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Education for a Globalized World

Are Austrian schools keeping up with the internationalization of the Austrian economy?

As a result of increasing international economic integration and activity (key words globalization, EU), the knowledge level of the work force concerning such relations is becoming ever increasingly important. Particularly for graduates of the initial educational system, profound knowledge and understanding of basic international economic relations are becoming an increasingly important factor in terms of their employability. How well is the Austrian educational system preparing young people for these challenges and opportunities?

This study was carried out within the framework of the *go international* Initiative of the Federal Ministry of Economics and Labor and the Austrian Federal Economic Chamber. It is based on a representative survey of almost 3,300 upper secondary school graduates.

Predominately positive attitude towards the EU and globalization – Effects are viewed with skepticism

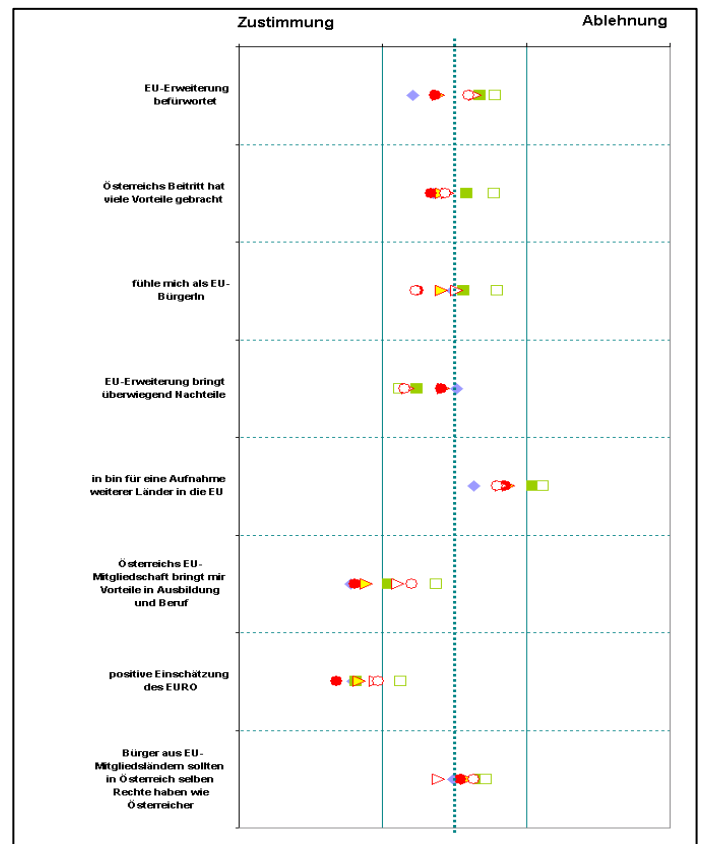
In principle, youths have a positive attitude towards the internationalization of the economy and globalization in general as well as towards the European Union.

By no means can a polarization of the students between EU and globalization critics versus vehement supporters of the EU and internationalization be determined. Only a minority of the students represent the respective extremes. In fact, a large majority of the students view the effects of both the EU as well as globalization with skepticism. Furthermore, the majority believes that globalization is a complex phenomenon that brings both advantages and disadvantages.

Upon examining the opinions of the students, a basic pattern emerges that reveals for many an asymmetrical perception and evaluation: the potential opportunities and advantages brought by the EU and globalization (particularly for the individuals themselves) are indeed viewed positively, while at the same time there are also reservations about giving others the same rights and chances that they themselves wish to take advantage of.

Detailed results for the individual questions can be seen in illustration 1 (question of attitude towards the EU) as well as illustration 2 (question of attitude towards globalization).

Ill. 1: Typical statements regarding attitude towards the European Union (average) based on school type.



Legend:

- ◆ AHS-Oberstufe
- HTL
- ▲ HAK
- sonstige BHS
- t/g Fachschule
- △ HAS
- sonstige Fachschule

III. 2: Typical statement of the students regarding individual statements about globalization (average) based on gender.



Source for both illustrations: ibw graduate survey 2005

Clear opinions are held regarding many of the questions. Thus, 80% of the school graduates believe that Austrian companies profit from globalization in that it enables easier access to foreign markets. At the same time, approximately two thirds of the students believe that globalization also brings disadvantages in that it destroys many jobs in Austria without creating new workplaces.

The influence of globalization on the environment is viewed rather negatively. Approximately 60% are of the opinion that globalization is the cause of continued environmental devastation.

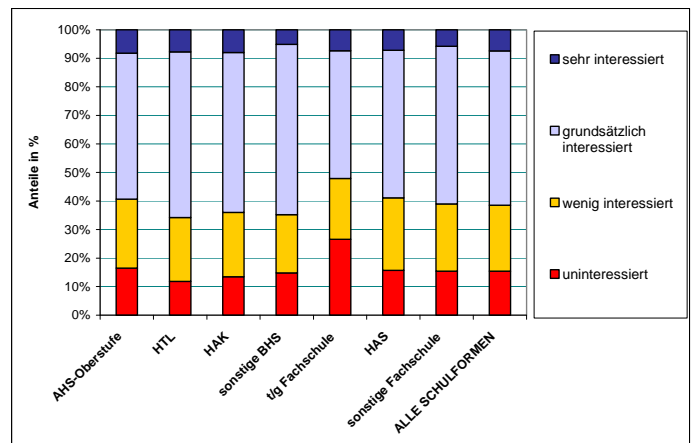
In principle, the competitive position of Austrian companies is rated very positively. Nevertheless, 20% believe that Austrian products do not have a chance on the world markets.

Basic interest in economic topics exists – nevertheless many are also completely uninterested

An overall index was constructed based on a variety of individual questions regarding student interest in topics concerning international economy in order to better display cumulative effects as well. Thus it makes a difference if, for example, a student in fact reads economic articles in the newspaper, but at the same time fails to discuss them with parents or friends. Should they however regularly discuss such topics, then it can be assumed that their interest in the topic is comparatively high. The overall index illustrates this effect.

According to this, 60% of the students have a basic interest in economic topics, and around 10% even showed a particularly high interest. A majority of the youths thus claimed to be principally interested in economic questions. However, there is a core of approximately 20% to 30% of the youths that are completely uninterested in the topic – see illustration 3.

III. 3: Interest in economic topics – overall index*: School level specific division of the students.



Source: ibw graduate survey 2005

* The overall index was constructed based on the information provided by the individual students regarding their reading and TV viewing behavior as well as the frequency of discussions with parents and friends.

Majority of the students feel they are adequately informed – nevertheless there is a need for action

Only a minority of the students (~6%) feel that they are “very well informed” by their school on the topic of international economy. Over half (57%) however believe that they are “adequately informed”. A good third of the students believe they are given insufficient information or no information at all.

The more often such topics are dealt with during instruction, the better informed the students believe themselves to be.

International economy is set in every school syllabus – nevertheless there is a varying degree of coverage at the schools

Topics concerning international economy are present in the syllabi for every school type. Despite the possibility to also cover the topic as interdisciplinary material in other subjects, the material is predominately taught in subjects specifically intended for the topic: these are geography and economics (and the “analogous” subjects of economic geography and tourism geography), subjects in political education as well as various sales subjects (business administration, political economics etc.). Furthermore, according to information provided by the students, these topics are also covered in the subjects of history (and social studies), foreign languages as well as in a broad spectrum of various “other subjects”.

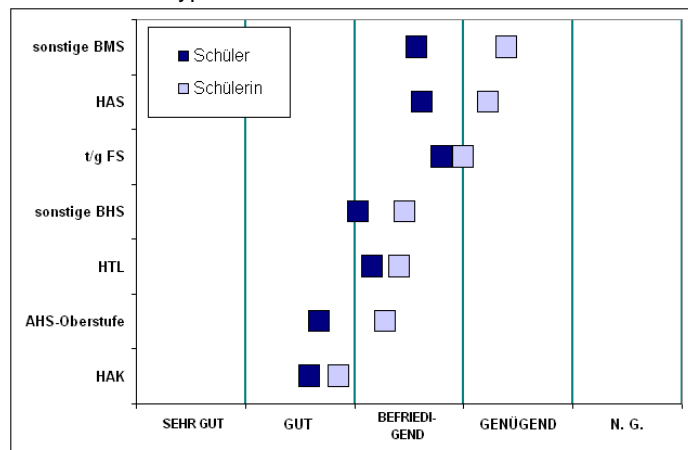
The students’ estimates are divided when it comes to how often “international economy” is the focus of classroom discussion: nearly half report that the topic of international economy (export/import, foreign trade, investments, globalization etc.) is regularly discussed in the classroom – the other half feel that such topics are only rarely dealt with.

The topic of international economy is not only dealt with differently between different school types, but the focus on the topic apparently also varies between different schools of one and the same type.

Knowledge on the topic of international economy is often unsatisfactory

The positive results regarding the attitude and interest of young people in the topic of “international economy” are however accompanied by rather limited factual knowledge, in particular for the students of VET schools. Illustration 4 shows the results of the ibw knowledge test¹.

Ill. 4: Grade (average) for the knowledge of economics by gender and school type.



Source: ibw student survey 2005

Graduates from colleges of business administration achieved an average grade of “good” and thus the best rating. Graduates from higher secondary schools, colleges of engineering, other VET college types (business professions, tourism, fashion etc.) as well as technical/trade schools each achieved a grade of “satisfactory”. Graduates from business schools as well as other trade schools (business professions, professions, tourism, fashion etc.) rated the worst.

It is also noticeable that female students tended to “score” lower on the ibw test than their male colleagues. Such gender-typical differences are revealed time and again in analogous international studies on the topic of knowledge of economy.

Even more noticeable is the often relatively modest knowledge level of graduates on the topic of economy as can be seen by looking at the distribution of grades in the various school types. Based on these grades, it can be assumed for example that approximately 50% of the graduates from VET schools are seriously lacking in knowledge of economy. For the school types with an upper secondary school leaving exam, this number is approximately 20% to 30% of the graduates.

In summary, it can be concluded that many of the graduates from higher secondary schools in Austria are seriously lacking in knowledge related to international economy. Particularly among students from middle schools, the level of knowledge is often insufficient.

The results of the ibw knowledge test are presumably also related to the syllabi: the content regarding economic topics is clearly focused on domestic economy. Topics for international economy are thus to an extent “incorporated” as a supplement in the “core material for domestic economy” and are clearly given less significance. It can be critically questioned as to whether this concept is still appropriate for the times and if the content is adequate. Furthermore, a change in perspective for the basic concept away from a domestic national focus towards international relations should be striven for.

Both “private interest” (use of various media, frequency of discussions at home and with friends) as well as “the school” influence the test results. Interestingly, “private interest” plays a more important role than education at school. In particular, good test scores are the result of a combination of positive private and educational influencing factors.

Internationalization & Apprenticeships

The internationalization of the economy also has an effect on the apprenticeship training. A survey of relevant experts shows a particular need for knowledge of English among apprenticeship graduates. Their willingness to travel is also strongly emphasized.

Internationalization activities at the schools

The teachers have placed great importance in internationalization activities at the schools (networking with foreign schools, student exchange projects, CLIL or English as Medium of Instruction)². Based on the already surprisingly high amount of such activities (whereby however, relatively distinct differences exist between the school types) a majority of the teachers surveyed plead for a further increase in such efforts. Critics emphasize that an expansion of the internationalization activities may lead to an instructional overload and that the students could become overburdened.

Teacher attitude towards globalization

A majority of the teachers (approximately 95%) are generally skeptical about globalization. Almost a third of the teachers hold a predominately negative / critical view, only 6% of the teachers view the effects of globalization as decidedly positive. Female teachers tend to view globalization somewhat more critically than their male colleagues.

Compared to the attitudes of the students, that of the teachers tends to be somewhat more negative and strongly accentuated.

Study design

The current ibw study is the first survey for Austria on a broad empirical basis to explore the essential aspects regarding the attitude and level of knowledge of Austrian higher secondary school graduates concerning the topic of international economy³. A total of almost 3,300 students in 280 graduating classes at 68 schools were questioned about the following aspects:

- Attitude of the students towards the European Union and globalization
- Interest in economic topics
- Self-assessment of the students with regard to the level of information gained from school
- Coverage of the topic “international economy” in class
- Student’s knowledge of economy
- Willingness to travel

Further contents of the study are concerned with the review of the offer of educational courses with an internationally oriented selection of course offerings as well as an analysis of the curriculum for higher secondary schools regarding the existence of educational goals for topics relating to international economy.

Furthermore, a teacher survey concerning the relative aspects in relation to internationalization in the educational sector was also conducted. Trends in apprenticeship training were also determined through expert interviews.

Only a few of the highlights of the study could be touched upon here in this research letter. The entire study is available in printed form from ibw and is also available for download free of charge:

Schmid Kurt: “Bildung für eine globalisierte Welt”, ibw Research Report No. 132, 2006.

<http://www.ibw.at/media/ibw/fb132.pdf>

Further articles on this topic:

Kurt Schmid: „Auslandserfahrungen und Mobilitätsbereitschaft von SchulabsolventInnen der Sekundarstufe II“, in: ibw-Mitteilungen 2nd Quarter 2006. Available for download under:

http://www.ibw.at/ibw_mitteilungen/art/schm_238_06_wp.pdf

Kurt Schmid: „Kenntnisse zum Themenkomplex internationale Wirtschaft. Ergebnisse des ibw-Tests von SchulabsolventInnen der Sekundarstufe II.“, in: ibw-Mitteilungen 4th Quarter 2006. Available for download under:

http://www.ibw.at/ibw_mitteilungen/art/arc_schm_249_06_wp.pdf

¹ The ibw test consists of a self-developed battery of tests with a total of 20 individual questions. It focuses on the basic competencies and knowledge of the students in the subject field of international economy (about vocabulary / meaning as well as fundamental relationships). A questioning of expert knowledge was consciously avoided, for the point was to gather information about the level of knowledge that is of essential importance both in terms of (future) career as well as for active participation as a citizen.

The grade “unsatisfactory” was given to those students who achieved less than half of the total possible points.

² 339 teachers participated in the teacher survey. Due to the relatively small sample size, the results are to be interpreted as a rough benchmark.

³ Graduates from schools for social occupations, agriculture and forestry, as well as nursery school teachers and social pedagogy were excluded from the study since it was assumed that they would not provide education for any professions relative to the export oriented economy. Vocational school students were not included in the survey primarily due to technical reasons. The meaning of such economic knowledge was determined for this group through expert interviews.

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