With Austria lowering the voting age from 18 to 16 in 2007 allowing youngsters to vote in municipal, federal and presidential and European elections, the need to strengthen citizenship education has been advanced from eighth to sixth grade to ensure the timely education of young voters. Despite the holistic approach taken towards citizenship, those from poorer socio-economic and/or migrants background continue to have lower educational attainment in civic and intercultural competences. Many people have skills and competences not recognized by formal education, thus according to SOLIDAR Foundation members in Austria more resources and monitoring of validation process should be dedicated to non-formal and informal education.
1. Ensuring that people acquire civic and intercultural competences

Following the lowering of the voting age to 16 in 2007, citizenship education in Austria is taught both as a separate subject and as a cross-curricular theme integrated into what is known as ‘history, social sciences and citizenship education’. The 2017 Eurydice study on citizenship education shows that the Austrian curricula for primary, secondary and school-based vocational education and training (VET) are similar to those for most other EU countries. They cover issues such as ‘interacting effectively and constructively with others’ and ‘thinking critically’. Some issues such as ‘inter-cultural skills’ are treated less fully. Our members have pointed to the lack of specialization for citizenship education objectives when it is taught as a separate subject.

When it comes to inclusive education, training is provided to future teachers within higher education, in which they are taught provisions of individualized support services to youth with disabilities for empowering them to enter the labor market and support their social and citizenship skills, either through Austria’s Employment Assistance Network (Netzwerk Berufliche Assistenz) or through support offers funded by regional governments¹. However, our members highlighted the need to have inclusive education integrated in all education and training courses.

Furthermore, our members have highlighted the need to have a dedicated contact point for civil society within the Austrian government to facilitate NGOs and civil society demands in the legislative process as part of the legal assessment. This contact point could be negotiated during exchanges between representatives of different Ministries. Also, the need for more transparency as a prerequisite for participation, along with a more structured involvement in the political discussion process and in the legislative process.

Validation of NFIL

Based on the recommendation of the European Council of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning, Austria has developed a national strategy for validating non formal and informal learning which contains chapters linked to the European context and national bases such as societal challenges and strategic goals².

Austria aims at increasing the attractiveness of vocational pathways for both employers and young people by linking it with measures to increase the digital skills of learners and trainers in dual VET. The necessary tools are being developed and implementation started in spring 2018. In addition, the job profiles and training regulations in dual VET are being updated and adapted to new requirements to prepare for digitalization. The 2017 apprenticeship occupation package (Lehrberufspaket) comprises eight modernised apprenticeships. By 2020, it is planned that another 50 apprenticeship occupations (one quarter of all dual VET programmes) will be adapted or newly introduced to better match apprenticeship programmes to digitalization³.

CASE STUDY
Giving people credits for their competences

The Berufsförderungsinstitut Oberösterreich – Institute for Vocational Advancement Upper Austria, also known as the BFI vocational training institute is the largest educational institution for workers in Austria. Their activities focus on vocational education and continuing training for workers and workers threatened with unemployment. BFI Upper Austria has developed

¹. https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/support-measures-learners-adult-education-and-training-1_en
². https://bildung.bmbwf.gv.at/event/ebildung/umtil/pdf?329ai4to
the project *You are able to do something* (DU Kannst was) along with County Upper Austria, the public labour market service, the chamber of labour, public high schools, the Institute for Economic Promotion, and associations for company training. “Du Kannst Was” enables vocational qualifications by recognizing informal and non-formal acquired competences as part of a quality check in order to give apprenticeship certificates to those with very good practical skills.

However, our members have pointed out to the lack of comprehensive national statistics on validation along with the fragmented offer for validation opportunities. For instance, according to our members the funded occupational and placement-supporting courses focus on the collection and determination of competences. In addition, the acquisition of new skills and their use play a role during the qualifying process. As our members have explained, in the metal sector for example there was cooperation with the Fohnsdorf Training Center which use a virtual welding system to train young people⁴. The implementation of these guidelines takes place regionally with trainers who attend special trainings on competence assessment or create their own competence profile as proof for the public labour market service requirements.

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2. Enhancing critical thinking and media literacy, particularly regarding the use of the internet and social media

Civil society and NGOs have been at the forefront when it comes to promoting media literacy and critical thinking though non-formal and informal learning in Austria. The Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research has also promoted these media competences so that young people are able to learn how to deal with media consciously and critically⁵. For instance, from 2015 to 2017, the BFI was part of the Erasmus + project “Schau hin”, aimed to raise awareness amongst young people and in schools and youth facilities that hate speech and all forms of discrimination and contempt for others which could lead to serious consequences⁶. The program also created materials such as guidelines on how to behave on the internet. A website was set up, on which materials are available for download⁷. These materials are intended primarily for teachers and youth trainers. Among the materials there is a glossary, which gives information about what is happening on the Internet, and on the other hand, there is a guide to discuss with perpetrators and victims.

Recommendations

- Increase specialization and quality of citizenship education when taught as a separate subject
- Implement inclusive education in all education and training courses
- Need to have a dedicated contact point for civil society within the Austrian government to facilitate NGOs and civil society demands in the legislative process
- Call for more transparency as a prerequisite for participation, along with a more structured involvement in the political discussion process and in the legislative process.
- Increase trust between CSOs, NGOs and governments despite possible political tensions
- Have comprehensive national statistics on validation along with complete offer for validation opportunities

7. https://www.schau-hin.info/
This Monitor is a contribution to further examine the relationship between citizenship and lifelong learning experiences and policy outcomes in and outside of the classroom in various European countries. Mapping the different approaches that SOLIDAR Foundation members have taken in promoting EU values in relation to citizenship education and lifelong learning for greater democratic participation of citizens, the outcomes will be disseminated towards European and national policy-makers and offers an array of best practices to collect, use and transfer among networks. The SOLIDAR Education and Lifelong Learning Forum will further work on the topic and develop a long term sustainable advocacy strategy for CSOs towards national and EU-wide authorities to influence the debate and revision of national curricula and education systems.

Through its member and partner organizations, SOLIDAR Foundation engages citizens in EU decision making processes, empowers people through lifelong learning and VET, and voices their concerns to the EU institutions by carrying out active lobbying, project management and coordination, policy monitoring, research and awareness-raising.