

Innovation in VET

Austria



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Authors: Janine Wulz, Karin Luomi-Messerer

Translation: AHA Translation Office, Lange Gasse 11, 1080 Vienna

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background

To ensure its economic success, every company needs employees who are able to develop innovative products and services. Within the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training, “Education and Training 2020” (ET 2020)¹, “enhancing creativity and innovation, including entrepreneurship, at all levels of education and training” was therefore set out as one of four strategic objectives. **Creativity and innovation** are to be promoted, for example, by developing specific teaching and learning methods and by developing partnerships between education and training providers and businesses, research institutions, cultural actors and creative industries. With “**Culture Connected**”, this article presents a national measure which aims to strengthen creativity in school-based education in Austria. Before discussing this project in detail, the following section aims to present the general approach to the topic of innovation and creativity in the Austrian VET sector.²

1.2. Enhancing innovation and creativity in Austrian VET

The **Austrian Strategy for Research, Technology and Innovation**, published in 2011, pursues objectives including lasting reform of the education system by optimising framework conditions for research, technology and innovation, improving the connection between the education and innovation systems and enhancing the quality and quantity of the human potential available in Austria for research, technology and innovation³. The strategy also describes some problematic areas, such as a lack of interest in technical and scientific subjects, low participation of women in research, deficits in the integration of migrants into the education and innovation system, a still strong brain-drain to other countries, and a relatively low openness of society towards science and technology.⁴ To counteract these problems, the strategy lays down so-called “horizontal objectives” related to social selectivity, permeability and quality assurance and affirms them by specifying general demands (early childhood promotion, all-day school, standards, standardised final exams, individual promotion, promotion of mathematics, informatics, science and technology, etc.) and formulates some of them as benchmarks – in analogy to the **Austrian Strategy for Lifelong Learning**^{5, 6}.

¹ Council of the European Union 2009:

² In Austria, many measures have also been initiated to promote entrepreneurship, but these are not the focus of this article.

³ Republic of Austria 2011, 10

⁴ Republic of Austria 2011, 8

⁵ Republic of Austria 2011a

⁶ Lassnigg, Laimer 2012, 63

But many **measures** have already been launched which can be assigned to the strategic objective of “enhancing innovation and creativity”. Some of these are described briefly in the following section:

- **Transversal competences**, which are considered a major prerequisite for innovation and comprise linguistic competences and communication as well as creativity and design, among others, are included as educational objectives in curricula and the School Organisation Act⁷ and other documents. But the implementation of these transversal competences in everyday school life is described as differing widely because the implementation of educational objectives is formulated in a not very binding manner⁸.
- Similarly, the **initiative for quality development and quality assurance in VET** (QIBB) emphasises transversal competences that are of particular importance for innovation and creativity. Quality objective matrices have been developed, for example, which describe the quality objectives of the schools. At colleges of social and services industries (*humanberufliche höhere Schulen*), for example, the quality areas include “interdisciplinary and networked thinking and understanding”, “promotion of social competences and personal development” and the “promotion of creativity”. At colleges for engineering (*höhere technische Lehranstalten*), the objectives of “willingness to perform, competence and power of innovation” have been laid down.
- The **educational standards in VET** which are just being developed also contain educational standards related to social and personal competences. They describe fields of competence such as “communication”, “cooperation” and “sense of responsibility”⁹.
- Social and personal competences are also encouraged in **partnerships between schools and companies** or through initiatives on the initial and continuing training of teachers. These include awards for teachers such as the Teachers Award¹⁰ and projects promoting innovative teaching didactics such as “E-COOL”¹¹.
- As part of the “**efit21**” **strategy**, for example, initiatives to implement e-learning in everyday school life are launched to enhance ICT competences, and the development of digital competences for teachers is promoted in the “**EPICT**” (European Pedagogical ICT Licence) project.¹²

⁷ Republic of Austria 1962 (SchOG) §2

⁸ Eder, Homann 2012, 71pp. The study “Vision Österreich 2050 [Vision Austria 2050]” (Keuschnigg et. al 2013, 114), which deals with the innovation potential of the Austrian education system, also criticises the fact that skills such as creativity, independence, initiative and knowledge about the way the market economy works are hardly found in current curricula.

⁹ BMUKK 2011, 14ff

¹⁰ <http://www.iv-teachersaward.at/>

¹¹ <http://www.cooltrainers.at/>

¹² <http://www.efit21.at/> and <http://epict.virtuelle-ph.at/>

Especially the **promotion of creativity** for personal development and as the key to innovation has been increasingly seen as a major aspect in recent years. This is taken into consideration, for example, by a fundamental decree of the Education Ministry from 2009 which established creativity as the interdisciplinary guiding principle of the education system: “Creativity is of major importance both in personal and in social, cultural and economic life contexts. The development and promotion of creative skills constitute essential factors for tackling future issues competently”.¹³ The **projects and measures** supported by the Education Ministry with the goal of enhancing creativity include the following, for example:

- The **“Art catches on at school”** (*“Kunst macht Schule”*) project, which was launched in 2007, aims to teach creativity, innovation and cultural competences by launching a dialogue between young people and creative artists at schools. This aims to enhance the students’ creative potential and develop new perspectives and competences such as self-confidence, the ability to work in teams and a sense of responsibility.¹⁴
- The **“White feather”** (*“Weiße Feder”*) initiative encourages creative projects in which students campaign for fairness and against violence at schools (since 2009).¹⁵
- The programme **“K3 – Teaching arts and culture in the apprenticeship training system”** (*“K3 – Kulturvermittlung mit Lehrlingen”*), which was launched in 1989, promotes creativity, innovation and creative leeway in apprenticeship training by holding workshops at part-time vocational schools and offering individual schemes for apprentices in boarding schools.¹⁶
- The **“p[ART]”** programme promotes partnerships between schools and cultural institutions over several years with the goal of enhancing the students’ cultural experiences and creativity in the long term and with lasting effect.¹⁷
- Student competitions such as **“Innovative youth”** (*“Jugend Innovativ”*)¹⁸ also support the development of creative competences.

The “Culture Connected” initiative, which was launched in 2011, is among the most recent initiatives of the Education Ministry that aim to promote creativity. This initiative is open to all school types in Austria. It is described in detail in the following section, with the focus on co-operation of VET schools and colleges with cultural institutions.

¹³ BMUKK 2009, 1

¹⁴ BMUKK 2007

¹⁵ BMUKK 2012

¹⁶ KulturKontakt Austria nd.

¹⁷ KulturKontakt Austria 2014

¹⁸ cf. <http://www.jugendinnovativ.at>

2. The “Culture Connected” Initiative

2.1 Background

Basic information on the initiative

“Culture Connected” was **initiated** in 2011 by the Austrian Education Ministry¹⁹. The **key goal** of “Culture Connected” is to support cooperation projects between schools and cultural partners. Here students learn about new opinions so they can question common views and overcome prejudices.²⁰

Since 2011 schools have had the option to **apply for funding** for their cultural partnerships every year. Teams comprising students, teachers and at least one non-school cultural partner (cultural institutions, initiatives, associations) can **submit project concepts** for all areas of art and culture. An **expert jury** assesses these projects and decides on funding for project implementation up to a maximum of € 1,500²¹. The initiative is coordinated and organised by the association **KulturKontakt Austria**²², which has been active in art and culture mediation since 1989 and supports cooperation ventures with educational establishments in Southern and Eastern Europe. KulturKontakt is supported financially by the Education Ministry, among other institutions.

Rationale

The “Culture Connected” initiative was launched to make it easier for students **to access art and culture** and **enhance creativity, participation and innovation at schools**. It also aims to support students via social and cooperative learning.²³ In addition, “Culture Connected” has the following areas of focus:²⁴

- enabling involvement with and participation in art and culture,
- opening up the school institution through cooperation with cultural partners and involvement of external experts,
- involving target groups with different cultural and social backgrounds,
- creating awareness of the potential of new learning venues outside school.

¹⁹ Ministry of Education and Women’s Affairs (BMBF), until 2013 Ministry for Education, Arts and Culture (BMUKK)

²⁰ Kultur Kontakt Austria nd.a

²¹ BMBF 2014a, 2

²² <https://www.bmbf.gv.at/ministerium/vp/2007/20071206.html>

²³ BMUKK 2012a

²⁴ BMBF nd.a

Initiators and stakeholders involved

Various people and organisations are involved in the planning and implementation of “Culture Connected”.²⁵

- The Education Ministry (BMBF), as the initiator of the initiative, is responsible for concept development, the annual call for applications for schools, and funding.
- KulturKontakt Austria supports the initiative in terms of concept development, advice and organisation.
- All Austrian schools as well as school-based day-care establishments can submit projects jointly with cultural partners. The call for applications is announced by the Education Ministry by way of a decree.
- Cultural partners cooperate with schools in a submitted project. Partners can be both well-established cultural institutions and also smaller cultural initiatives and associations.
- It is also possible to involve other (additional) project partners, such as other educational establishments, municipalities or embassies.
- An independent expert jury comprising several experts from the fields of visual arts, music and performing arts selects projects based on defined criteria.²⁶

2.2. Implementation of “Culture Connected”

Implementation and cooperation arrangements

Before **submitting a project**, schools contact possible cultural partners and develop a joint concept. The concept should be developed in close cooperation between all those involved in the project (school management, teachers, students, cultural partner[s]) and is described in the online application form when the project is submitted. The concept needs to comprise at least the following points.²⁷

- Essential content: main objective, type of project (thematic areas, objectives, division of tasks, etc.),
- methods of project implementation and cooperation, scope of work and schedule,
- cost and funding plan,
- framework conditions at the school and the cultural partner.

It is expected that the projects are carried out in an interdisciplinary manner, involving several classes, and the entire school is informed about the project and involved in it.

²⁵ BMBF nd.a

²⁶ KulturKontakt interview

²⁷ BMBF nd.a

Following the development of the concept, the **project is submitted** via an online form on the website of the “Culture Connected” initiative up to a defined time (usually in the December of the year when the call for applications is published). The online form contains information about the following points:

- Project title
- Data related to the school
- Data related to the cultural partner
- Data related to the project management
- Data related to the participating students
- Emergence of the project idea/starting point
- Project objective/s
- Project description (content, methods, project steps)
- Form of cooperation between the school and the cultural partner
- Student involvement
- Other non-school project partners and their involvement in the project
- A binding cost and funding plan

The project can be submitted by the respective school or cultural partner, with every school being entitled to take part only once in each call for applications (i.e. once a year), while the cultural partners could participate in several projects. In addition, the project application needs to include information about the project management, which is the point of contact for the period during which the project is implemented and is responsible for documentation and settlement of accounts.

After the end of the submission period, an expert jury decides on which of the submitted concepts are **eligible for funding**. Here the school form (primary schools, VET schools, general education schools, etc.) and the size of the cultural institution do not play a role. The criteria for the selection of projects are described in transparent form on the initiative’s website:

- informative value, transparency and clarity of the project concept,
- intensity and creativity of cooperation between school and cultural partner,
- realistically planned implementation,
- participatory involvement of students in all phases of the project,
- planned formation of networks in the school context (interdisciplinary, involving several classes),
- integration of the project concept into the school environment,
- sustainability of the project,
- compliance with the submission criteria.

The jury also takes into consideration aspects related to diversity and inclusion (such as gender-sensitive implementation) as well as the different physical and mental abilities of the students, the needs of the age group addressed by the project and also the social and cultural background of the students. In addition, the framework conditions and possibilities of the school location should be taken into account. In general, the jury attempts to support projects of different school types, school grades, from different provinces and cultural areas.²⁸

A few weeks after the projects have been submitted (usually in January of the following year), the submitting project partners are informed in writing about the outcome of the selection made by the jury. Then the partners which have been selected have to fill in a form with a request for the project amount. Half of the project costs will be transferred at the beginning of the project, another 50% after the final statement of the project costs has been drawn up. Then the project can be started. **Implementation** is scheduled between January and June. Furthermore, the projects are published on the initiative's website in March of the project year.

After **conclusion of the project**, in June of the project year, the final report needs to be submitted via an online form which is sent by email to the project management. The report serves as project documentation and also contains feedback about the course of the project and the settlement of accounts.

Incentives, financing and funding

Projects are **funded** with a maximum of € 1,500, which is provided by the Education Ministry. The jury decides on the specific funding amount when selecting the projects. Overall, an amount of up to € 500,000 a year is available for the initiative.²⁹

Project costs which are invoiced for the project must have accrued in the project period from January to June of the project year and must only comprise costs that have been applied for beforehand (when submitting the project application).³⁰

²⁸ BMBF nd.a

²⁹ BMUKK 2012b

³⁰ BMBF nd.a

2.3 Projects implemented at VET schools and colleges

Since the initiative was launched in 2011, about 130 projects have been funded a year³¹. This means that every year some 8,500 students have had the opportunity to take part in these projects.³²

VET schools and colleges (*berufsbildende mittlere Schulen*³³, *berufsbildende höhere Schulen*³⁴) take part in the initiative as equal partners with other schools. For this article, 23 projects of VET schools and colleges have been analysed³⁵. The following schools have taken part: colleges for engineering and crafts (*höhere technische und gewerbliche Lehranstalten*), colleges of management and services industries (and colleges of fashion) (*höhere Lehranstalten für wirtschaftliche Berufe [und Mode]*), kindergarten teacher training colleges (*Bildungsanstalten für Kindergartenpädagogik*), colleges of business administration (*Handelsakademien*), colleges of tourism (*höhere Lehranstalten für Tourismus*), schools of management and services industries (*Fachschulen für wirtschaftliche Berufe*) and schools of social occupations (*Fachschulen für soziale Berufe*).

The VET schools and colleges had between one and three **project partners** from the sphere of culture, partnerships could be concluded with 49 cultural institutions overall, including art and cultural associations, theatres, cinemas, museums, and other partners such as higher education establishments, municipalities or embassies, or schools in other European countries.

Similarly to the project partners, the **project formats** also vary widely: The most frequent formats were exhibitions, theatre and film productions, but also textual work, cultural management, dance, installations, radio and architecture have been used as forms of creative expression in the projects. In addition, a varied range of topics have been covered by the projects, from issues related to migration, intercultural co-existence and creative expression, to various other aspects such as management, relationships and love, gender relations, sciences, local history, handicraft and career choice.

³¹ Most projects are supported with the full funding amount.

³² BMUKK 2012b

³³ Schools for intermediate vocational education (BMS) (ISCED 2011: 3B) last three to four years and impart professional training and qualification at medium level.

³⁴ Colleges for higher vocational education (BHS) (ISCED 2011: years 1 to 3: 3B, years 4 to 5: 5B) last for five years, impart sound general education as well as higher professional training, and are completed with a matriculation and diploma exam, which entitles holders to access to higher education and to exercise a profession.

³⁵ All the projects are presented on the website of "Culture Connected" (BMBF 2012b).

In the following, by way of an example, **two projects** will be described which have been implemented at VET schools and colleges.

*“CULT GOOD” (“KULT GUT”)*³⁶

Three classes of the Villach Federal College of Management and Services Industries and Federal College of Fashion and Clothing Technology, in cooperation with the Gmünd Cultural Initiative, developed artistically designed objects which, in the future, will be sold as advertising products for the Artists’ Town Gmünd. The students developed different prototypes and presented them in an exhibition in Gmünd over several days. An expert jury selected the winning objects and awarded prizes. The project was supported by the Municipality of Gmünd and implemented in cooperation with another school (BG Porcia Spittal/Drau).

*“Old masters – new pictures” (“Alte Meister – neue Bilder”)*³⁷

The Federal College of Business Administration Neumark am Wallersee (in the province of Salzburg) in cooperation with the Salzburg Municipal Library developed so-called re-enactments of pictures that show people who are reading. In this project, the pictures were re-interpreted, reconstructed and transferred to the 21st century. This resulted in a creative campaign of the students which aimed to motivate people to read and was presented in public space. The creative process of the students, ranging from the search for pictures, their selection, onto the search for materials and props, to the actual photography, image processing and final exhibition design, was supported and accompanied by a photographer.³⁸

³⁶ For the project description, see:

http://www.culture-connected.at/projekte/projekt/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=105&cHash=2801cddc80a8062e243e3c9ca51d80e8

³⁷ For the project description, see: <http://www.kulturkontakt.or.at/html/D/beispiele.asp?guid={3BFFD282-56A04EE4-8AF2-CAF53332EDEB}>

³⁸ Kulturkontakt Austria nd.a

2.4 Effects of the “Culture Connected” Initiative

Positive outcomes and lessons learned

The project report after conclusion of the project also includes feedback of the project manager about the project itself. This **feedback** allows the following **conclusions** to be drawn about the “Culture Connected” initiative.³⁹

It is emphasised as particularly **positive** that, by implementing cultural projects, students not only acquire basic subject-related and creative knowledge but also key social skills. These include creative development, cultural awareness, learning skills, civic competence, linguistic competences, autonomous work, motivation and concentration. In addition, it is underlined that they develop their abilities of perception and reflection. Furthermore, regarding the students’ personal development it is reported that their self-confidence, enthusiasm and ability to work in teams are enhanced.⁴⁰

The **major strength** of “Culture Connected” is that the students’ creativity is boosted thanks to their direct contact with cultural initiatives outside school. The students also experience new learning environments and are able to broaden their perspectives and forms of expression and extend their contacts in this way. Access to different spheres of art and culture is made possible, irrespective of the students’ social or cultural background.

The initiative’s structure is easily accessible and allows a relatively uncomplicated submission process via an online form. Wide participation by different schools and the wide array of project ideas prove the success of this initiative.

Bottlenecks and challenges

Due to the frequently large number of project partners there can also sometimes be **difficulties** in the information and communication process. Providing sufficient information and involving all concerned parties in the course of the project represent major foundations for the project’s success. In addition, it is also described as essential to pass on information to the project environment, such as other teachers, staff and members of the cultural institution, parents and other students, in order to avoid scheduling conflicts or misunderstandings.

³⁹ Culture Connected nd

⁴⁰ Culture Connected nd, 1.

Another challenge is cooperation with external partners and possible activities outside regular teaching times. These require precise coordination of dates and planning of time resources by all involved parties.

Moreover, **lack of reflection and communication** about problems can lead to conflict between the parties involved in the project.⁴¹

3. Conclusions

The “**Culture Connected**” initiative provides easy access to art and culture for schools and students. The students experience creative processes, develop social skills and broaden their perspectives. The development of creativity and the personal development of students are at the centre of all projects that are funded through this initiative. In addition, the contact with cultural institutions is experienced as positive and possible access barriers of students for future cultural activities are removed in this way. The “Culture Connected” initiative succeeds in developing lasting networks between students, schools and cultural partners by using relatively few funding and makes it possible for students to develop competences which form a foundation for future creative and innovative processes.

One **weakness** of the “Culture Connected” initiative is that longer-term projects which last for more than one semester cannot be implemented and projects can only be carried out in the summer semester; more flexible options for submission would be desirable. Another possibility of how this programme can be improved is by introducing a quality assurance system to guarantee that the experiences of schools, for example relating to their resource planning, time management or cooperation with cultural initiatives are integrated into the planning of future projects.

Feedback of project managers gives insights into the project outcomes and describes the benefits for the participating students in terms of the **further development of their creative potential and their personal and social competences**.

Overall the “Culture Connected” initiative represents an **example of good practice** for promoting the innovative strength of students at VET (and general education) schools and colleges in Austria. This succeeds mainly due to the easy, favourably perceived access to creativity and social learning by all parties involved.

⁴¹ Culture Connected nd, 2

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Contact

KulturKontakt Austria employee – telephone contact on 28 Nov. 2014