

FIFOBI

# Developing business competencies in school

# Introduction

The research project “Fifobi” focused on the implementation of economic education in Austria following the international project structure. In year one a thorough analysis of the curricula was carried out. After a comprehensive evaluation interviews with teachers followed in year two and in year three interviews with representatives of the Social Partnership were conducted.

# Focal Points:

On the one hand it offers a comprehensive analysis of the research results based on the curricula analysis and the interviews. On the other hand the controversial discussion on matters of education in Austria is omnipresent, which is clearly reflected in the results. Curricula development, curricula reforms and school development respectively have always been highly political processes, as the interviews show.

Many Austrian teachers feel the need to justify their work, complain about negative public pressure and the poor image of their profession. Their endeavours, their commitment and their professional expertise are very often underestimated. This undertone was present in all interviews.

Therefore it is my personal concern and claim not to stop at the criticism and the analysis of the research results but also to make concrete suggestions for the practical work of teachers. It is an absolute must not only to deliver a scientific analysis but also to discuss task-based approaches for practical teaching and learning.

## Curricula analysis

As a first step the curricula of all subjects for general lower secondary schools years 7 and 8 were carefully studied and analysed. It was important to gain an overview of all subjects with a focus on economic education and the concept of entrepreneurship.

The Austrian curricula show a definite and clear focus on basic knowledge in economics. Social and self-competences have to be taught in all subjects, but are poorly linked to the content of individual subjects. Many aspects of social and self-competences are part of career orientation classes. A relatively small focus, however, is put on entrepreneurial thinking and acting.

The detailed analysis made it very clear that a revision of the curricula of some subjects is urgently needed. A new structure which links economic basic knowledge (political economics and business studies) entrepreneurial thinking and acting, career orientation, social and self-competences more closely would be desirable.



Especially the challenging topic of “economy and globalisation” offers subject related content, which addresses a diversity of topics: basic economic knowledge, the necessity of responsible entrepreneurial acting and thinking, the ability to show empathy and the ability to reflect on the consequences of one’s own economic acting either as a consumer and/or as a producer.

In this way, at an early stage of analysis the necessity of a curricula reform became obvious which would have to consider linking basic economic knowledge to self and social competences. These results were confirmed by the interviews with teachers and social partners.

## **Interviews with teachers**

Six interviews with teachers were analysed.  
My aim was to invite particularly dedicated and experienced teachers for interviews.

Mainstream education reflects what the analysis of the curriculum showed: high priority on information and knowledge, few links to social- and self-competences. Teachers are aware that social and self-competences are extremely important, but at the same time they say that they have an insufficient structural framework that would enable them to realise these contents and to bring them to focus in their lessons.

These deficits are reflected in their opinion on teacher education. The interviewees have unanimously agreed on the fact that there was a focus on economic knowledge in their education. Business studies were of marginal importance.

Social and self -competences are badly neglected in teacher education. All teachers confirm that they have acquired these competences through their long professional and life experience.

Career orientation has a strong position in the Austrian curricula and in teaching practice, which is either an independent subject or an integrative part of Geography and Economic Education classes.

The great variety of teaching and other materials is highly appreciated. Cooperation with businesses and enterprises is often very close and successful in the long run.

Initiatives, which exceed by far the concepts of the curriculum, lead to various activities such as successful information events organised by teachers and sampling days, which allow pupils to get first-hand experience concerning their future careers.

The success of establishing such networks is always closely connected to the teachers' own commitment and their ability to establish and maintain manifold contacts.

All teachers emphasise that they have their personal selection criteria and a "Braving the gap" attitude in the face of the far too complicated contents of economic education.



Many teachers implement the content through specific practice projects: for example, by showing commitment to fair trade and co-operations with world shops, by organising school lunches or “earning money” in order to support development projects or save the money for a class trip. Thus pupils become entrepreneurs.

There are individual cases in which pupils participate in practice-focused projects. One teacher described a project in which three days were spent on project development, realisation, logo design, budgeting, talk with the head teacher about financial issues, realisation of the project, cash basis accounting and evaluation, reflection on team and project work.

All interviewees stress the unconditional necessity of linking the content to the pupils' world, e.g. "The journey of my T-shirt". The line of production of an everyday piece of clothing – T-shirt or a pair of jeans – is followed in great detail. Where does cotton grow, how is it picked, where is cotton processed, where is it spun and dyed? Where and under which conditions is the T-shirt sewn, how does it enter the retail sector and our cupboards and what happens to it once we have discarded it? The journey of a T-shirt or a pair of jeans may be as long as 40.000km.

This specific example helps pupils to understand concepts of political economics, production sites, global chains of production, conditions of production, consumption and global responsibility, price formation, international regulations and law. This is not done out of context, but with a specific everyday product in mind.

All interviewees stress the necessity of visiting businesses, investigating businesses and enterprises and job sampling days. They emphasise their commitment and their strong dedication to secure long-term cooperation with enterprises.

## Strengths

Good content related to globalisation, good examples in textbooks

Career orientation classes are extremely relevant to real life, pupils look into their future career plans thoroughly

Time for visiting enterprises, getting to know working processes

Curricula allow for a good deal of commitment of teachers. E.g. running a practice business. Specific example: pupils have three days to develop a project to deal with sales and marketing, finances, accountancy, balance sheets and evaluation

"Braving the gap" is possible

## Weaknesses

Too little time for a number of topics, too few lessons, too few excursions, too little time for project work lasting several days

Too complex concepts, which are impossible to understand for pupils and partly for some teachers too

Too complex content for the respective age groups. Some topics are hardly linked to the everyday life of the pupils.

A lack of specific links to social- and self-competences is made up by the life experience of teachers. This content lacks structural framework.

Too much content, little room for reflection

Items for comparison	Results of the curriculum analysis	Results of the teacher interviews
Career orientation	Well embedded in education; Job orientation has its own clear and detailed curriculum; can be taught as an individual subject or as an integral part of the subject Geography and Economic Education	Excellent examples of good practice, very good teaching materials. Great support from organisations outside school, networking with businesses, organisation of internships, job sampling days, information about job opportunities at school The teachers show great commitment to support pupils in getting started in a job and work out criteria for decision making together with pupils There is a need for the development of time and structural frameworks
Basic knowledge	The curriculum shows that the main emphasis lies on knowledge based competences.	Teachers consider economic knowledge as very important. Teachers repeatedly stress the fact that teaching materials present content and concepts quite often in a too complex way. When basic knowledge is taught pupils need links to their world, to their own personal experience and to perspectives how to set their own economic actions.
Social competences	Embedding of social competences in teaching content is needed.	Better structures linking social and self- competences to contents are needed. Teacher education, teaching materials and the curricula need to be adapted accordingly. The teachers refer to their lifelong practice and experience.
Self competence	Embedding of self- competences in teaching content is needed.	Reference to teachers' long time practice and life experience
Business studies	Relatively loosely connected to teaching content	Importance of visits to enterprises and job sampling days



# Interviews with representatives of Social Partnerships

The interviews were conducted with three representatives of an Austrian labour organisation, three representatives of an employers' organisation and one representative of the Austrian Trade Unions.

In the current debate in Austria on a reform of education and the curricula, representatives of the Austrian Social Partnership (institutionalized cooperation between the representations of employers and labour in Austria consisting of four influential lobbying groups: The Austrian Trade Unions, the Austrian Federal Economic Chamber, the Austrian Chamber of Labour and the Austrian Chamber of Agriculture) show a great interest in having their say in these matters and in taking an active part in the ongoing public discourse.

The interviewees from the Social Partnership see their organisations very strongly as service providers for schools and teachers. There is a comprehensive portfolio provided by the Social Partnership that pupils and teachers can access.

All interviewees strongly agree that strengthening social- and self-competences is extremely necessary, because this obvious lack of both competences in our pupils is “life threatening and threatening their future”. This very specific backlog asks for relevant pedagogical and didactical models.

In conclusion, it can be said that there are numerous efforts on behalf of the representatives of the Austrian Social Partnership to overcome the deficit they have spotted in social-and self competences. But due to a shortage of resources many services can only be offered selectively.

All interviewees agree that they would appreciate a greater interest in and demand for their services from pupils and teachers. All representatives of the Social Partnership consider themselves as providers of service at places where teachers and pupils are welcome.

There is also a strong wish to implement more business related courses in initial and in-service teacher education, as for instance, a course on career orientation. More university colleges of education should offer this type of course.

Interviewees representing employers or employees are involved in curricula design. They have a right to assess and comment on new curricula but their views are “mostly not listened to”, according to one interviewee.



So far centres offering information on career orientation have been established to support pupils in their difficult processes of making the right decisions when deciding for a career. They offer job application training sessions. They also sponsor projects related to economic education at schools.

All interviewees from the Social Partnership wish for and even demand a more practical and more real life oriented business education, which they themselves feel committed to and prove in their comprehensive portfolio of offers.

Economic education of the future needs to follow these considerations:

A teaching and learning concept that appeals to both teachers and pupils should be at the centre of economic education. The expertise of pupils and teachers is relevant and influential in any lesson. The often quoted and stipulated pupil centeredness turns into teacher and pupil centeredness, a shared responsibility for processual learning. If, like quoted in the curriculum of History “relying on the world of experience of pupils” is the starting point, this expertise has to appear in the teaching and learning concept of an “area subject”.

## **Hauptschule (general secondary school) (ages 10 to 14)**

The Hauptschule (general secondary school) is incorporated in a community and is relatively flexible in meeting the different needs of students (depending on region, individual interests, talents, etc.).

# Model test Neue Mittelschule (New Middle School)

The goal of models tests with the Neue Mittelschule (NMS) (new middle school) is to provide a joint school for all 10- to 14-year olds that is open to all students who have completed the fourth grade in primary school.