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International classification of Austrian vocational education and training (VET)

Appropriate positioning in ISCED as a challenge for educational policy

The International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) is the classification system for education that is in worldwide use today. Its relevance is not only the result of the importance of international educational ranking systems in political discourse but also of its use to classify the employees' and companies' qualification in international job advertisements. For the national states it is important to represent their certificates and diplomas in a way that they are classified as fittingly as possible in international communications. For educational policies it is indispensable to have realistic comparative figures as the basis for assigning resources and conducting structural reforms.

At its core, ISCED classifies – according to its objective – education and training paths on six levels. It is well-known in comparative research that education systems are traditionally characterised by pronounced differences. To tackle this diversity, international classifications have been developed which aim to serve as reference frameworks that are as neutral as possible. But as there are no standards for comparison, other criteria are applied. These criteria are connected – as is shown by a more detailed analysis – with the educational tradition of the English-speaking countries, particularly the educational model of the US. This educational model is characterised in particular by an internally differentiated education system until the end of the upper secondary level, vocational training in the college system or exclusively in company-based continuing vocational education and training (CVET) and the Bachelor/Master-system in the university sector. It is hardly possible to appropriately classify those countries with ISCED which differentiate according to interests and requirements at the upper secondary level and provide labour market-oriented qualifications. This also applies to Austria. This study therefore aims to search for the causes of the underestimation of vocational qualifications in the ISCED classification in order to develop an improved international presentation of the Austrian VET qualifications.

Levels 4 and 5 as problematic areas of the 6-level classification system

Of particular importance for the country comparison are Levels 4 and 5 of the six-level classification sys-

tem ISCED. Level 4 aims to present „post-secondary non-tertiary“ education at the international level. Level 5 – i.e. the tertiary sector – is divided in ISCED into an occupationally-specific tertiary sector 5B and an academic tertiary sector 5A. Level 6 refers to the doctoral level. Many countries only rarely assign their education programmes to Level 4 (A and B) or do not do this at all. Instead they assign them to Level 5B or also 5A. The Austrian programmes for certified nursing staff are classified at Level 4B, in other European countries however – where the same contents are provided – at 5B or also 5A. The related EU directive from 2005 (a law) guarantees that training contents are equivalent.

In ISCED the tertiary sector is not considered equivalent with university or higher education as is usually the case in Austria, because in ISCED there is also a tertiary sector B. Since in the English-speaking countries, where the universities decide on the admission of students, there is no qualification that would be comparable to the Matura (general HE access qualification), the tertiary sector is not defined by the requirement of a Matura, as is usually the case in Austria.

If – according to an OECD publication from 2009 – in a country comparison between 30 percent and 86 percent of a comparable age group enter programmes of the type ISCED 5A („HE institution“) each year, this raises doubts about how realistic the educational comparison category ISCED 5A is, especially because no correlation to socio-economically relevant variables can be seen.

TABLE 1:

Rates of beginners of tertiary studies* in a country comparison by gender, 2007, in %

OECD countries (selection)	Tertiary sector: ISCED 5B, programmes of at least 2 years' duration			Tertiary sector ISCED 5A, programmes of at least 3 years' duration		
	Total	M	F	Total**	M	F
Relatively high study rate 5A						
Australia	-	-	-	86	75	96
Poland	1	-	1	78	72	85
New Zealand	48	42	54	76	63	90
Slovak Rep.	1	-	1	74	61	87
Sweden	9	8	9	73	62	85
Finland	-	-	-	71	62	80
Norway	-	-	1	66	52	81
USA	-	-	-	65	57	72
Relatively low study rate 5A						
Greece	23	21	24	43	33	55
Austria	7	6	7	42	38	45
Spain	21	19	22	41	35	48
Estonia	32	24	40	39	32	46
Switzerland	16	19	13	39	38	40
Germany	13	10	16	34	34	35
Belgium	37	30	44	30	29	31
OECD-Ø 2008	15	13	17	56	50	63

* Sum total of net study beginners' rates for each individual age group

** In some countries, the adjusted beginners' rate (without international students) is clearly below the given rate (e.g. in Austria 32% vs. 42%).

Source: OECD 2009

Countries with study rates of 78 percent (Poland) to 86 percent (Australia) in the tertiary sector A („HE institution“) have, by all means, opened up this sector to a wider spectrum of talents and qualifications than countries that can be found at the bottom of the list (Belgium with 30 percent or Germany with 34 percent). This also includes initial vocational training programmes and qualification-oriented continuing vocational education and training paths which in Austria are located at the upper secondary level, e.g. programmes for certified nursing staff, bookkeeping or IT specialists, etc. It is obvious that English-speaking countries and countries with a comparable educational structure where „tertiary qualification rates“ (5B and 5A: occupationally-specific and academic tertiary sector) of 70 or 80 percent can be found per age group have a wider definition of tertiary education. Internationally and therefore also in the ISCED classification system everything is considered as „tertiary“ which starts after „upper secondary school education“ and comprises a learning period of at least two years' duration.

EU benchmark of at least 40 percent of higher education qualifications by 2020 as a problem of definition

A still more transparency-reducing effect is obtained by the use of ISCED by Eurostat and Cedefop, where ISCED is combined at three levels and thus reduced. In almost all tables and statements issued by these institutions about qualifications, the ISCED categories 5B, 5A and 6 are combined as a „high qualification level“ and ISCED Levels 3 and 4 as „intermediary qualification levels“. Many countries have no or only few qualifications at ISCED 4A or 4B, therefore this does not play a role for these countries. In Austria, however, there is a major difference between Levels 3 and 4, e.g. between business school (Handelsschule) and the college of business administration (Handelsakademie).

This reduction of ISCED to three levels has also been made by the definition of the qualifications of ISCED 5B, 5A or 6 as „higher education attainment“ in the benchmark for the new education strategy 2020 (cf. European Council 2009). The objective by 2020 is that at least 40 percent of 30-34 year-olds should have tertiary quali-

cations within the meaning of ISCED. As can be seen by the rates of entrants and graduates, this will not represent a problem for the majority of countries. For Austria, a tertiary rate of at least 40 percent is only possible after a redefinition of what constitutes tertiary education (or higher education).

TABLE 2:

Post-secondary/tertiary graduation rates by ISCED categories, 2007, in %

Countries (selection)	„Post-secondary non-tertiary“ graduations (ISCED 4A* + 4B**)	Tertiary programmes of at least 2 years' duration (ISCED 5B***)	Higher studies of at least 3 years' duration (ISCED 5A)
New Zealand	-	24,9	54,8
Australia	-	16,7	60,6
Ireland	-	23,7	45,0
Japan	-	27,7	38,8
Finland	-	0,1	59,8
Switzerland	10,6	25,0	29,1
United Kingdom	-	15,3	38,7
Poland	-	0,1	49,0
United States	-	10,1	36,5
Netherlands	-	-	46,6
Spain	-	14,0	32,4
Norway	1,1	1,0	44,4
Sweden	-	5,4	39,9
Czech Republic	22,5	4,8	35,3
Italy	-	-	35,0
Germany	18,3	10,4	23,4
Austria	24,2	7,1	22,1
OECD average	3,8	11,8	38,5
EU-19 country mean	4,7	11,3	37,9

* in Austria this includes the VET college main form and the VET college for people in employment

** in Austria this includes the schools for certified nursing staff

*** in Austria this includes e.g. the VET post-secondary college courses or the foreperson courses, but not the VET college main form and the VET college for people in employment

Source: OECD 2009, p. 64 and 82

Reform approach by ISCED 2011/12 with the focus on tertiary education

The insufficiency of ISCED-97 in the post-secondary/tertiary sectors is one of the reasons why this system of comparison is planned to be newly designed. The current proposal of the ISCED-2011/12 version comprises seven categories (or levels?) to record post-secondary or tertiary education. There should be the following „programmes“ and „degrees“ at post-secondary or tertiary level of the new ISCED-framework:

OVERVIEW 1:

Post-secondary/tertiary structure in the proposal for the ISCED 2011/12 version (UNESCO, September 2009)

- 0 Advanced vocational education programmes
(ISCED-97 mostly ISCED 4B)
- 1 Short tertiary programmes
(ISCED-97 mostly 5B)
- 2 Medium first degree programmes
(ISCED-97 mostly 5A)
- 3a Long first degree programmes – low
(ISCED-97 mostly 5A)
- 3b Long first degree programmes – high
(ISCED-97 mostly 5A)
- 4 Second/further qualification/degree programmes
(ISCED-97 mostly 5A)
- 5 Advanced research/doctoral programmes
(ISCED-97 mostly 6)

Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics 2009, p. 4ff.

This is extremely remote from the understanding of the Austrian higher learning tradition and will further aggravate the risk of underestimating the Austrian educational qualifications. In discussions about a European reference framework for qualifications it has already been stated that the ISCED system is not sufficient for comparing professional qualifications due to the diversity of education systems. Therefore an outcome-oriented approach has been developed in the form of the EQF (European Qualifications Framework). Due to the importance and topicality of the subject, however, it is impossible to wait any longer to see how the new ISCED version and the EQF will develop in the longer term.

Recommendations for improved ISCED classifications in Austria

The main reason for the classification-related underestimation of the advanced fields of vocational education and training in Austria is that in the national education system the Matura acts as a „watershed“ between secondary and tertiary education, that tertiary education is restricted to higher education, thus creating a structure that can only be compared with difficulty at the inter-

national level. To enhance international transparency it would be necessary to rely on the ISCED logic – hence the order of educational programmes and the separation of the tertiary sector into an occupationally-oriented and an academic sector.

What is needed therefore in the international presentation of the Austrian education system is orientation towards the ISCED logic rather than towards the logic of the traditional Austrian education system. This affects e.g. the add-on courses (Aufbaulehrgänge) and the VET college for people in employment (BHS für Berufstätige), which internationally must be clearly rated as tertiary as they require qualifications from the upper secondary level. Any re-rating of the main forms of VET college, the learning outcomes of which are equivalent in the labour market, will require legal changes. Switching the 5-year main form to the „3 + 2 model“ (final certificate after 3 years, then a 2 year diploma level) would be such a change.

The restructuring of the VET schools and colleges (BMHSs) is essential but is not yet sufficient. It would also be important to include – as is widely done internationally – regulated vocational programmes and other qualification-oriented CVET programmes so that underestimation of initial and continuing training outcomes in Austria does not have to be systematically accepted in international contacts. In the training of certified nursing staff, for example, a first step in this direction would be clarification of the actual entry age and previous qualifications. Apprenticeship training is also currently classified in a too undifferentiated way at Level 3B by ISCED, with programmes lasting between 2 and 4 years all „lumped together“. Differentiations are possible here.

It is generally known that the Ingenieur title, which is awarded to graduates of colleges of engineering by the Minister of Economics or Agriculture, is not accounted for within the framework of ISCED as it does not represent a formal qualification. A classification above Level 5B can be made in ISCED if the awarded Ingenieur title would be institutionally rated and recognised as an educational qualification. Other ways of recognising professional qualifications would also have to be examined and, if appropriate, taken into consideration within the framework of ISCED. But they can only be taken into account in ISCED if they are covered and classified as educational qualifications.

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