 65.7% in AHS (OECD 2025). An analysis of teacher age distribution reveals emerging demographic pressures. In the 2021/22 school year, 11% of Austria's teaching staff were aged over 60, and only 0.5% were over 64. Notably, older contract-based teaching positions exist to mitigate abrupt retirements or labor gaps, with extensions possible for periods of one to five years (Eurydice 2025).

The TALIS study (2018) displayed, that teaching was the first-choice career for 66% of Austrian teachers. Unfortunately, only 16% of teachers agree/strongly agree with the statement that their profession is valued in society, which is lower than the average across OECD countries (26%). On the other hand, only 12% report experiencing stress in their work „a lot“, which is lower than the OECD average of 18% (OECD 2018). Although Austrian teachers report lower levels of work-related stress compared to their EU and OECD counterparts, regional differences are notable. Educators in rural areas report significantly lower stress levels (10.4%) than those working in urban schools (16.4%). Moreover, rural teachers feel slightly more recognised by society, with 18.9% indicating they feel valued, compared to just 14.2% in urban contexts. Collaboration among staff also appears to be more common in rural schools, where teachers more frequently report the presence of a supportive and collegial school culture. When asked about improvements to their professional working conditions, 51% of teachers highlighted the need to reduce bureaucratic and administrative tasks, calling for less paperwork and greater support with non-pedagogical duties. Furthermore, 18% of teachers, particularly in primary education, emphasised the importance of additional school psychologists and social workers to help alleviate their overall workload (OECD 2025)

Resource-wise, student-teacher ratios are notably low, a favorable feature of Austrian classrooms. In primary schools, there were 10.02 students per teacher in 2017, one of the lowest ratios globally, especially when compared to the historical average of 13.28 (Global Economy). For secondary schools, the ratio stood even lower at 9.33 students per teacher in 2017. Classroom environments in Austria also differ by demographic context. The OECD's TALIS 2018 study shows that 48% of teachers work in schools where at least 10% of students have a migrant background, compared to an OECD average of 17%. This highlights Austria's multicultural teaching conditions and the importance of intercultural competencies among educators. In terms of classroom environments, relations between students and teachers are positive overall, with 97% of teachers in Austria agreeing that students and teachers usually get on well with each other. However, 15% of principals report regular acts of intimidation or bullying among their students, which is not significantly different from the OECD average (14%) (OECD 2018). From a demographic participation standpoint, international data show Austria's tertiary attainment is strong, with women reaching 48% and men 39% tertiary attainment - both above OECD averages. The gap between genders is thus narrower than in many other countries. Efforts to reduce the number of young adults without an upper secondary qualification have been a policy priority in recent years. Between 2016 and 2023, the share of 25- to 34-year-olds who had not completed upper secondary education decreased by two percentage points, reaching 10% in 2023, which is four percentage

points below the OECD average. This progress in educational attainment reflects Austria's continued investment in inclusive secondary and post-secondary pathways. Employment outcomes also correlate strongly with education levels. In Austria, 59% of 25- to 34-year-olds without an upper secondary qualification were employed in 2023. In contrast, 85% of those with an upper secondary or post-secondary non-tertiary qualification were employed. These figures compare to OECD averages of 61% and 79%, respectively, highlighting Austria's relatively favourable employment rate for individuals with completed upper secondary education. Finally, intergenerational education mobility remains a significant challenge in Austria. Among 25- to 64-year-olds who have at least one parent with a tertiary qualification, 61% have attained tertiary education themselves. In contrast, only 16% of adults whose parents had no upper secondary qualification achieved a tertiary degree. These figures compare to OECD averages of 72% for those with tertiary-educated parents and 19% for those from low-educated backgrounds, underscoring the enduring impact of social origin on educational outcomes in Austria (EAG 2024).

2.4. Infrastructure and Resources in Austrias Education System

Austria boasts an extensive and well-integrated educational infrastructure, with a dense network of schools accessible even in remote areas. The prevalence of small local schools, particularly in rural regions, ensures geographical proximity and minimal commute for most students. While official headcounts vary across institution types, most municipalities host primary and lower-secondary schools, preserving community cohesion and equitable access to essential education services. Secondary and specialized institutions tend to cluster in regional centers, yet transport and cooperative models mitigate accessibility challenges (Eurydice n.d.). As of the 2023/24 school year, Austria had over 5.700 schools, including approximately 3.000 primary schools, 1.200 lower secondary schools (Mittelschulen and AHS-Unterstufen/Gymnasium), and around 900 upper secondary institutions, including general academic (AHS-Oberstufen/Gymnasium), vocational middle (BMS), and higher vocational schools (BHS) (Statistik Austria, 2024). In addition, more than 400 special education institutions and integrative settings ensure access for learners with disabilities. While urban areas such as Vienna, Linz, or Graz offer a high density of schools across all levels and specialisations, sparsely populated districts in regions like the Waldviertel, Upper Styria or East Tyrol often rely on school cooperatives and regional mobility programmes to guarantee educational provision (Statistik Austria 2024e). Furthermore, Austria's free school transport policy guarantees accessibility for pupils living at a distance from educational institutions. This is particularly relevant in Alpine or rural municipalities, where public transport infrastructure can be limited. For children under 15, school transport is fully subsidised by the state, and in upper secondary education, students only pay a nominal fee. These measures ensure equal access regardless of socio-economic background or geographic location (BMBWF n.d.)

Austria's national financial commitment to digital education has ramped up significantly. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Ministry of Education allocated approximately 256 million € through 2024 to support digital infrastructure and equipment for primary and secondary schools, with an additional 46 million € earmarked for higher education institutions (Trade.gov. 2023). Starting with the 2023/24 school year, Digital Basic Education has been introduced as a compulsory subject in the lower secondary level of special needs schools (General Special Schools, Schools for Deaf Children, Schools for Blind Children). The aim of the subject is to strengthen students' skills in media education, computer science literacy, and digital design competence, thereby preparing them for the challenges of an increasingly digitalised world. Moreover, digital

media offer numerous opportunities for social participation for people with disabilities. Through hands-on engagement with technical and digital assistive tools in the classroom, students learn at an early stage to use them confidently and intuitively (BMBWF n.d.)

Learning materials in Austrian schools align with traditional and digital modes. Textbook provision is typically state-supported, though digital-only materials face funding constraints. The current legislation requires materials to be owned by students, posing obstacles for licensing digital-only resources. Expanding access to digital content via unified platforms remains a critical goal, yet progress has been hampered by legal and pedagogical hurdles (Reform-Support 2023). Although device availability in Austrian schools compares favorably to OECD norms - Austria is among countries achieving at least one computer per student - actual usage in class remains limited. According to PISA 2022, while Austria meets the average threshold of 0.81 computers per student, classrooms often underutilize this potential due to limited integration in pedagogy (Austria.prg 2024; OECD 2022). Austria's digital infrastructure in schools is relatively strong, thanks in part to strategic legislation such as the 2021 School Education Digitization Act, which introduced free digital device distribution to students and teachers and mandated around three devices per class in participating schools. Parental contributions cover approximately 25% of the cost, with waivers available for families in financial need (Eurydice 2024). Additionally, the nationwide "Eduthek" platform serves as a comprehensive digital portal offering curricular resources across subjects and school levels, enhancing equity in content access and resource sharing (JKU 2023)

2.5. Vocational Training System

Austria's vocational education system represents a cornerstone of its education-to-employment landscape. At its heart lies the dual vocational education and training (VET) system, which integrates company-based training with vocational schooling and remains a global benchmark for effective workforce development. Approximately 80% of an apprentice's education occurs on-the-job, while the remaining 20% takes place in vocational schools, reinforcing real-world learning with academic instruction (Bildungsministerium n.d.). After completing compulsory schooling at around age 15, approximately 35% of Austrian young people enter legally recognized apprenticeships, while another 40% pursue school-based VET programs, meaning roughly 75% of students follow a vocational pathway in upper secondary education. Graduates of an apprenticeship programme acquire a full vocational qualification of high standard. No specific school qualification is required for starting an apprenticeship (BMAW 2024)

Training in the company

Companies view apprenticeship training as a valuable investment in their future. It enables them to meet their future need for qualified skilled employees as best as possible, since already during their training, apprentices contribute significantly to the daily work routine of the training company. Currently (last update 31.12.2021) 28.461 companies are open to young people as training institutions. By voluntarily providing apprenticeship training, companies show that they accept social responsibility and make an important contribution to reducing youth unemployment while at the same time securing their future need for qualified and skilled employees. However, upon termination of apprenticeship training, an employment contract between the apprenticeship graduate and the training company is not mandatory. Fully trained skilled graduates can switch to other companies and at the same time, companies can recruit graduates trained at other training sites. This possible fluctuation is a characteristic of a free education system. Therefore, companies

that invest in apprenticeship training do not only act in their own best interest but also contribute to the benefit of all economic sectors and professional branches, which have a demand for qualified apprenticeship graduates (BMAW 2024)

Company-based training is characterised by the following features:

- It takes place under real-life working conditions. The apprentice acquires the knowledge and skills laid down in the job profile for the respective apprenticeship. Therefore, the apprentice is able to take up a qualified professional activity as a skilled worker immediately upon completion of the training.
- Most of the training is provided as part of real-life productive activities; this reduces costs and increases the apprentice's motivation to learn.
- For companies that cannot fully train the job profile, there is the option of supplementary practical training in a training alliance. In addition, supra-company training centres (e.g. "Lehrbauhöfe") are set up by the economy in some sectors.

A company that wants to train apprentices is obliged to submit an application to assess suitability for apprenticeship training (Feststellungsantrag - application for assessment) to the Apprenticeship Office (Lehrlingsstelle) in the province in which the company is located. In each of the nine Austrian provinces one Apprenticeship Office is established. It is located at the site of the regional Economic Chamber (Wirtschaftskammer - WKÖ) but operates on behalf of the Federal Ministry of Labour and Economy. In cooperation with the Chamber of Labour, the Apprenticeship Office is obliged by law to examine whether the company applying for accreditation as a training company meets the required prerequisites. In case it does, the company receives official notification (Feststellungsbescheid) certifying that it is entitled to train apprentices. The authorized instructor (e.g. company owner) can train apprentices herself or himself. However, she or he can also entrust suitable employees of the company with the training. The success of in-company training is primarily determined by the professional ability and pedagogical skills of the trainer. In addition to professional experience, an apprenticeship trainer needs to have basic knowledge of pedagogy (teaching methods and theory) and the legal framework Apprenticeship trainers have to pass a trainer examination. The exam can be replaced by taking a forty-hour instructor course. Some trainings or exams (e.g. master craftsperson qualification) replace the trainer exam (BMAW 2024).

Education at part-time vocational schools

The focus of training at vocational schools is around 65% on professional theory, general education takes up around 35% of school time. Practical training is also provided as part of the specialist teaching (e.g. in workshops, laboratories, etc.). The apprentice is obliged to attend vocational school, ideally in the vicinity of the training company. The apprentices are taught according to a curriculum coordinated with the training regulations (Ausbildungsordnung). There are classes for every profession and every grade. In professions with small numbers of apprentices, they are taught in classes of a related professions. Vocational school teachers have broad practical experience in the respective occupational field. Since the academic year 2016/17, training for teachers at a part-time vocational school is offered in the Bachelor programme "Secondary Vocational Education and Training – Dual Training and Technology and Commerce" university colleges of teacher education (Pädagogische Hochschule; a total of 240 ECTS credits, recognition of credits based on professional prequalification is possible). Graduates are awarded the academic degree Bachelor of Education (Bed). In addition, vocational education and training teachers can

also attend a Master degree qualification “Vocational Secondary Education – Dual Vocational Education and Technology and Commerce” amounting to 60 ECTS credits. Furthermore, in addition to the personal suitability, a relevant professional experience of a minimum of three years for admission to study is required. The apprenticeship pathway concludes with a leaving certificate, recognized for its high qualification standard. The training duration typically lasts two to four years, depending on the field, and offers multiple progression opportunities, including qualification as a master craftsperson or further study at tertiary level, especially if one completes *Berufsreifeprüfung* or an additional VET course (BMAW 2024).

The success of the Austrian dual VET model is well-documented. As noted by CEDEFOP, three years after completing their training, 80% of apprenticeship graduates are still employed, compared to only 38% of those who dropped out (CEDEFOP 2016).

Alternatives

Parallel to the dual system, school-based VET provides alternative paths:

- *Berufsbildende Mittlere Schulen (BMS)*: three- to four-year programs encompassing general education and occupational skills. Graduates can also achieve vocational qualifications and, with supplementary education, general university entrance.
- *Berufsbildende Höhere Schulen (BHS)*: five-year institutions delivering both vocational depth and the Matura diploma. Graduates emerge with dual qualifications, ready for junior roles or tertiary study (see *Chapter 2.1. Composition of the education system*)

Technical colleges (HTLs) likewise play a vital role in advanced vocational-academic training. Austria hosts around 75 HTLs, offering engineering-focused instruction, electrical engineering, mechatronics, IT, mechanical engineering, with programs lasting five years, culminating in a “*Reife- und Diplomprüfung*.” Graduates may qualify for university-level credentials or professional titles upon further experience (AMS n.d.).

2.6. Access and Participation in Austria’s Education System

Access to education in Austria is underpinned by a strong policy framework and robust institutional support aimed at promoting equitable educational opportunities. With nine years of compulsory schooling, the Austrian system mandates that all children receive at least a basic education foundation. Moreover, since 2016, a favorable approach has extended the mandate beyond compulsory education: young people are required to continue in either education or training until the age of 18, bolstering overall participation and reducing early school leaving (Bildungsministerium n.d.; Eurydice, n.d.).

Regional Disparities

Despite universal policy design, regional disparities persist in access to education, often aligned with population density and geography. Urban centres like Vienna, Graz, Innsbruck, or Linz generally provide comprehensive learning infrastructure from kindergartens to upper secondary and tertiary institutions offering diverse school types and more robust auxiliary services. In contrast, rural or alpine regions such as the Waldviertel, East Tyrol, or Upper Styria rely heavily on local primary schools and lower-secondary colleges, with fewer options at the upper secondary tier, often demanding longer commutes or boarder solutions (Statistik Austria 2024e). To mitigate these challenges, Austria ensures fully subsidized school transport for younger students, with

nominal or no fees for older students, ensuring access regardless of geography (BMBWF, n.d.). Policy-driven mobility solutions coupled with regional funding frameworks help bridge infrastructural gaps, though ongoing monitoring is essential to ensure parity in opportunity. But there is a high amount of internal migration within Austria especially among young adults who frequently move from rural or suburban areas to urban centers to pursue higher education. In 2024, Austria recorded 784.709 internal migrations - a decrease of 6% compared to the previous year indicating an ongoing, substantial domestic mobility (Statistik Austria 2024f). Notably, young adults aged 18 to 26 predominantly migrate to urban centers, driven by broader access to educational and vocational opportunities (Schönherr n.d.).

Socioeconomic Inequities

Income level remains a determinant of educational access. Around 13% of children lived in relative income poverty in 2020, slightly above Austria's previous low and comparable to OECD benchmarks of 12% in both Germany and Switzerland (OECD 2024). While financial hardship may not bar access to compulsory schooling, it can influence participation in extracurricular programs, tertiary enrollment, and resource availability, particularly for children from socioeconomically disadvantaged households. Austria's compulsory training initiative alongside welfare improvements and family allowances, addresses these gaps by ensuring training continuity post-compulsory school, reducing the risk of social exclusion (YouthWiki 2024). Combined with broad family benefits and targeted funding for low-income learners, the approach helps cushion against income-related disparities, though progress is continual.

Scholarships and Financial Incentives

Financial incentives and scholarships play a pivotal role in promoting higher education access. The Dr. Erich Ciesciutti Scholarship at the University of Klagenfurt is one such initiative, offering €600 monthly to Bachelor's students with physical disabilities or those transitioning from foster care, contingent on performance (minimum 8 ECTS per semester) (Universität Klagenfurt n.d.). In addition to such targeted programmes, Austria offers a national study grant system (Studienbeihilfe), administered by the Studienbeihilfenbehörde. This financial aid supports students from low-income households and is calculated based on a range of factors including parental income, family size, distance from the place of study, and academic progress. As of 2024, eligible full-time students can receive up to €923 monthly, with additional supplements for working students, students with children, or those who have lost both parents (Studienbeihilfenbehörde 2024). These measures underline Austria's broader commitment to social equity in higher education.

Inclusion Programmes

To ensure equitable participation, Austria has instituted various inclusive programmes, particularly for disadvantaged youth and learners with disabilities. Introduced in 2016, the compulsory education and training programme requires youth to remain in education or training until age 18, promoting social mobility and reducing dropout rates. For those with disabilities, the 'Fit for Work until 25' (AF25) initiative extends training or employment participation and provides youth coaching services tailored to individual capacity and needs, facilitating inclusive workforce integration. The 'Fit for Training' (AusbildungsFit) programme offers one-year foundation training, focusing on social competencies for re-entry into education or apprenticeships for youth with learning or social difficulties. Additionally, Youth Coaching assists school-to-work transitions through personalised

guidance and collaboration with schools and AMS, striving to prevent early school leaving and social exclusion (YouthWiki 2024).

2.7. Performance Assessment of Students and Schools in Austria

Austria's education system utilizes a combination of international benchmarks, national evaluation measures, and dropout monitoring to assess learning outcomes, school effectiveness, and educational equity.

Austria participates in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA); the triennial OECD survey assessing 15-year-olds in mathematics, reading, and science. According to the PISA 2022 Country Note, Austrian students continue to report strong social well-being within school settings: 80% report that they make friends easily (above the OECD average of 76%), and 77% feel a sense of belonging at school, compared to 75% on average in the OECD. Meanwhile, 14% of students report feeling lonely at school (versus 16% OECD average), and 13% feel like outsiders (compared to 17% average) (OECD 2023). Regarding academic performance, while detailed scores require deeper data access, global PISA data suggests that Austria is often above average but has not avoided recent declines. Between 2018 and 2022, math competency across OECD nations dropped by an unprecedented 15 points, with reading declining by 10 points and science remaining more stable (OECD 2023). Austria likely mirrors these broader trends, though it traditionally sits among the better-performing nations.

Austria's dropout figures remain relatively modest compared to other countries. According to a Cedefop report, 6.8% of students leave education after compulsory lower secondary schooling without continuing in education or training, with male students disproportionately affected. Within Vocational Education and Training (VET) schools, the dropout rate is 9.3%, though it varies significantly, some vocational schools have rates as high as 12.7%, while others report as low as 4% (CEDEFOP n.d.). Additional sources, such as SIRIUS, similarly suggest dropout rates of approximately 7% after compulsory education, translating into an average of around 44,000 students per year dropping out (Sirius n.d.).

Austria's education system displays a solid performance profile across international, school-level, and dropout indicators. Student well-being is relatively high, and school environments are broadly inclusive. International comparisons via PISA indicate possible recent declines in academic performance, a trend mirrored across OECD countries highlighting the need for adaptive instructional strategies and support structures. Equity remains central: Austria's policies ensure that disadvantaged students receive support to prevent early exit and promote inclusion. Continued focus on reducing social and regional disparities will safeguard the positive trends in student engagement and participation.

3. The place and role of career guidance in the education system and its main characteristics

3.1. Career guidance in Austria

Austria operates two interlinked yet distinct career guidance systems: one embedded within educational institutions (schools and higher education) and another outside the formal education system, primarily through the Public Employment Service (AMS) and independent providers. This dual framework ensures comprehensive coverage of guidance throughout learners' educational and professional pathways. Young people have many options for careers guidance available both inside and outside the school system. There are six Psychological Counselling Centres in Austria for prospective and active university students, whereas the Public Employment Service Austria (AMS) is an important stakeholder in career guidance for adults. Adults can also receive free educational guidance in each of the nine federal provinces of Austria (OEAD n.d.). Social partners, including the Chamber of Commerce (WKO), Chamber of Labour, WIFI, and bfi, offer supplementary guidance services. These include talent checks, vocational orientation workshops, online portals like bic.at, and certification schemes such as the "Vocational Orientation plus" seal for exemplary school-based guidance (YouthWiki 2024).

Lower Secondary Education

Within the school context, the IBOBB model (Information, Beratung und Orientierung für Bildung und Beruf; engl.: Information, Guidance and Orientation for Education and Career) is implemented across lower and upper secondary levels. Each school's IBOBB coordinator organizes three pillars of guidance: Career-guidance (career orientation classes for 12- to 14-year-olds), individual student counselling, and real-world experiences such as work placements and job fair visits, supplemented by support from school-based psychological services. These measures are supplemented by the School Psychological and Educational Counselling Service Unit, which can offer specialised assistance. Outside the school system a wide range of other individuals and bodies (such as the Public Employment Service and services set up by social partners) offer careers guidance in guidance centres. Youth Coaching is an assistance programme for young people at the end of their mandatory schooling or after they leave school to encourage them to move into further education (OEAD n.d.).

Guidance in Higher Education

In upper secondary schools, Austria offers the 18plus: Berufs- und Studienchecker, a guidance tool combining individual and group counselling, aptitude tests, and portfolio development to help students align their skills with educational and career paths. The six Student Psychological Counselling Centres support prospective university students with their choices and with starting their academic study programmes, coach them in their personal development and provide advice regarding academic and personal concerns. In Austrian universities, careers service centres provide guidance regarding choices of profession and serve as recruiting service providers for young students and graduates (OEAD n.d.).

Career Guidance for adults

The Public Employment Service Austria (AMS) plays a central role in career counselling and educational guidance for individuals navigating the labour market. These services are primarily delivered by trained counsellors at the Career Information Centres (BIZ). Adults seeking to change

career paths receive tailored advice on training opportunities and professional development. In addition, the AMS regularly organises events that focus on current labour market trends, as well as interactive workshops on topics such as career orientation, self-assessment, and application strategies (OEAD n.d.).

Austria provides several specialised career guidance services targeting different groups. Springboard (Sprungbrett) is a dedicated centre supporting young women aged 15 to 21. The Fit2Work programme focuses on vocational (re-)integration, offering counselling to employees on long-term sick leave, individuals with health-related limitations, unemployed people with physical or mental impairments, as well as to companies and staff representatives. For migrants, there are four recognition counselling centres that deliver free, multilingual guidance on the validation and recognition of foreign qualifications. These centres, together with the online portal *Berufsanerkennung*, help streamline the recognition process and improve labour market integration in line with prior qualifications. In addition, the platform *Refugeeswork.at* specialises in connecting refugees with employers to facilitate access to work placements. For adults, there are provincial services such as Educational Counselling for Adults (BIBer) in Salzburg, as well as the nationwide Education and Training Guidance Networks (*Netzwerk Bildungsberatung*), which bring together regional education and counselling institutions in every federal province (Eurydice 2025b).

National policies

Central to policy is the National Lifelong Guidance (LLG) Strategy, which is part of Austria's overarching Lifelong Learning Strategy. LLG serves as one of five core strategic guidelines and is integrated into at least seven of the ten lifelong learning action-lines. Its progress is overseen annually by the National Lifelong Guidance Forum, comprising representatives from the Education Ministry, Labour Ministry, AMS, adult education networks, research institutions, teacher training colleges, and Euroguidance Austria.

The following five key priorities of the national LLG strategy are:

1. The implementation of basic competences in all curricula so that learners can make education and career decisions autonomously.
2. A focus on process orientation and monitoring to enable high-quality decision-making processes.
3. The professionalisation of counsellors and trainers.
4. Quality assurance and evaluation of offers, processes and structures.
5. The extension of access by creating offers for new target groups (OEAD n.d.).

3.2. Institutional and organisational structure

The institutional structure of career guidance in Austria is characterised by a multi-level governance model that ensures cooperation between various actors across the education and employment sectors. At the heart of this structure lies the Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research (BMBWF), which holds primary responsibility for developing policy frameworks and curricular integration of guidance at the primary and secondary levels. The Ministry ensures that career education is embedded in school curricula, especially within the Information, Counselling and Orientation for Education and Career (IBOBB) framework, and coordinates the initial and

further training of teachers delivering career-related content (OEAD n.d.). Parallel to the education sector, the Public Employment Service Austria (AMS), under the oversight of the Federal Ministry of Labour and Economy, plays a pivotal role in delivering labour-market-related guidance. Through its Career Information Centres (BIZ), AMS provides counselling, information sessions, and digital tools that are accessible both to students (in collaboration with schools) and to adults seeking retraining or employment. These services are aligned with Austria's broader employment strategy and complement the more education-focused services offered in school (YouthWiki 2024). Cooperation between BMBWF and AMS is not limited to policy level but is also evident in joint programmes. For example, school classes frequently visit BIZ centres as part of their vocational orientation curriculum, and guidance counsellors from AMS are invited to present at schools. Conversely, teachers receive support from AMS in the form of labour market information, materials, and training offers (BMAW 2024).

Furthermore, the OeAD – Austria's Agency for Education and Internationalisation, hosts the Euroguidance Austria centre, which serves as a link between Austrian guidance services and the European guidance network. Through Euroguidance, Austrian stakeholders access European research, training, and mobility tools and contribute to policy dialogues on guidance at the EU level. OeAD also plays an advisory role within national networks and supports digitalisation efforts in guidance through platforms such as the IBOBB portal (OEAD n.d.). At the regional level, the federal provinces (Länder) are responsible for implementing national strategies in their educational institutions and often initiate their own projects to strengthen guidance services, especially in rural areas. Regional educational boards (Bildungsdirektionen) coordinate school-based guidance structures and work closely with AMS regional branches, further ensuring that young people receive integrated support during transitional phases such as school-to-work or school-to-tertiary transitions (YouthWiki 2024). Social partners, such as the Wirtschaftskammer Österreich (WKÖ) and the Arbeiterkammer (AK), contribute additional counselling offers, support dual education placements, and participate in policy consultation processes. Their direct contact with companies ensures that up-to-date labour market information flows back into the guidance system. These partners are also involved in events like career expos (e.g. BeSt³, Jugend & Beruf) and in producing media and publications for young people (STVG 2019; YouthWiki 2024).

In summary, Austria's institutional framework for career guidance is built upon strong inter-agency collaboration, shared responsibilities, and clearly delineated roles across sectors. The system's coherence is supported by permanent structures like the National Forum, digital integration via central platforms, and local implementation through school-AMS partnerships and regional pilot initiatives. This interplay ensures that career guidance services are aligned with labour market developments while remaining accessible to all learners, regardless of age or background.

3.3. Implementation and availability of career guidance

In Austria, the implementation and availability of career guidance services are characterised by a multi-actor system, in which school-based structures, public employment services, and private or semi-public institutions jointly provide comprehensive and age-appropriate counselling. This system aims to ensure that guidance is not only accessible to all learners, regardless of social background, region, or ability, but also responsive to the changing needs of the labour market.

Career guidance in Austrian schools is typically delivered by career education teachers (BO-Lehrer:innen), student counsellors (Bildungsberater:innen), and where needed, school

psychologists. These professionals work collaboratively to provide both individual and group-based services, including subject-specific classes on career orientation, personal interviews, and preparatory workshops for internships or job applications (YouthWiki 2024). Outside of the school context, the Public Employment Service (AMS) plays a central role through its network of Career Information Centres (BerufsInfoZentren, BIZ). Here, specialised AMS counsellors offer tailored support to students, early school leavers, and adults seeking orientation or requalification. Their services include one-on-one counselling, aptitude assessments, CV workshops, labour market analysis, and company visits (BMAW 2024). Further actors include university career centres, such as Uniport at the University of Vienna or the career services at FH Kärnten and FH Joanneum, which support students in transitioning to the labour market or postgraduate education. These centres offer career coaching, job databases, and employer networking events (YouthWiki 2024).

Career guidance in Austria is delivered through a blended approach combining traditional face-to-face methods with digital tools. In schools, counselling is usually integrated into timetabled career orientation classes and supplemented by individual interviews. Group workshops on job exploration, application training, or soft skills development are common at both school and AMS level.

Digital platforms have gained significant importance in recent years. Key tools include:

- the 18plus Berufs- und Studienchecker (a digital guidance tool for final-year students),
- the AMS Job Barometer and Beruflexikon, which provide real-time labour market data and career profiles,
- the ibobb.at portal, which acts as a national hub for guidance-related information (BMAW 2024).

For youth with special needs or at risk of social exclusion, such as NEETs, Austria has developed specialised services like Jugendcoaching and AusbildungsFit, which offer stabilising daily structures and psychosocial support, as well as targeted training modules. These are delivered in close cooperation with AMS, NGOs, and social workers (YouthWiki 2024). Austria aims to provide universal access to career guidance services for all learners and citizens. In principle, all students from lower secondary level onwards receive structured guidance through their schools. Regional disparities, however, still pose a challenge - particularly in rural areas where access to external counsellors or AMS offices may be limited. To mitigate this, mobile counselling teams and digital resources have been introduced (BMAW 2024; YouthWiki 2024). For vulnerable groups, Austria ensures inclusive access through national measures such as the “AusBildung bis 18” programme, which mandates that all young people up to the age of 18 must engage in some form of education or training. Guidance services play a key role in implementing this programme, offering targeted support for at-risk youth (BMAW 2024). Services offered by AMS are free of charge and open to everyone, including those outside formal education. The BIZ centres are especially designed to serve as low-threshold entry points, and many of their workshops and info materials are available in multiple languages to address Austria’s increasingly diverse population (AMS 2023).

3.4. Human resources and capacity

The effectiveness and accessibility of career guidance in Austria strongly depend on the qualifications, competencies, and availability of professionals who deliver these services. As the guidance landscape spans across education and employment systems, the human resources involved are diverse, ranging from trained teachers and school-based counsellors to specialised

professionals within the Public Employment Service (AMS) and non-formal actors in youth work and adult education.

In the Austrian school system, career guidance is primarily delivered by career education teachers and educational counsellors. These roles are taken on by regular teaching staff who complete additional training modules in guidance during or after their teacher education programmes. The teacher training institutes (Pädagogische Hochschulen) offer courses that cover areas such as vocational psychology, counselling methods, and career decision-making theory. The IBOBB (Information, Counselling and Orientation for Education and Career) framework is the conceptual foundation for this training and is integrated into the curricula of these programmes (Euroguidance, n.d.; YouthWiki 2024). In the public employment sector, AMS counsellors, particularly those working in the Career Information Centres (BIZ), are full-time professionals who do structured in-house training. This includes modules on labour market trends, digital tools (e.g., Berufslexikon, Karrierekompass), communication skills, and psychosocial support. Counsellors are expected to understand the needs of various target groups, including NEETs, jobseekers in transition, or those seeking reskilling opportunities (BMAW 2024). Beyond the formal school and employment systems, Austria also supports a growing number of professionals in non-formal learning settings, including NGOs, adult education providers, youth centres, and integration services. These actors often work on a project basis (e.g., through EU-funded programmes) and may participate in cross-sectoral training initiatives supported by the Austrian Lifelong Guidance Forum or Euroguidance Austria. Courses focus on topics such as working with disadvantaged youth, intercultural competence, digital counselling tools, and the integration of labour market data into guidance services (STVG 2019).

Additionally, as career guidance becomes increasingly complex due to changing educational pathways, evolving job markets, and digitalisation, the demand for ongoing upskilling and specialisation is growing. Surveys from the AMS and the Education Ministry highlight that many counsellors express the need for more training in digital career tools, psychological methods, and migrant-sensitive counselling approaches (BMAW 2024; STVG 2019).

3.5. Content and tools

Career guidance in Austria is supported by a broad and sophisticated range of information formats and digital instruments aimed at empowering young people and adults to make informed educational and career decisions. These resources are provided both within the formal education system and through public employment services, ensuring broad accessibility across age groups and regions.

One of the most prominent platforms is the “ibobb portal” (“Information, Counselling and Orientation for Education and Career”), developed by the Austrian Federal Ministry of Education. It serves as a central hub for educators, career counsellors, and vocational orientation coordinators, offering teaching materials, links to events, gender-sensitive resources, and inclusive guidance tools. For students in their final year of upper secondary education (AHS/BHS), the “18plus – Berufs- und Studienchecker” tool offers personalised career and study planning. This tool helps students match their individual strengths and interests with concrete education and career options. In the 2023/24 academic year, 367 schools participated, with over 23.000 students using the tool (BMAW, 2024).

The Public Employment Service (AMS) provides a comprehensive set of digital guidance tools:

- The Career Compass (Berufskompass) helps users identify suitable professions based on interests, values, and competencies.
- The Interest Test supports orientation from the age of 12 and is available in multiple languages.
- The AMS Berufslexikon offers detailed profiles of around 1.800 occupations, including required qualifications, training paths, employment opportunities, and income levels.
- The Career Information System (BIS) allows users to search occupations based on specific skillsets, with over 25.000 competencies and more than 17.500 occupational entries (AMS 2025).

In addition to digital platforms, AMS Career Information Centres (BIZ) offer a wide range of hands-on materials and methods, including:

- Educational games, videos, and tactile tools for self-assessment.
- Company visits, career fairs, and CV workshops.
- Multilingual resources to support migrants and non-native speakers (AMS 2025).

A core component of Austrian guidance tools is the systematic integration of up-to-date labour market data:

- The AMS Job Barometer, updated monthly, highlights in-demand sectors, regional labour needs, and future employment trends.
- Wage statistics, employment forecasts, and qualification requirements are regularly included in tools like the Gehaltskompass and Karrierekompass (AMS, 2025).

This alignment ensures that guidance is grounded in economic realities and supports Austria's broader employment and skills strategies.

3.6. Quality assurance and challenges

Quality assurance in Austria's career guidance is implemented primarily through institutional efforts. A school-wide Quality Management System, based on the Quality Framework, was introduced in 2021 to elevate school-wide guidance processes and outcomes. Higher education institutions are required by law to maintain their own quality management systems in accordance with the Austrian University Law (2002) and the Higher Education Act (2005) - mandating accreditation, audits, and internal evaluations. Moreover, the IBOBB quality label offers outsider oversight for career counselling services. Agencies, such as AMS's Career Information Centres (BIZ), undergo external evaluation to ensure neutrality, client orientation, structural adequacy, gender sensitivity, and quality development (YouthWiki 2024). This affords users a degree of confidence and consistency across independent providers. Despite the lack of nationally unified outcome metrics, some evaluation practices exist. For example, data from apprenticeship programmes show graduation rates around 87.5% by 2022, highlighting the effectiveness of career-linked paths in VET (BMAW 2024). Studies by WIFO also underscore positive outcomes of AMS-funded quality programmes in enhancing job integration for unemployed individuals (WIFO 2022).

Several challenges threaten the quality and reach of career guidance across Austria:

- Evaluation gaps: While qualitative feedback is common, objective, longitudinal outcome evaluations are scarce. Most assessments focus on short-term satisfaction rather than longer-term employment or educational transitions (Kasy & Lehner 2025).
- Digital divide: Despite digital infrastructure growth, rural or underserved regions may experience limited access to online guidance tools and resources (OECD 2021).

Nevertheless, Austria is proactively addressing these challenges through reforms and pilot projects. Digital tools such as ibobb, 18plus, and 3D-BIZ expand accessibility, especially for remote regions. The Youth Coaching initiative aims to target at-risk youth and those transitioning from school to employment (BMAW 2024).

4. Presentation of results

This report presents an evaluation of career guidance in Austria, combining empirical findings from 25 interviews and two focus groups with students, parents, and teachers with an analysis of the broader institutional framework at the national level. The dual perspective allows for both a bottom-up and a top-down view: on the one hand, the everyday experiences of those directly involved in the guidance process, and on the other, the structural and organizational framework within which guidance is delivered. The purpose of this evaluation is to identify strengths and weaknesses of the Austrian system, to reflect on the effectiveness of current practices, and to suggest ways forward in order to improve accessibility, quality, and consistency of career guidance across the country.

Educational guidance in Austria is situated at the intersection of education policy, labour market policy, and social policy. Its main goal is to support young people in developing self-awareness, identifying interests and strengths, and making informed choices about their educational and professional futures. Yet the task is complex: students face a dynamic labour market, parents often struggle with the diversity of options, and teachers are asked to provide orientation while managing multiple responsibilities. By combining system-level analysis with qualitative insights, this report provides a holistic picture of the opportunities and challenges of career guidance in Austria.

4.1. Primary School Students

The interviews and focus groups with lower secondary students provide valuable insights into how young people perceive their future, what kinds of support they experience, and which barriers and needs they articulate in relation to their educational and career pathways. Their voices highlight not only individual perspectives but also structural challenges.

a. Perception of one's own future

Many students already have initial ideas about their future careers, though these are often vague and strongly driven by personal interests, role models, or media influences. Artistic, creative, or sports-related careers are frequently mentioned, alongside some technical professions. However, these aspirations are less the result of systematic information and more the product of individual preferences or impressions. At the same time, students emphasize that they feel overwhelmed

when asked to make “final” decisions at such a young age. Their future plans are perceived as flexible and subject to change. While some students are optimistic, others express doubts and feel under pressure from the education system to choose too early. Furthermore, students emphasized the importance of making their own career choices, rather than following the expectations or preferences of their parents or peers. The most important thing when choosing a career path is to be interested in the field and enjoy what you do.

b. Experience and support

The main sources of information for students are parents, siblings, friends and the internet. Teachers are mentioned, but less often as proactive supporters. Many students report valuing internships or short work experiences to explore future options. However, some highlight a lack of motivation or opportunities to engage in such experiences. Peers play a crucial role: students exchange views and seek reassurance from their friends. Additionally, students get their ideas for future professions through television, social media or AI.

c. Barriers and uncertainties

A central barrier for many students is the perception of time pressure. They feel important decisions must be made “too early,” which causes stress and decreases motivation. The fear of choosing the wrong career path or making mistakes was also mentioned frequently. In addition, a lack of knowledge about education systems and career opportunities leads to uncertainty. Further uncertainties relate to fears about financial insecurity and rapid technological developments, such as AI. Some students mentioned that they’re not afraid of making the wrong choice, as there are many opportunities to correct their path and make better decisions later on.

d. Expectations and needs

Students express a strong desire for more practical, hands-on information and direct insights into the world of work. They find theoretical input in the classroom harder to connect with, while real-life experiences with companies or professionals are motivating and memorable. Individualized counselling is another central expectation. Students want guidance that reflects their own strengths and interests rather than generic advice. They also stress the need to talk to professionals from the industry they’re interested in to gain more knowledge and ask questions.

4.2. Secondary School Students

The perspectives of upper secondary students provide critical insights into how adolescents approach educational and career choices at a stage where decisions have more immediate consequences for their future. Interviews and focus groups reveal that these students are increasingly aware of their opportunities and challenges but also face substantial pressures.

a. Perception of one's own future

Upper secondary students generally have more concrete ideas about their future compared to younger peers. Many already identify specific career fields, such as technology, medicine, business, military or creative industries. Their choices are influenced by both personal interests and pragmatic considerations, such as job security or earning potential, even considering technological improvement. Despite this greater clarity, many still feel uncertain about whether they are making the “right” choice. Some students express fear of committing to a path that might later feel

restrictive. A few expressed uncertainty about their current school choice. Others found their true passion only after initially making the wrong decision.

b. Experience and support

Although the subject of career orientation is offered and provides valuable opportunities, students often do not actively take advantage of it. In these classes, various professions were introduced using materials from the Chamber of Commerce, giving students initial insights into potential career fields. The school also provided extensive support through workshops and individual assistance, such as help with writing applications. Starting in the third year, students had the opportunity to practically try out different professions during a dedicated career exploration week. However, there is a clear desire for more guidance and counselling from teachers. Only a few students attend career counselling services such as open-days or job-fairs. Parents remain central, but teachers, career counselors, and online resources play a growing role. Peers are still influential, though students begin to rely more on professional advice and structured information sources. Some students mention that school-organized career fairs or job orientation events were particularly useful. Others stated that a personality test could be helpful in learning more about one's interests and strengths.

c. Barriers and uncertainties

One of the greatest barriers for upper secondary students is the pressure of final decisions. They are acutely aware that the end of school marks a transition point, and they often feel unprepared to handle its complexity, such as applications for apprenticeship or how to handle frustrations after rejections. One of the main concerns is, if they're on the right path. Many students expressed uncertainty about moving from lower to upper secondary school. Additionally, some students saw parallels to Eva's story: no clear plan, no particular interests, and being too comfortable to initiate change or make use of available career counselling services. Furthermore, it was mentioned that students aged 14 to 19 face high stress levels and are forced to make important decisions without sufficient time for preparation.

d. Expectations and needs

Upper secondary students articulate clear expectations for effective support. They want personalized, realistic, and honest advice-guidance that acknowledges their individual strengths and constraints rather than generic suggestions. Additionally they want to learn how to write résumés and applications. They also consider practical offers, such as youth workshops with short courses on different professions, to be very helpful in supporting their career orientation. The students even highlighted the importance of having a backup-plan if the original one didn't work out. Many stress the need for labor market information in schools or real life experiences through internships. Students also express a desire for practical preparation for adult life. Beyond career choice, they want to learn about financial literacy, application skills, and workplace culture. Theoretical lessons alone are perceived as insufficient. Some also suggest that schools should provide more digital tools (e.g. TikTok, short videos), such as interactive platforms that help match personal interests with study/career options or give informations about diverse job opportunities.

4.3. Parents

Parents play a central role in shaping the educational and career pathways of their children. The interviews and focus groups with parents highlight how they perceive their children's future, the kinds of support they provide, the barriers they encounter, and their expectations for schools and society. Their perspectives shed light on both the strengths and limitations of current guidance structures.

a. Perceptions of career planning

Parents expressed mixed views on the importance of career planning during primary and secondary school. Some see it as less important, emphasizing that one advantage of the Austrian education system is its flexibility, allowing students to change their educational path at any time. They believe the pressure to decide in the fourth grade of primary school is inappropriate, as children at this age still need time to discover their talents, and the current school system does not sufficiently foster individual strengths. However, parents agree that early orientation can be helpful if it is not treated as a final decision, since interests and maturity levels develop differently for each child. Many suggested that career guidance should start in lower secondary school, for example through presentations of various professions, to help children build an early understanding of different career fields. Others stressed that this is highly relevant, as the choice of secondary school after primary school already lays an important foundation for the future educational path. In addition, most parents said that their children currently have no concrete plans for their future career. Many parents express a desire for their children to pursue stable and secure careers, though they also recognize the value of personal interests. Some parents emphasize academic pathways (such as university studies), while others highlight the advantages of vocational education. A recurring theme is concern about the uncertain labour market. Parents worry whether their children will find secure jobs and whether the skills taught in school match future demands. While most want to support their children's aspirations, they also feel the responsibility of guiding them toward realistic choices. Nevertheless, parents mentioned the importance of passion and interests for educational and career choices.

b. Role and support

Parents see themselves as the primary supporters in their children's decision-making, but many admit feeling ill-equipped to provide professional guidance. Their own experiences, sometimes shaped by outdated job markets, often limit the advice they can offer. Another difficulty is the projection of their own expectations or unfulfilled ambitions onto their children, which can lead to pressure and push them toward educational paths that may not align with their individual strengths or interests. Though parents support their children through various means, such as extracurricular programs like "children's universities," which provide valuable insights into different fields of study and help with early career orientation or simply through talking and discussing the possibilities. It was mentioned that children who are indecisive, insecure, or still immature are the ones who need career guidance and support the most. However, they emphasize that as children grow older, the responsibility for career planning increasingly shifts to the young people themselves, who are expected to take initiative. Some parents rely on the internet or social networks to gather information, while others feel lost in navigating the education system. Support practices vary widely: while some parents actively encourage internships, extracurricular activities, and career exploration, others focus mainly on academic performance. Additionally, parents highlighted the importance of open dialogue and making decisions with their children rather than over their heads.

c. Barriers and uncertainties

Parents face their own uncertainties when trying to guide their children. Many struggle with complex educational systems, admission criteria, and the variety of available career options. Some express frustration at the lack of clear information and the pressure of making decisions with long-term consequences. Financial concerns are a significant barrier. Parents worry about the costs of higher education or training relocation. Families with limited financial means feel restricted in encouraging certain pathways, even if these align with their children's talents. Additionally, students from middle schools (Hauptschule) frequently face disadvantages in securing apprenticeships, as they are often given lower priority, which significantly limits their career prospects. Another challenge is the transition from school to the professional world, as many young people struggle with presenting themselves and showcasing their skills in front of strangers. Additionally, parents noted that social media strongly influences how young people perceive career options, often presenting unrealistic or misleading images of reality. Additionally, parents expressed concerns about an uncertain future and the impact of digitalization. As a result, a different attitude towards work has emerged - work is no longer seen as the top priority. At the same time, competition and performance pressure in the job market, as well as limited mobility options for students in rural areas, were mentioned as major challenges when planning their careers.

d. Expectations and needs

Parents clearly express the need for better collaboration with schools and professional career services. They want up-to-date and reliable information on labour markets, higher education, and vocational training options. Moreover, a test to assess students' strengths and weaknesses within the school setting was suggested, in order to better evaluate suitable career options. Many parents mentioned a Montessori-style approach, suggesting that schools should focus more on the individual strengths of each student and actively support them, rather than treating all children the same. Many call for individualized counselling not only for students but also for parents, to ensure they can provide appropriate guidance at home. They also expect schools to prepare their children with life skills beyond academic knowledge, such as financial literacy and job application skills. Parents believe these competencies are crucial for navigating adulthood and employment. Practical exposure to the world of work should start at an early age, as many children today no longer have the everyday opportunities to observe different professions of their parents, which makes it difficult for them to understand work processes. Company visits and job-shadowing opportunities would therefore be valuable in giving students a basic understanding of various career paths. In addition, clearer information about school options is needed, with parents and teachers sharing personal experiences rather than relying solely on brochures or written materials. Career orientation days, in which companies actively present themselves to students, are seen as particularly useful, especially if they allow for direct interaction and insight into the workplace. Parents highlighted the positive impact of the mandatory 'Berufspraktische Tage' (career orientation days) in Austrian schools, where students can spend a week gaining insight into a potential future workplace.

4.4. Teachers

Teachers play a critical role in guiding students through their educational and career journeys. The interviews and focus groups conducted with teachers highlight their perspectives on students' development, the challenges they face in providing guidance, and their observations of systemic strengths and weaknesses.

a. Perception of Career Planning

Younger children, especially those in preschool and primary school are generally not yet able to form clear ideas about future professions. In primary and lower secondary education, career guidance is rarely addressed, as schools often lack the necessary resources. According to teachers, children in Austria are required to make decisions about their educational path too early. She advocates for a comprehensive school system up to the age of 14, as even this age is still too early for such far-reaching decisions. While adolescents do engage with thoughts about their future, they often struggle to make decisions, as the vast number of options feels overwhelming. Many young people perceive the future as uncertain due to constant societal and technological changes, which leads to hesitation in engaging seriously with long-term career planning. Moreover, teachers emphasized that making mistakes or initially choosing the wrong career path is not a major problem. Austria's job market is flexible and adaptive, allowing individuals to start a new career or vocational training at any time. Many teachers know students who eventually found their passion by taking an unconventional or indirect path.

b. Current tools and support

Austria offers a wide range of career guidance services such as youth coaching, educational counselling, and the school subject "career orientation". However, it remains unclear whether these offers actually reach and are used by students and their parents. Teachers generally receive information about opportunities like job fairs, which they can pass on to their students. In addition, there are specific initiatives such as the mandatory career orientation week, which gives young people practical insights into various professional fields. Nevertheless, teachers report mixed experiences in supporting students with career orientation. Some feel well-positioned to provide basic advice, drawing from their knowledge of education systems. Others admit they lack specialized expertise and therefore rely on external resources such as career counselors, job fairs, or online platforms. A recurring observation is that students are strongly influenced by their families and peers. Many teachers emphasize that their primary responsibility remains academic instruction, and career guidance is often seen as an additional burden. Time constraints and limited institutional support are cited as reasons why teachers cannot engage more deeply in this area. Teachers' role in career orientation is supportive but secondary. They often act as facilitators rather than central advisors, pointing students toward other resources.

c. Challenges and Needs

Teachers believe there are many different barriers that prevent high school students from actively planning their future. One of the main reasons is a lack of interest in topics related to school or future careers. Many students are more focused on their free time, friendships, and personal development. In addition, factors such as school-related stress, family issues or pressure, and the sense that the future is still far away and therefore not yet relevant all contribute to this reluctance. Teachers think that many young people are already thinking about the future to some extent, this particular age is a developmental phase in which other things take priority. Building interpersonal relationships, finding one's place in a peer group, and forming a sense of identity often feel more

urgent than making long-term career decisions. Furthermore, smartphones and digital distractions, as well as increasing performance pressure, whether through grades, report cards, or portfolio requirements for admission to certain schools, add to the complexity of the situation. On a systemic level, they point to insufficient time allocated to career guidance within the curriculum and the lack of standardized structures across schools. In addition, information gaps pose a challenge: many teachers feel they are not sufficiently informed about rapidly changing labor market demands, emerging professions, or new educational pathways, which limits their ability to offer up-to-date guidance. Finally, some teachers express uncertainty about their own role in the career guidance process. They are unsure how much advice they are expected or allowed to give, and some fear crossing professional boundaries.

d. Expectation and cooperation

Teachers mentioned the idea to incorporate topics such as life planning more actively into regular lessons, in order to encourage students to reflect on their future in a structured and meaningful way. Another idea would be to introduce mandatory internships or at least career exploration days, even in academic school types such as Gymnasien. This would allow students to gain early practical experience and develop a better understanding of different career paths. Field trips to visit different professional fields and workplaces could add valuable practical relevance. Another suggestion is to invite professionals into the classroom to talk about their personal career journeys. Such firsthand, authentic stories resonate more with students than reading information from brochures. When a person shares their experiences in a relatable and honest way, it can have a much greater impact. In general, there is criticism of how open days at schools are currently conducted. Many schools try to present themselves as the "best option" through activities like science experiments or sports stations. Instead, it was suggested that prospective students should experience a typical school day with regular classes to get a realistic and unbiased impression. Finally, multiple school visits and excursions to explore various professions, followed by in-depth classroom discussions, were seen as particularly helpful approaches to support informed decision-making.

In Austria, there is a lack of concrete support structures for parents to effectively accompany their children in making educational and career-related decisions especially when parents themselves are unsure how to help. Parents can support their children in everyday school life by actively engaging with organisational and academic matters through asking questions, giving praise or constructive feedback, and being involved in the learning process. Successful career orientation depends on the cooperation between parents, teachers, and the students' own initiative. Austria offers good opportunities in this area, but making the most of them requires active engagement and open communication.

4.5. Cross-Cutting Findings

The analysis of focus groups and interviews with students, parents, and teachers reveals several cross-cutting findings regarding educational and career guidance in Austria. One major issue identified across all groups is the pressure placed on young people to make far-reaching decisions about their educational paths at a very early age. Many students feel overwhelmed by the expectation to define their future careers while their interests and strengths are still developing. Although Austria's education system offers a degree of flexibility, the lack of structured guidance and support often limits the ability to make informed decisions. Career orientation in schools is

often perceived as too abstract and lacking practical relevance. Students, parents, and teachers alike emphasized the value of real-life experiences, such as internships, company visits, or direct conversations with professionals. Mandatory practical days in schools were seen as particularly effective, while purely theoretical lessons failed to leave a lasting impression.

Teachers reported that career orientation is frequently treated as a secondary issue in schools, with limited time and inconsistent implementation. Many educators feel they lack up-to-date knowledge about labour market trends and evolving career options and are unsure about the extent of their responsibilities in this area. Parents, too, play a crucial role in supporting their children but often feel ill-equipped, especially if their own career paths were shaped by different economic realities. Some parents project their own expectations onto their children, while others struggle to navigate the complexity of the education system. They expressed a strong desire for better cooperation with schools, more accessible information, and personalized support to help them guide their children more effectively.

Emotional and social factors also emerged as key barriers. For many students, especially adolescents, career planning competes with more immediate concerns such as friendships, identity development, or coping with academic stress. A lack of motivation, fear of failure, and feelings of insecurity can hinder their willingness to engage with career guidance offers. Social media was also identified as a strong influence, often shaping unrealistic ideas about work and success.

Across all groups, there was a clear demand for more personalized, strengths-based guidance. Students want support that takes their individual interests and life circumstances into account, rather than receiving generic advice. Tools such as personality tests, reflection exercises, or digital platforms were seen as useful if they are accessible, engaging, and tailored to the target audience. Finally, participants emphasized that career orientation should go beyond job information and prepare young people for adult life, with a focus on everyday competencies such as financial literacy, job application skills, and life planning. Overall, the findings highlight the importance of integrated, accessible, and holistic career guidance that involves all key actors: students, parents, and educators alike.

4.6. Conclusion

The combined findings from interviews and focus groups reveal a complex but coherent picture of career orientation in the school context. Across all groups, one of the most prominent themes is the tension between aspirations and uncertainty. Students at both lower and upper secondary levels express interest in shaping their future but feel constrained by limited knowledge, pressure to decide too early, and fears of making irreversible mistakes. While younger students tend to describe vague, interest-driven ideas, older students articulate more concrete plans but struggle with balancing personal passions against pragmatic considerations such as job security, technological development and financial stability. Parents emerge as highly influential but also as a group under pressure. They often see themselves as the primary source of support, yet many lack up-to-date knowledge about educational pathways and labour market dynamics. Teachers, for their part, acknowledge their role in observing and supporting students but generally describe themselves as secondary actors in career orientation. They point to systemic barriers such as time constraints, lack of standardized structures, and insufficient training that limit their capacity to offer individualized guidance.

The data also reveal systemic strengths and weaknesses of the education system. On the positive side, schools are seen as trusted environments that provide structured learning and occasional opportunities for career orientation, such as fairs, projects, or internships. When such activities take place, both students and parents value them highly. The presence of dedicated teachers and counsellors, even if limited, also shows the system's potential to support young people holistically. Additionally, the flexibility of the Austrian education system was frequently highlighted: many participants felt reassured knowing that alternative career paths remain accessible, even after making an initial 'wrong' choice. However, weaknesses were mentioned too. Career orientation is often described as fragmented, dependent on individual teachers' initiative rather than embedded into the curriculum. Access to internships or practical experiences is inconsistent, leading to unequal opportunities across regions and schools. Furthermore, the education system is criticized for placing decision-making pressure on students too early, without equipping them with the necessary information or resilience. Teachers themselves feel underprepared for guidance roles, reflecting gaps in professional development. Parents also note that communication between schools and families is not systematic, leaving them uncertain about how best to support their children.

Taken together, the findings underline several core challenges:

1. Decision-making pressure affects students at all stages, often undermining motivation and confidence.
2. Information gaps exist not only for students but also for parents and teachers, reflecting a broader need for updated, accessible resources.
3. Systemic weaknesses in coordination, curriculum integration, and teacher training limit the effectiveness of career orientation.

At the same time, the findings highlight clear expectations and opportunities. All groups call for more practical, real-world experiences and closer cooperation between schools, families, and external partners such as employers and career counsellors. Students, parents, and teachers alike emphasize the need for individualized support that combines information with emotional reassurance.

In summary, the main outcome is that career orientation is not the responsibility of any single actor but a collective process. Effective guidance requires collaboration, accessible resources, and systemic frameworks that empower students while supporting parents and teachers. Strengthening these elements can reduce uncertainty, address inequalities, and help young people transition with greater confidence into education, training, and the labour market.

5. Summary

Career guidance and development in Austria must be understood in close connection to the country's education system. Austria's educational landscape is characterised by a strong vocational orientation: after completing nine years of compulsory schooling, approximately three quarters of students move into vocational or pre-vocational pathways. The dual training system, in which apprentices spend around 80% of their time in companies and 20% in vocational schools, is internationally recognised as a strength, as it ensures close links between education and the labour market. However, this structure also requires young people to make career decisions at an early stage, often around the age of 14 or 15, when many lack the necessary experience to make informed choices. The education system offers a wide variety of school types – from academic upper secondary schools (AHS) to technical colleges (HTLs) and vocational middle and higher schools (BMS/BHS). This diversity ensures flexibility, yet regional disparities are significant. Urban centres such as Vienna, Graz, or Innsbruck provide a broad range of options, while rural and peripheral areas often offer only limited access to secondary and tertiary institutions. This structural imbalance contributes to youth outmigration, especially from regions such as Waldviertel, Osttirol, Kärntner Unterland, and Murau, where students frequently commute long distances or relocate permanently to pursue education.

Career guidance is embedded in both the education and labour market systems. Within schools, guidance is implemented through the IBOBB framework (Information, Counselling and Orientation for Education and Career). From lower secondary level onwards, students receive career orientation classes, individual counselling, and exposure to real-world experiences such as internships or career fairs. In upper secondary education, digital tools like the 18plus "Berufs- und Studienchecker" provide structured support for decision-making. Higher education institutions operate career centres and psychological counselling services to accompany students into academic or professional careers. Outside the education sector, the Public Employment Service (AMS) plays a central role. Its Career Information Centres (BIZ) provide individual counselling, aptitude testing, and access to labour market data. Digital resources such as the Career Compass, the Berufslexikon, and the AMS Job Barometer ensure that guidance is based on up-to-date labour market information. Social partners including the Chamber of Commerce and Chamber of Labour as well as NGOs add further services, often targeted at specific groups such as migrants, women, or youth at risk of exclusion. Specialised programmes like Jugendcoaching, AusbildungsFit, or Fit2Work support young people with additional needs and ensure inclusive access to career guidance.

Despite this comprehensive structure, the research highlights fragmentation and uneven implementation. Guidance provision in schools often depends on individual teachers' engagement and the availability of resources. Teachers frequently report feeling underprepared for guidance roles, as their training focuses primarily on pedagogy rather than labour market knowledge. Parents also face difficulties in navigating the system and often feel left alone in supporting their children's decisions. Students, meanwhile, express that career orientation is too theoretical and would benefit from more practical experiences, such as internships, company visits, and direct encounters with working life.

The qualitative findings based on 25 interviews and two focus groups with students, parents, and teachers underline these systemic weaknesses. Students value the opportunities they receive in school but often feel pressured to decide too early, particularly given the long-term implications of choosing between academic and vocational tracks. Parents demand clearer communication and

structured guidance offers, while teachers see the need for more time, training, and cooperation with external experts. All three groups emphasise the importance of real-world exposure and individualised counselling.

Regional disparities intensify these challenges. In the Waldviertel, youth outmigration is driven by limited educational opportunities and weak local labour markets. Osttirol faces a steep demographic decline among young people, reducing the pool of potential apprentices and students. The Kärntner Unterland, while economically diverse, struggles with youth unemployment and relatively low participation in higher education. Murau in Styria exemplifies the challenges of rural regions: depopulation, limited transport connectivity, and few tertiary options push young people to relocate. In all these regions, guidance services are crucial for maintaining youth engagement, yet local provision is often scarce. National strategies aim to counterbalance these weaknesses. The Austrian Lifelong Learning Strategy includes the Lifelong Guidance (LLG) framework, which prioritises decision-making competences, professionalisation of counsellors, quality assurance, and access for new target groups. The National Forum for Lifelong Guidance brings together ministries, AMS, social partners, and research institutions to coordinate policy. However, evaluations show that while structures exist, consistent implementation and long-term monitoring are still limited.

In conclusion, Austria's career guidance and development system combines strong institutional foundations with clear challenges. The vocational orientation of the education system provides robust links to the labour market, but the early age of decision-making creates risks for young people who lack experience and information. The dual provision of guidance in schools and through AMS ensures broad access but often results in fragmented delivery. Qualitative evidence reveals strong demand for more practical experiences, better communication, and improved training for teachers and counsellors. Regional disparities further underline the need for targeted support in rural areas. To strengthen career guidance, Austria must enhance coordination among stakeholders, expand digital and mobile services, and ensure that all young people, regardless of region or background, have access to high-quality, practical, and individualised guidance.

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