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LIFELONG LEARNING IN AUSTRIA: THE VIEW FROM OECD

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Lifelong learning has become a serious concern in many countries. In most places this interest has been generated by what I call the Education Gospel: the faith that increases and improvements in education – especially occupationally-oriented education – can resolve a large number of individual and social problems, including those related to growth and competitiveness (Grubb and Lazerson, 2004). Within this belief, lifelong learning (LLL) becomes more important on the assumption that workers will need to upgrade their skills and change jobs as the economy evolves and as technology changes.

Fortunately – because the faith in education is often incorrect, especially as a generator of growth and competitiveness – Austria has largely avoided such rhetoric. Instead, the OECD team that examined adult education in Austria in 2003 (OECD, 2004) found much greater concern with the aging of the workforce, and with the need to replace workplace skills that might otherwise be in short supply. In several ways the focus on the aging workforce explains some of the decisions that Austria has made in its systems of lifelong learning, including some of the strengths

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as well as some of the weaknesses. But this does mean that the country's overall goals for lifelong learning determine what kinds of adult programs are widely-provided and well-funded, and which seem weak.

Overall the OECD team was impressed with the breadth and quality of lifelong learning in Austria, including the role of the social partners in both providing forms of lifelong learning and their collaboration in developing consensus. I review some of these strengths in the first section. Inevitably, however, there prove to be other aspects of adult education that merit more attention, which I address in the second section. While the provision of lifelong learning is quite strong compared to most other countries, there remain several areas where the voices of the social partners could be important in strengthening the Austrian system.

I. The Strengths of Lifelong Learning in Austria

An OECD team of five people spent two weeks in Austria in March 2003, visiting a variety of adult education programs throughout western Austria. While this may seem a small amount of time and energy, in fact these country visits generate many insights because they do not need to be concerned with the small details of education — as we say in English, they can concentrate on the forest rather than the trees — and because the outside experts come with extensive experiences from other countries. The purpose is not so much to criticize a country's education system as much as to understand the variation among countries and to identify strong practices that other countries might consider. The results are then written into

comparative documents drawing together the results of many country visits (see OECD 2005).

Widespread availability: One admirable feature of LLL in Austria is the widespread availability of different programs, with varying sponsors. The education system provides a number of second-chance programs to complete upper-secondary qualifications if they have not already done so, and then to move into tertiary education; these include the evening schools for adults (a school-based approach), an Intensive Apprenticeship program paralleling the dual system of work-based and school-based learning, and some programs in the *Volkshochschule*, the folk high schools, very often in more informal and less “school-like” settings. Many other countries have relatively weak systems of second-chance institutions, and of course the Austrian (and German) dual systems have been the envy of many other countries, so second-chance options in both school-based and dual forms provide opportunities lacking in many other countries.

In addition, the OECD team was impressed with the almost a bewildering amount of upgrade training, for workers who need to enhance their skills. These are offered by all of the social partners including the Economic Chambers (the WIFI), the Chambers of Labor (the BFI), and in rural areas by the Chambers of Agriculture (the LFI). In contrast to many other countries, where there are complaints that all types of occupationally-oriented education become supply- (or provider-) driven rather than demand-driven — there’s little doubt that upgrade training is quite responsive to demand, for at least two reasons. One is that the boards of these organizations include representatives of all the social partners — employers, labor, and

government — who are in positions to know what the demands for skills are. In addition, the institutions providing upgrade training are largely self-supporting, and therefore need to tailor their offerings to the needs of prospective adult students.

Firms also provide their own upgrade training and retraining — especially large firms, it appears. It's difficult to figure out how many individuals received firm-based training and employer support because firms use a wide variety of public and private training programs, and because subsidies are often not well-understood; for example subsidies through the tax system — what economists call tax expenditures — were impossible to determine. But we could come up with no evidence of shortages of skill training. The shortages that some people asserted appeared to be demand-side problems, as noted below.

Finally, non-adult education is organized within *Volkshochschule* as well as in "houses" (*Bildungshäusern*) providing room for a variety of non-profit organizations can offer courses. A wide variety of voluntary and non-governmental also provide non-vocational adult education, many of them members of the umbrella group KEBÖ. The very existence of KEBÖ is testimony of the admirable Austrian tendency to organize programs for the purposes of information-sharing and consensus-building. It's possible that there is somewhat less non-vocational adult education in Austria than other countries, especially Scandinavian countries — as I will note below — but in general these forms of LLL also seem ubiquitous.

Consensus and the Social Partners: Second, the OECD team was impressed with the cooperation of the social partners. As far as we could see, the social partners

cooperate in the provision of upgrade training, in the development of policy at both the national level and at the level of *Länder*, in the development of the dual system including the Intensive Apprenticeships, in providing advice to the Ministry of Labor about labor market programs (reviewed in the second section). When counties or *Länder* develop their own policies, the social partners at the *Land* level seem to agree on policies. For example, the development of an individual learning account or *Bildungskonto* in Upper Austria, and then quality assurance mechanisms (the Quality Seal), were all accomplished with the cooperation of the social partners.

Indeed, one of the few ways of judging whether a program is effective or not is whether the social partners agree about its value. This is not necessarily an appropriate way to judge effectiveness, since it is possible for all partners to have positive ideas about a program even though it has no long-run effects. (Below I mention the possibility of creating a more evaluation-oriented culture). But it is testimony to the strength of the social partners that this has become a measure of effectiveness.

In addition, there seemed to be relatively little reliance on market-like mechanisms to organize education and LLL in Austria. A small exception is the development of individual learning accounts – *Bildungskonto* – in some *Länder*, but these seem designed more to introduce some flexibility for individuals than to create real competition among providers. In other countries, especially the English-speaking countries, there has been extensive use of market-like mechanisms and competition among providers, on the grounds that this is the only way to assure efficiency and effectiveness in the provision of LLL. What replaces the need for

competition in Austria is the ability of the social partners to come to consensus; where no consensus is possible in other countries, then policy turns to competition as a way of *avoiding* the need for consensus. In my view, market-like mechanisms in education have worked relatively poorly because education and training are not like conventional commodities, and market-like mechanisms very often create distortions and inequities (Finkelstein and Grubb, 2000; Fiske and Ladd, 2000). So from my perspective the ability of the social partners to work well together and create consensus in place of competition has been one of the benefits of the Austrian system.

In other countries, the ties among the social partners seem to be weakening. Certainly there is much discussion about the weakening of the German dual system, with employers distancing themselves from their former obligations, and the development of market competition in other countries – both in general and in education systems – has led to strained ties between business and labor. From this perspective – and certainly from the perspective of the English-speaking countries including the U.S., where the social partners are poorly organized and there is nothing like the tripartite planning that takes place in Austria – the ties of the social partners in Austria should be viewed as a tremendous asset.

The adequacy of LLL in Austria: We found a great concern in Austria with the adequacy of LLL, and a fear that the country was lagging behind other European countries in LLL. It's difficult to calculate participation rates for LLL in Austria, since there are many different providers, and many of them serve different roles for

different populations. Overall, however, we could detect no shortages of adult education, especially of adult education related to employment. (The single except is LLL for the *Bildungsfernen*, examined below.) The examples of shortages given (like nursing and workers for the tourist industry) proved to be demand-side problems – inadequate salaries or difficult working conditions – rather than problems that can be resolved simply by increasing the supply of workers.

In comparing participation rates among countries, the only countries with higher rates of participation than Austria are the Scandinavian countries. But these high rates are due largely to high levels of *non-vocational* LLL , provided by their versions of folk high schools. Non-vocational LLL has not been a particularly high priority in Austria, and the large amounts of upgrade training provided by the WIFI, BFI, and LFU are all focused on occupational upgrading and retraining. So in the area where Austria has placed its greatest emphasis the supply of LLL is as high as in any country in Europe. The social partners might want to rethink the provision of non-vocational LLL – particularly for the *Bildungsfernen*, as discussed below – but otherwise the supply of LLL in Austria seems relatively generous.

II. Some Limitations of Lifelong Learning in Austria

At the same time that the OECD review team found a great many admirable features of the Austrian system, there were some elements that could be improved. Several of these – like the state of labor market programs and programs for the *Bildungsfernen* – are problems common to many countries. Others, like flexibility,

are more inherent in the system of consensus by social partners that Austria has developed. But they all merit some attention as Austria continues to develop its LLL.

Labor market programs: Like many countries, Austria has a number of labor market programs providing short-term training for the unemployed, emphasizing the long-term unemployed, women returning to the labor market, and other groups at risk of being kept out of the economic mainstream including immigrants and minorities. These are operated by the Ministry of Labor rather than Education, and they have only weak connections to educational institutions. The offerings include some vocational education and other skills, but they seem to emphasize social competence, communications skills, and other “soft” skills necessary both to get and keep employment. There’s a three-stage system of job search, counseling, and then an “integration plan” that might include some skill development.

In general these labor market programs are quite different from the rest of LLL in Austria, in ways we suspect make them ineffective. They do not follow the conception of preparing for a *Beruf*; instead they prepare individuals for relatively low-skilled, low-wage work, the kind of work that is likely to have little future and therefore none of the long-run prospects that are part of the idea of a *Beruf*. Second, the training programs are quite short, with an average of 70 days (though a few last one or two years); again this means that, compared to programs in the education system, these efforts cannot provide much training. In addition, the three-stage system prevents many individuals from getting training since they may find

employment – relatively low-skilled employment – before they get to the third stage when training begins. As the Minister of Labor admitted, these programs have a “placement mandate, not an education mandate.”

Finally, the evaluation of labor market programs has been weak. The evaluations we could find measured the success of such programs by examining the proportion of participants who found employment shortly after the program. But there has been little effort to compare these figures with those of any comparable group. They fail to estimate substitution and displacement effects – the extent to which some individuals who have completed labor market programs are simply substituted for other low-skilled individuals who then become employed. Worst of all, these evaluations fail to ask what happens over 5 or 6 years, which is crucial because of evidence from other countries that initial benefits tend to disappear over time. In general the culture of evaluation in Austria is not particularly strong, and labor market programs provide a good example where existing evaluations are probably misleading.

Overall, the labor market programs in Austria show the same problems as many if not most other countries experience. They enroll individuals who have had the greatest difficulties in the labor market; they provide them relatively little training, over short periods of time, to prepare them for low-skilled work without much future. Apparently the social partners are consulted in the development of labor market programs, but in the estimation of the OECD team these programs need to be substantially improved.

Programs for the *Bildungsfernen*: Because the Austrian system of LLL is so closely tied to employment, those who are not employed generally have less access to LLL as well. (They also lack access to sources of information, guidance, and counseling, since these tend to be attached to training programs that are in turn linked to employment.) This includes not only the long-term unemployed eligible for labor market programs, but also the *Bildungsfernen* — low-literacy adults who are poorly connected to employment, distant from any *Bildung* or preparation for employment. While Austria did not participate in the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), and therefore there is no information on the extent of low literacy, it has the conditions — a substantial rural population and recent immigrants — that are usually associated with low literacy. The OECD team heard about very few programs specifically for the *Bildungsfernen*, aside from a small number of *Volkshochschule*; most people denied that such a problem exists; and indeed individuals running one program declared that the subject of low literacy had been a taboo topic — and that “to be illiterate should no longer be taboo”.

We suspect, therefore, that there is a larger problem in Austria with *Bildungsfernen* than the country has acknowledged. Part of the problem stems from the fact that the LLL system is linked so strongly to employment, so those not in regular employment do not have access to the large amounts of upgrade training and retraining noted above. But we also suspected that the relative decline of non-vocational adults education has also been part of the problem: low literacy adults are likely to have had poor experiences in schools, and may resist entering programs located in schools or associated with conventional educational pedagogies.

Programs like those in *Volkshochschule* may be more welcoming. One way, therefore, to address the needs of the *Bildungsfernen* would be to start outreach programs, to work through the network of the KEBÖ and *Volkshochschulen* both to strengthen non-vocational adult education and address the needs of low-literacy adults.

The disconnected systems of adult education: There is indeed a great deal of coordination in the Austrian system, and large numbers of coordination councils, umbrella organizations, and other groups intended to make the system more coherent. But to the OECD team it looked like there were really four sub-systems, with coordination *within* each of these but relatively few connections *among* the four. The four included (1) increased routes through upper-postsecondary education, to enhance completion of secondary credentials; (2) the vast amount of upgrade training, especially provided by WIFI, BFI, and LFI; (3) labor market programs provided by the Ministry of Education; and (4) non-vocational programs provided by private and voluntary providers. In many cases we could see some advantages to creating connections *among* these four-subsections, for example allowing individuals in short-term labor market programs to gain access to the education system (into *Fachhochschulen*, perhaps), or encouraging individuals in the “house” system to consider the need for upgrade training. One of the most complex possibilities then, is to try to knit these four-subsystems together into a more transparent and integrated overall system of LLL.

The flexibility and the transparency of the system: One consequence of the commitment to *Berufsbildung* and to extensive preparation is that second-chance programs are relatively long and arduous, requiring in many cases a four-year program plus a qualifications exam. There is little modularization of courses in the system that might enable individuals to spread these efforts out over longer periods, or time, little use of recognition of prior learning that might have been developed on the job. As a consequence dropout rates from second-chance programs are high. There have been a few efforts to make this system more flexible, particularly with some evening schools trying to develop more flexible programs and some efforts to recognize foreign occupational certificates and experience.

More generally, the fact of having a large system of LLL connected to *Berufsbildung* and to many different institutions means that the system is always going to be prone to certain types of rigidity as well as a lack of transparency – an inability of some adults to understand the various LLL alternatives that exist. Partly because many mechanisms of information and guidance are connected to specific training institutions – particularly those run by the WIFI, the BFI, and the LFU – again those outside these institutions and employment have little access to information and counseling. One of the issues that the social partners might consistently address, therefore, is whether there are opportunities to make the LLL system more flexible and more transparent to potential participants.

Pedagogical Innovation: The OECD found little evidence of pedagogical innovation or of the pedagogical methods most appropriate for adults. The second-

chance schools we visited looks like conventional schools with traditional teaching; the teaching in much upgrade training also seemed to be highly tradition, rather than modifying the pedagogy to fit experienced adults. The exceptions were several Volkshochschule, which are generally learner-centered institution where the directors spoke convincingly about incorporating experiences into teaching and about the need for a different type of teacher training. Indeed, one teacher training college was planning a program to train teachers for adult education in appropriate instructional methods, acknowledging that teaching in most adult education is quite conventional.

The lack of pedagogical innovation was in some way quite surprising. The German-language tradition has a particularly active development of novel forms of vocational pedagogy, virtually the only such development in the world (Achtenhagen and Grubb, 2001) – and we would have thought that the Austrian LLL system, concerned as it is with vocational forms of adult education, might have absorbed some of these methods. But this seems not to have taken place. The OECD team was concerned that the kinds of learner-centered, activity-based, and constructivist pedagogies generally recommended for adults have been neglected – and that as a result lifelong learning in Austria is less motivating as a result.

III. An Agenda for the Social Partners

From the perspective of the OECD, and of the numerous other countries that participated in studies of adult education and lifelong learning, perhaps the most

important policy for Austria and the social partners to pursue is the continuation of a rich set of programs designed for adults. The contributions of the social partners to specific forms of adult education — through the WIFI, the BFI, and the LFU — are themselves remarkable, and the consensus among partners on other aspects of LLL and education policy are similarly valuable. Unlike most countries, where there is substantial evidence of severe shortages of certain types of LLL, we found little evidence of real shortages, at least for vocationally-oriented adult education

However, there still remains an agenda for improvement. To summarize the points I have made in this paper, the following could be future projects of the social partners:

- The labor market programs of the Ministry of Labor seem weak, focused on low-skilled work, and disconnected with the rest f the adult education system. Either improving the quality of these programs or establishing consistent links to further education opportunities would help substantially.
- The programs for *Bildungsfernen* seem inadequate, and could be both expanded and improved.
- More generally, programs that are not connected to employment seem average relative to other European countries, including non-vocational adult education.
- Austria has not yet developed a “culture of evaluation” in which education and social programs are routinely evaluated for their effectiveness; instead the consensus of the social partners is the most common mark of effectiveness. The social partners could contribute to creating a culture of evaluation and analysis by

asking for evaluations in cases where the benefits of education and training programs seem uncertain.

- The improvement of pedagogical approaches, consistent with the student-centered and experiential methods that have been used elsewhere for adult education, might improve the attractiveness of the system, especially for potential students (like the *Bildungsfernen*) uncomfortable with conventional schooling.
- Particularly because there are so many institution providing LLL, the flexibility and transparency of the entire system is always a potential problem. The overall system of guidance and counseling is not well-suited to adult education. Most guidance and counseling is concentrated in secondary schools; counseling in tertiary education is quite weak (OECD, 2003); the guidance available to individuals in labor market programs is not available to others, and individuals with weak connections to employment have few sources of information and guidance. Creating a more comprehensive system of guidance and counseling would help make LLL more transparent. Most ambitious of all, creating an overall system of LLL from the four sub-systems that now exist would enhance the flexibility and transparency of LLL, to the benefit of many Austrians.

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