

# AUSTRIA

## 1) EDUCATION SYSTEM

In Austria, the school system is regulated by the federal government. Therefore, apart from the pilot projects carried out within the framework of school autonomy<sup>1</sup>, throughout Austria, all school types and curricula are standardised. The essential features of examinations are also regulated at a federal level in order to ensure comparable standards.

### a) Pre-school education

Although there is no legal obligation to do so, a large proportion of children attend kindergarten from the age of three. General compulsory tuition begins at the age of six. If a child who is required to attend school is not yet considered ready to do so, a one-year pre-school may be attended before beginning primary school. Pre-school classes are often taught in primary schools. Unlike kindergarten, the one-year pre-school forms part of the school system.

There are public and private kindergartens. By far the largest number of kindergartens are set up by the municipalities (almost three quarters of all kindergartens).

### b) Primary level and lower secondary level

In Austria, there is no compulsory education as such. Instead, there is a period of general compulsory tuition which lasts nine years. This begins once the child reaches the age of six and continues until the age of 15. Compulsory tuition may be carried out not only in public schools but also by means of teaching which is equivalent in value in private schools or at home. If the private school does not have public status, pupils must sit an exam at the end of the school year on the material that has been taught over the year. The alternative form of home teaching is seldom used.

General compulsory tuition therefore starts with a four-year primary school (*Volksschule*) once the child reaches the age of six. This generally comprises elementary grade I (pre-school grade where necessary and grades 1 and 2 in all cases) and elementary grade II (grades 3 and 4). Primary schools provide all pupils with the same elementary education.

After primary education, pupils have the choice between two types of school<sup>2</sup>, both covering a period of four years: the lower secondary school (*Hauptschule*) or the lower level of a secondary academic school (*allgemeinbildende höhere Schule (AHS)*).

Lower secondary schools provide pupils with a basic general education, prepare them in a practically and interest-oriented way for working life and, at the same time, impart to

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<sup>1</sup> For a number of years now, “pilot projects” have been carried out in the majority of school types in an attempt to test new forms of school organisation and teaching methods. The principle of school autonomy which applies in Austria enables schools to conduct such projects.

<sup>2</sup> The third school type which they may select, the primary school upper cycle (*Volksschuloberstufe*), is now of little significance in numerical terms.

them the knowledge and skills required for the transfer to schools at the upper secondary level. The only requirement for admission at a lower secondary school is the successful completion of grade 4 (fourth year of primary school). Lower secondary school consists of four grades (grades 5 to 8). From grades 7 and 8, there is a greater focus on preparing pupils for the world of work. Furthermore, in certain subjects, pupils are put into performance categories. For the more able pupils (those in the top performance category), it is also possible to switch to the *AHS* during the main period of schooling<sup>3</sup>. In principle, following the lower secondary school, pupils are free to choose from among all of the advanced schools, although only a small percentage attends the upper cycle of secondary academic school. There is no particular final examination for the lower secondary school.

Following primary school, the more talented pupils attend the lower cycle of a secondary academic school. In order to gain entrance to this type of school, pupils' performance in selected subjects must have been rated as at least "good". Alternatively (where a pupil has been awarded "satisfactory" in one subject), a decision as to whether or not the pupil is ready for the secondary academic level must have been made by the teaching staff of the primary school. If these requirements are not met, pupils must pass an entrance examination. The lower cycle of secondary academic schools imparts a broad and extended general education. Its function is twofold: on the one hand, it is a feeder to the corresponding upper cycles of secondary academic schools, while on the other hand, those pupils who successfully complete the lower cycle have the opportunity to switch to secondary vocational schools.

As a basic principle, within the category of secondary academic schools, a distinction is made between the classical secondary academic school (*Gymnasium (BG)*), the secondary academic school emphasizing mathematics and science (*Realgymnasium (BRG)*) and the secondary academic school emphasizing economics (*Wirtschaftskundliches Realgymnasium (WKG)*). The internal difference is rather small. Secondary academic schools are divided into two halves, with there being no difference between the lower cycle - secondary level I (grades 5 to 8 = years 1 to 4) and the upper cycle - secondary level II (grades 9 to 12 = years 5 to 8)<sup>4</sup> in organisational terms. The curriculum during the first two years (grades 5 and 6) of the lower cycle is the same, whereas from the start of the third year, in addition to the distinctions between the *Gymnasium* (which serves primarily to provide a broad general education in the humanities, focusing on classic languages like Latin, but also increasingly strongly on modern foreign languages), *Realgymnasium* (for those with a talent for the sciences) and the *Wirtschaftskundliches Realgymnasium* (with an additional focus on economics), new special forms also appear (e.g. within the framework of pilot studies). As part of school autonomy, each school may, within a certain framework (i.e. a type of core curriculum applying to all schools) choose its own educational focus and develop its own school profiles. As a result, pupils are offered the opportunity to structure the course of their education in accordance with their own wishes and ideas and with a view to their desired vocational career.

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<sup>3</sup> Generally speaking, a system of "bridges and crossings" means that numerous switches can be made between the individual branches of the school system.

<sup>4</sup> One particular feature of the school system in Austria is that although there are grades ranging from one to twelve, the grades are always counted anew in each type of school.

### c) Upper secondary level

Upon successful completion of lower secondary school or the lower cycle of a secondary academic school, pupils are free to choose from a wide variety of education and training pathways: They may attend a school where the focus is on either general or vocational education.

The main aim of schools offering general education is to provide pupils with standard entry qualifications for the higher education level and a solid basis for more specialised education and training careers. They are attended for four years and conclude with a final examination (*Reifeprüfung*-certificate or *Matura*, a school-leaving certificate which provides access to studies at institutes of higher education). As mentioned above, the various forms of the upper cycle of secondary academic schools offer students a range of options (*Gymnasium*, *Realgymnasium*, *Wirtschaftskundliches Realgymnasium*). The upper cycle of secondary academic school starts from year 5 (grade 9). Here, different compulsory subjects mean that there is a further distinction between the individual school types. From year 6 (grade 10) onwards, the individual school types increasingly offer further specialisation options in certain subjects within the framework of the system of compulsory electives. In addition to the three basic types continued from the lower cycle, the upper cycle also includes the upper-secondary academic school (*Oberstufenrealgymnasium (BORG)*), which is geared primarily to pupils having successfully completed the lower secondary school and which provides a pathway concentrating on the arts and the sciences.

There is also a wide variety of schools and colleges offering technical and vocational education and training, which are characterised by two educational pathways. Pupils who have completed their period of compulsory schooling may either opt for the “dual vocational training system” or continue their education at medium-level or higher-level technical and vocational school.

About one fifth of all Austrian teenagers complete their ninth year of compulsory schooling at a one-year pre-vocational school (*Polytechnische Schule*), which prepares them for the transition to apprenticeship training<sup>5</sup>. Training for an apprenticeship occupation is provided partly in a company and partly through attendance at a part-time vocational school for apprentices (*Berufsschule*). The task of the part-time vocational schools for apprentices is to impart general education and to increase the specific knowledge of the individual vocational areas which has been taught in the companies providing the training. How long these schools last (usually three years) depends on the duration of the apprenticeship. The “dual vocational training system” (or “dual system”) is completed with an apprenticeship leave examination (*Lehrlingsabschlussprüfung*) or a proficiency examination.

Medium-level technical and vocational schools (*Berufsbildende mittlere Schule - BMS*, sometimes also termed “*Fachschulen*”) start after the eighth year of schooling and last for between one and four years, depending on the pupils' chosen vocation. These are full-time schools which provide both qualifications for an apprenticeship occupation as well as a general education. The qualification corresponds to that of a final

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<sup>5</sup> The ninth year of general compulsory tuition may be completed either within the pre-vocational pathway (*Polytechnische Schule*) or in the first year of a medium-level or higher-level technical and vocational school or the upper cycle of a secondary academic school.

apprenticeship examination. Having passed the final apprenticeship examination, pupils may attend add-on or preparatory courses which lead to the *Reifeprüfung*-certificate (*Matura*).

Higher-level technical and vocational schools (*Berufsbildende höhere Schulen - BHS*) also begin after the eighth year of schooling. After five years (five years of full-time tuition) successful pupils are awarded the *Matura*. In this respect, the advantage over a secondary academic school is that it entitles pupils to go on and study at institutes of higher education and at the same time it also provides full vocational training. Most types of higher-level technical and vocational schools also provide training over three years, but these do not lead to the award of a *Matura*.

The range of technical and vocational schools includes secondary business schools (*Handelsschulen*), secondary colleges for business administration (*Handelsakademien*), secondary schools for occupations in the social services sector (*Schulen für Sozialberufe*), secondary schools and colleges for agriculture and forestry (*land- und forstwirtschaftliche Schulen*) and a wide range of schools and colleges for the technical, business and artistic fields.

#### **d) Tertiary Level**

Graduates of a secondary academic school or a higher-level technical or vocational school with the *Reifeprüfung*-certificate or *Matura*, as well as those having passed the *Berufsreifeprüfung*, are entitled to go on and access post-secondary colleges (*Akademien*) and courses (*Kollegs*), institutes of higher education which provide high-quality professional and academic training for specific occupations (*Fachhochschulen*) and universities.

The period of study is shorter at post-secondary establishments than that at *Fachhochschulen* and universities.

There are currently 22 universities in Austria.

## **2) TYPES OF SCHOOLS**

In the area of both primary and secondary education, people can choose between public and private schools in Austria. In the case of public schools, no school fees have to be paid. In the area of secondary education within public schools, the only payments are for teaching materials, a contribution for school books and pupils' free travel passes as well as membership contributions to parents' associations, IT costs and other additional benefits.

In Austria, the foundation of private schools is safeguarded by the Constitution. Most private schools are funded by legally recognised churches or groups representing peoples' interests (*Kammern*). The former are legally entitled to have teaching staff provided free of charge. Private schools which are not managed by a recognised denomination are not entitled to receive state subsidies for personnel costs. However, private law contracts are sometimes entered into, on the basis of which these schools are treated the same way as schools maintained by a recognised denomination. Generally speaking, operating costs of private schools are not borne by the public authorities.

Private schools may, however, apply to the Federal Ministry for Education, Science and Culture for subsidies for extraordinary expenses. The granting of these subsidies is made possible on the basis of a private law contract, e.g. for meeting the cost of construction work.

For pupils with special needs, besides the possibility of integration into a conventional class, there are various types of special school available.

### **3) EDUCATIONAL RESPONSIBILITY**

As in many areas of public administration in Austria, legislative and executive responsibilities are divided between the federal government and the autonomous regions (*Länder*) in the school sector. Hence, with regard to the external organisation of public compulsory schools, the federal government is responsible for framework legislation whereas the enactment of implementing laws and their execution are the duties of each of the nine individual *Länder*. External organisation includes, among other things, the construction, establishment, maintaining and closing down of schools but also the fixing of class sizes and tuition time. In contrast, legislation and their implementation for the entire upper secondary level are the responsibility of the federal government. The kindergarten system, on the other hand, is the responsibility of the *Länder*.

In those areas where responsibility for execution lies with the federal government, this is carried out by its own authorities. In addition to the Federal Ministry for Education, Science and Culture, these authorities also include, in particular, the Federal School Authorities in the *Länder* and in the political districts. These are the Regional Education Boards at regional level and the subordinated District Education Boards at the level of the political districts.

Execution duties, which fall within the *Länder*'s area of competence, are carried out by the regional authorities entrusted with this task, i.e. the regional government offices. Cooperation with the municipalities in maintaining publicly-run, general education compulsory schools and the supply of teaching staff to these schools are listed as the most important aspects. However, on many occasions, the District and Regional Education Boards are entitled to participate in the administration of such matters.

The school inspection system in Austria is extremely well developed. The Federal Ministry for Education, Science and Culture is the supreme supervisory authority for the entire primary and secondary school system, which comprises both general education and vocational education schools. In the *Länder* and districts, school supervision in these two areas is carried out by the Federal School Authorities (Regional Education Boards and District Education Boards). A few schools at the upper secondary level are controlled directly by the Federal Ministry for Education, Science and Culture.

### **4) FINANCING OF EDUCATION**

In the case of public compulsory schools (primary level and lower secondary level), regions (*Länder*), municipalities or associations of municipal corporations act as school maintaining bodies.

In the case of general compulsory schools, these bodies are mostly municipalities or associations of municipal corporations, whereas for vocational schools, these bodies are the Länder.

School maintenance and financing (*Schulträgerschaft*) means the establishment of a school, maintenance of the building, responsibility for operating costs, the acquisition of equipment and teaching materials, provision for the school doctor and the appointment of the necessary support staff (cleaners, caretakers, etc.). The provision of teachers to compulsory schools, however, is always the responsibility of the Länder. Teachers at public compulsory schools are therefore employed and paid by the Länder. However, the federal government reimburses in full the costs incurred by the Länder as part of the system of equitable adjustment of revenues and expenditure between the territorial authorities in Austria, according to federal regulations.

The costs of equipping and maintaining vocational schools and specialist schools and colleges for agriculture and forestry are borne by the Länder. The costs for the teaching staff at these schools is divided between the federal government and the individual Länder.

Public compulsory schools are not allowed to charge school fees and travel to and from school by public transport is also free of charge. School books are provided by the public sector and these become the property of the pupils. Over the last few years, a contribution of 10% has been introduced for both free transport for pupils as well as for school books. Transport costs are paid for from a fund which is financed by employers and employees social security contributions and which is administered by the Federal Ministry for Social Security and Generations.

The federal government bears all of the costs for those medium-level and higher-level schools (upper secondary level) which it itself establishes and maintains, including teachers' costs. In this case too, the teachers' employment contracts are not with the school; they are employed by the federal government. As far as the exemption from school fees, free transport and school books are concerned, the statements on compulsory schooling apply.

Schools in Austria receive overall budgets, as well as a budget guarantee over 3-4 years. However, the amount of the funds which they manage themselves is only relatively small. There are, however, models to increase financial autonomy, some of which are already in use. For example, under certain conditions laid down under schooling law, schools may lease rooms or parts of the property (e.g. the gymnasium or sports ground) to third parties and dispose of the income on the condition that the money is used for school purposes. The same applies to external resources collected at the school by means of sponsorship or advertising activities. In addition, since 1998, so-called institutions with partial legal capacity may be established in school maintained by the federal government, which are authorised to carry out legal operations as listed under legislation.

## **5) PUBLIC AUDIT**

In accordance with the Federal Constitutional Law, the Austrian Court of Audit is responsible in particular for examining the “*Gebarung*”, or conduct, of the federal

government, the regions (*Länder*), the associations of municipal corporations and the municipalities with at least 20,000 inhabitants. The term “*Gebahrung*”, is a specifically Austrian term and refers to any behaviour which has financial implications. However, in addition, there are also regional courts of audit (*Landesrechnungshöfe*) which examine the conduct of the *Länder*. At the instigation of the regional government or the head of the regional government, these courts of audit will also examine the conduct of municipalities and associations of municipal corporations.

As far as the education sector is concerned, the remit of the Austrian Court of Audit covers schools, in particular, when it performs its audit duties within the sphere of activity of the Federal Ministry for Education, Science and Culture. School audits can be performed nationwide, i.e. at all levels. For example, in 2002 the Court of Audit examined the schools and colleges for agriculture and forestry within the sphere of activity of the Federal Ministry for Education, Science and Culture, the Federal Ministry for Agriculture and Forestry, Environment and Water and the regional governments of Niederösterreich, Oberösterreich, Steiermark, Tirol and Vorarlberg. In parallel, regional courts of audit may also conduct audits in those areas of activity of schools which are financed through regional funding. If possible, the auditing activities of the regional courts are coordinated with those of the federal court.

Financial conduct or management must be audited in such a way as to ensure that it complies with the prevailing regulations, that figures are accurate, and that operations are conducted economically, efficiently and effectively. In addition to official audits, there is also the possibility to conduct special audits.