



Institut für Bildungsforschung der Wirtschaft

Cedefop European Public Opinion Survey on Vocational Education and Training

Austria

Report drawn up as part of ReferNet Austria on behalf of Cedefop

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The opinions expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the opinions of Cedefop or BMB.

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Introduction

Background

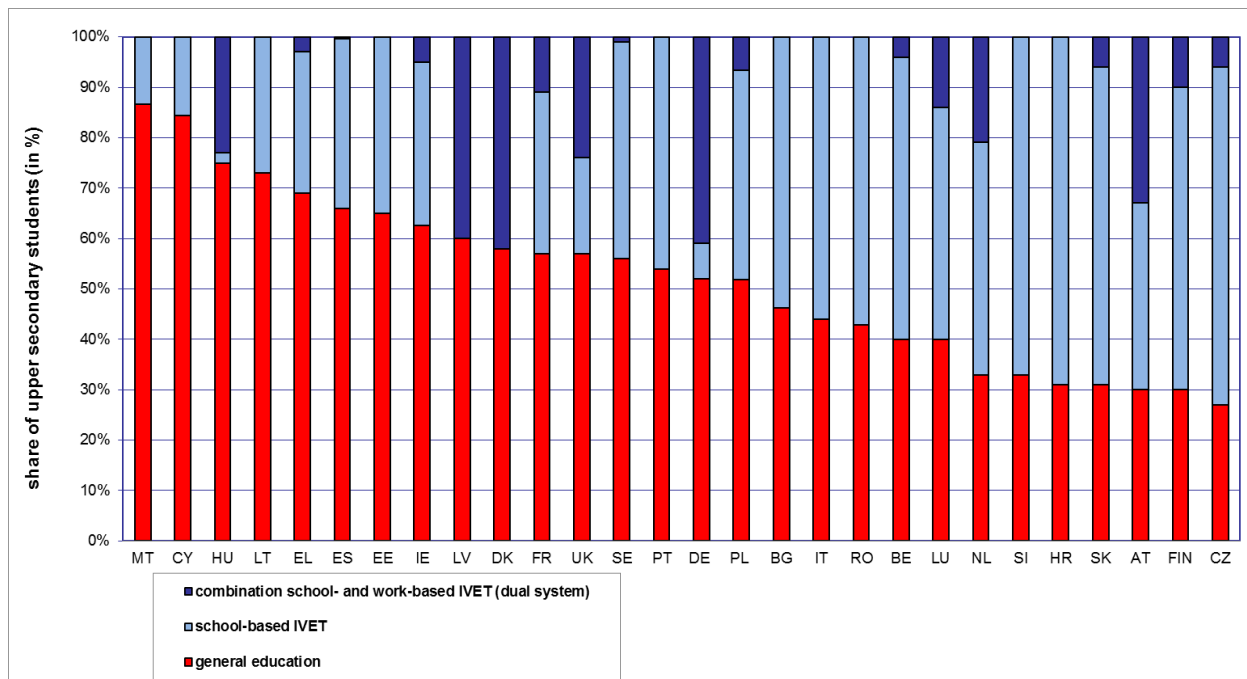
The results of the Austrian survey which was carried out as part of the European public opinion survey on vocational education and training (VET) by Cedefop (Cedefop 2017) can only be interpreted meaningfully against the background of the specifics of the national education system and, consequently, need to be contextualised accordingly. In an international comparison, Austria is one of the countries with a highly qualification-oriented initial vocational education and training (IVET) system (especially at the upper secondary level). Compared to many other countries, qualifications which are relevant for the labour market and for starting a professional career are, to a much higher extent, located at the formally intermediate qualification level: around 80% of young people attend a VET programme at the upper secondary level which leads to a professional qualification. As a result, the tertiary level (which has a strong academic orientation from an international perspective) is comparatively small. Another characteristic of Austria is that IVET is provided in two formats: on the one hand, in a full-time school-based VET system (with programmes for intermediate vocational education and for higher vocational education) and, on the other, in dual training pathways (apprenticeship training). Both VET subsystems cover about the same number of learners, which in turn is another specific feature of the Austrian's education system¹ (cf. Fig. 1). As the third specific feature, the programmes for higher vocational education must be mentioned. These are five-year education programmes which lead to higher education entrance qualifications and enable direct labour market entry to the intermediate or higher workforce segment (i.e. they provide a double qualification).

The acquisition of vocational qualifications has a long history in Austria and is firmly established and widespread in the formal education system. Nevertheless a trend can be discerned in society towards higher education and tertiary qualifications, which is reflected in related attractiveness problems of the IVET sector.

Also important for the comparative assessment of the survey results is that Austria boasts one of the lowest (youth) unemployment rates. This is often interpreted as a positive result of the strong position and quality of the IVET sector in Austria.

⁽¹⁾ In the majority of other countries with a high share of young people in VET at the upper secondary level, one subsystem dominates (full-time school-based VET, e.g. in the Czech Republic, in Finland, Sweden, Hungary; workplace-based apprenticeship system, e.g. in Germany, Switzerland).

Figure 1: Distribution of students at the upper secondary level in the EU Member States by type of programme (current situation)



Source: OECD, Eurostat, various years, ibw presentation

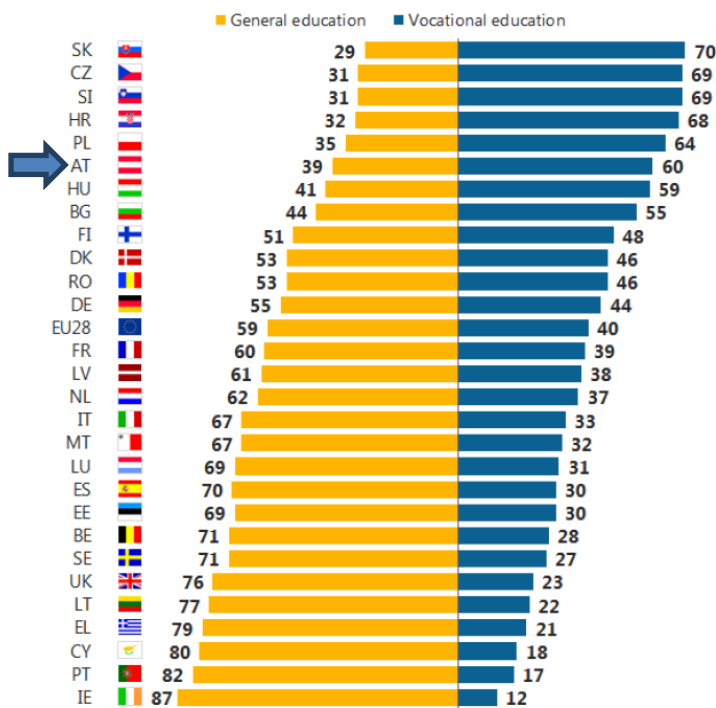
Based on the Cedefop survey, 60% of the over-15-year-olds in Austria at the upper secondary level have completed a vocational training pathway. This is very much in line with the current formal qualification structure according to Austrian register data, based on which 54% have specified a formal vocational qualification as their highest educational attainment².

International comparison

From a meta-perspective, the share of respondents with a vocational qualification (at the upper secondary level) is therefore clearly higher in Austria than on an EU-28 average (60% vs. 40%). Consequently, more young people in Austria complete a vocational training pathway than a general education track at upper secondary level (in an EU-28 average the opposite applies). This means that Austria holds the sixth place in the country ranking (cf. Fig. 2).

⁽²⁾ The difference between the two shares (60% vs. 54%) can be explained historically by the combination of obstacles to access to tertiary education for, and a traditionally low inclination to study of, graduates of an IVET programme. It was only with the expansion of the five-year VET programmes (from the 1970s onwards), the introduction (1997) of *Berufsreifeprüfung* (exam granting access to tertiary education to those holding an intermediate VET qualification) and the establishment of universities of applied sciences (since the mid-1990s) that vertical permeability was facilitated for this group of people.

Figure 2: Share of respondents with general education and vocational training at the upper secondary level



Base: Respondents who went to upper secondary education (n= 24,146)

Source: Cedefop VET Opinion Survey

Methodological note

Before expanding on Austria-specific results, the following needs to be highlighted: the comparative analysis of the survey in question is connected with a wide range of imponderables and uncertainties. This is due to the fact, among others, that the state of information/knowledge about the situation and systemic constellations in other countries is very limited among the respondents. Consequently, the respondents do not have sufficient information about the situation in other countries nor a standard of comparison with which they can rate/assess VET in Austria. Strictly speaking, their statements are therefore (at best) informative and valid only for their 'own' country. This article nevertheless aims to analyse the results for Austria against the background of the findings from the other EU Member States/the level of the EU-28. The goal is to identify similarities but also striking divergences in the respondents' assessments and present thoughts on whether this is due to artificial or, by contrast, 'real' differences. The Cedefop survey represents – despite these methodological restrictions – an important source of information portraying the VET sector in Austria, especially because no (regular and empirically founded) national surveys exist about this topic³.

⁽³⁾ Until 2009, so-called school monitoring was conducted every year in Austria. In the course of that survey, 2,000 people (around 500 parents of pupils, 100 teachers and 150-200 pupils and students) were questioned about topical educational topics. But this information could not be differentiated by education segments (and therefore not separately for VET) for analytical purposes. There is only information available about satisfaction with the VET system.

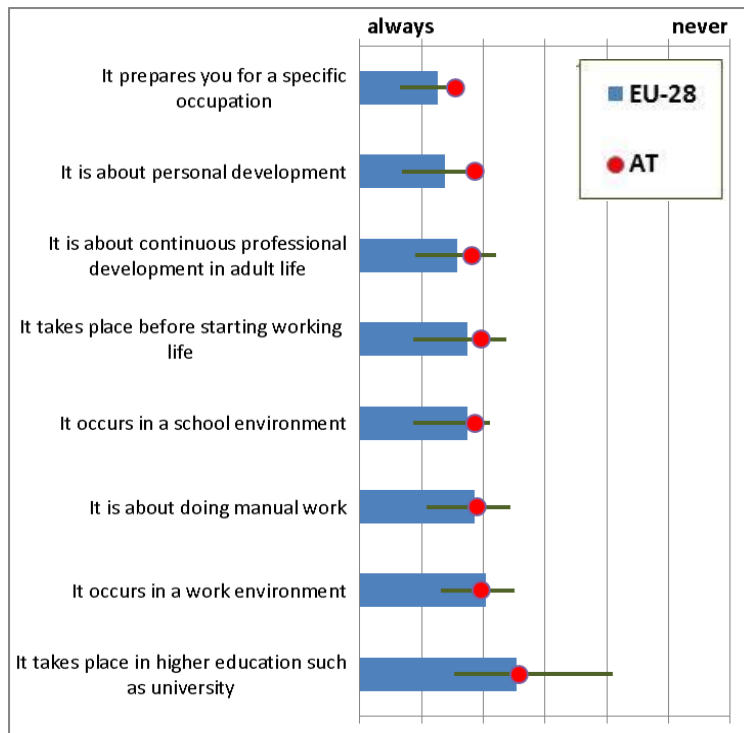
2. Awareness and knowledge of VET

The **general level of knowledge about VET (Q1)** (based on the respondents' self-assessment) in Austria is 'only' the EU-28 country average, despite the already mentioned high share of respondents with VET qualifications: 71% indicate that they have already heard about it and also know what it is about (= they have profound information/knowledge). Another 20%, however, are not sure what is 'really' understood by VET. There are no differences between the questioned groups of people: 80% of survey participants with a GE qualification and with a VET qualification state they have profound knowledge about VET. Those without an upper secondary qualification (therefore graduates of compulsory schooling as their highest educational attainment), however, have a clearly lower level of information/knowledge (53%) about VET.

In Austria as well as in an EU-28 average, the share of respondents who indicate that they have profound knowledge about VET is higher than the share of people who have completed a VET programme. In Austria, this difference is 11 percentage points, in an EU-28 average it is 31. This means that many more interviewees state they know what VET is than have actually acquired a VET qualification. Despite the, after all, apparently widespread level of knowledge about VET, at the same time there are still considerable information deficits, especially among compulsory school graduates.

All the answers given by the Austrian respondents to the question on **aspects they associate with VET (Q2)** are close to the EU average (cf. Fig. 3).

Figure 3: Aspects associated with VET (Q2), mean values for the EU-28 as well as highest and lowest country values for each question item

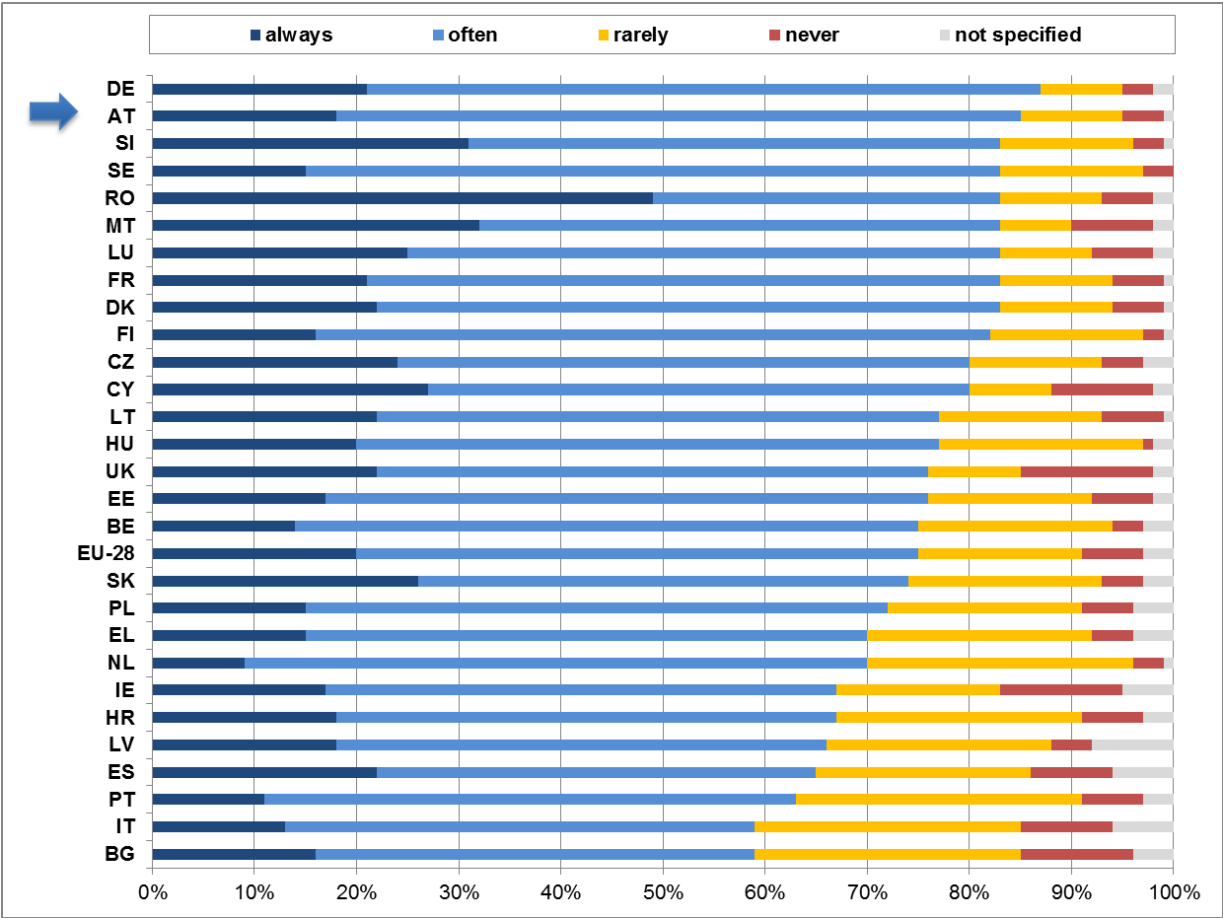


Source: Cedefop 2017

In principle, from the perspective of a comparison of systems, the questions about the **settings (world of work or school) where VET takes place (Q2.4 and Q2.5)** would have been very informative. Unfortunately, these questions are formulated imprecisely so that they were interpreted ambiguously by the survey participants. This is mainly reflected in the result for Austria where there are two VET subsystems of about the same size: full-time school-based and dual VET. In such a constellation, the two questions can be interpreted differently: (1) whether school and the world of work constitute settings of learning at all or (2) which weighting they have as settings of learning (and here, in turn, either as a share of the entire available range of qualification programmes or in the distribution of learning durations). If the question is understood in the sense of the first interpretation option, the correct answer to question Q2.4 ('school') for Austria would have been 'always': the reason is that school is the basic setting of learning in full-time school-based VET and a part of apprenticeship (dual) training. Also the question Q2.5 ('world of work') could have been answered with 'always' because the training company is, of course, the basic setting of learning in apprenticeship training and also because periods of work placement are foreseen in all full-time school-based VET programmes (in most cases compulsory, in some school types voluntary). But if the two questions are interpreted as an assessment of the weighting (regarding the distribution of offers or the learning durations) of the two learning sites, the given response categories ('always' – 'often' – 'rarely' – 'never') make no sense.

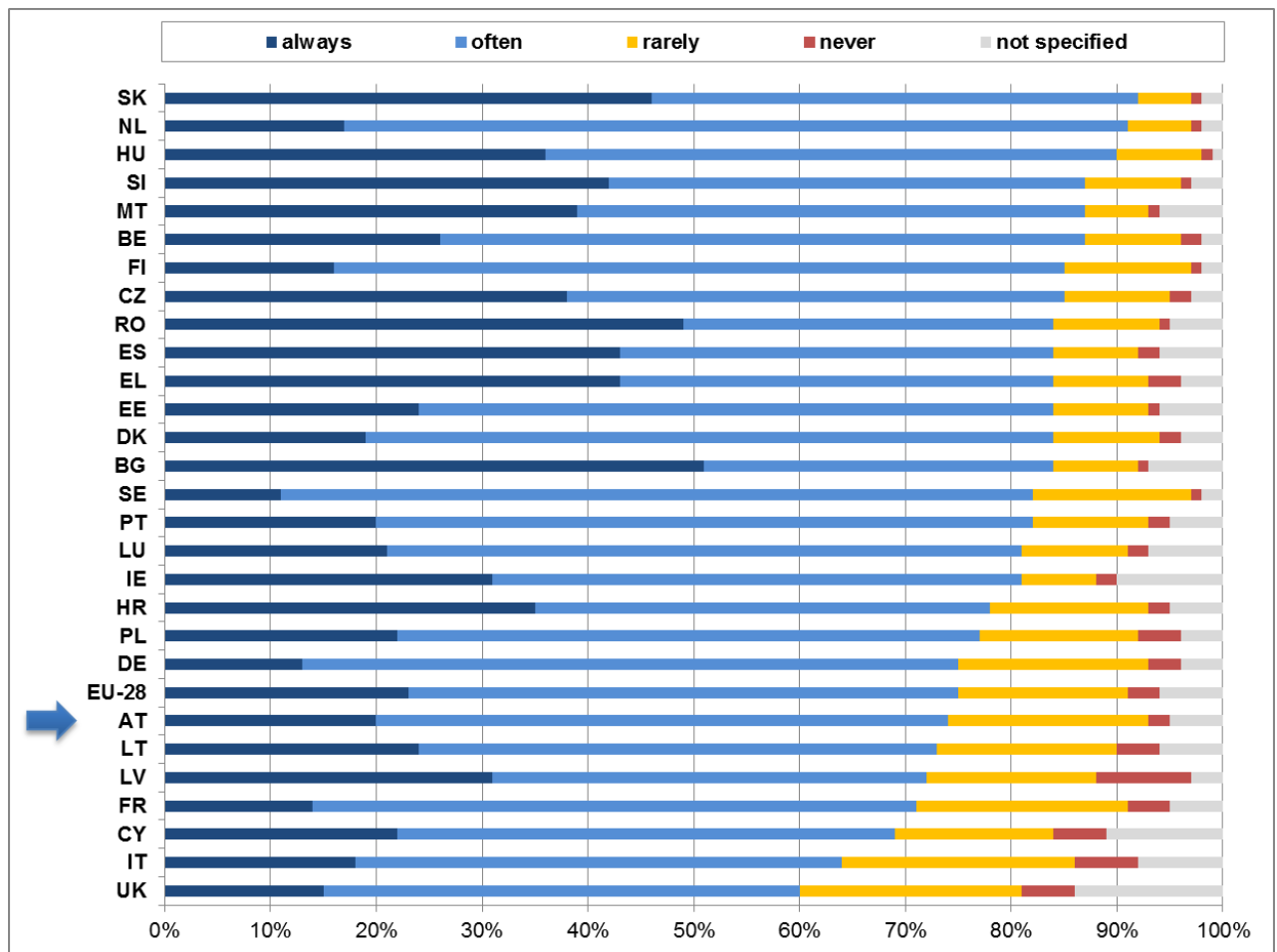
Austria has (jointly with Germany) the highest share of respondents who associate VET strongly ('always' and 'often') with learning in a work setting (cf. Fig. 4a). In line with this finding, the two countries have below-average shares of respondents – in an EU comparison – who see VET as mainly being embedded in school-based settings of learning (cf. Fig. 4b). Both results reflect the strong and comprehensive position of apprenticeship training in the two countries. In this respect, the respondents' assessments are 'correct' here. A differentiated analysis, however, illustrates how inappropriate the wording of the questions and of the given response categories is for deriving relevant information: the fact, for instance, that in Sweden – a country without apprenticeship training in the sense of the dual systems of the German-speaking countries – as many respondents as in Austria (68%) state that VET 'often' takes place in a work setting can only be explained with difficulty and has the result that – without any knowledge of the systems' contexts – wrong conclusions are drawn (such as about the actual distribution of workplace-based learning in the two countries).

Figure 4a: Distribution of the question whether VET takes place in a work setting/environment (Q2.5); ranking of countries based on the share 'always' + 'often'



Source: Cedefop 2017

Figure 4b: Distribution of the question whether VET takes place in a school setting (Q2.4); ranking of countries based on the share 'always' + 'often'



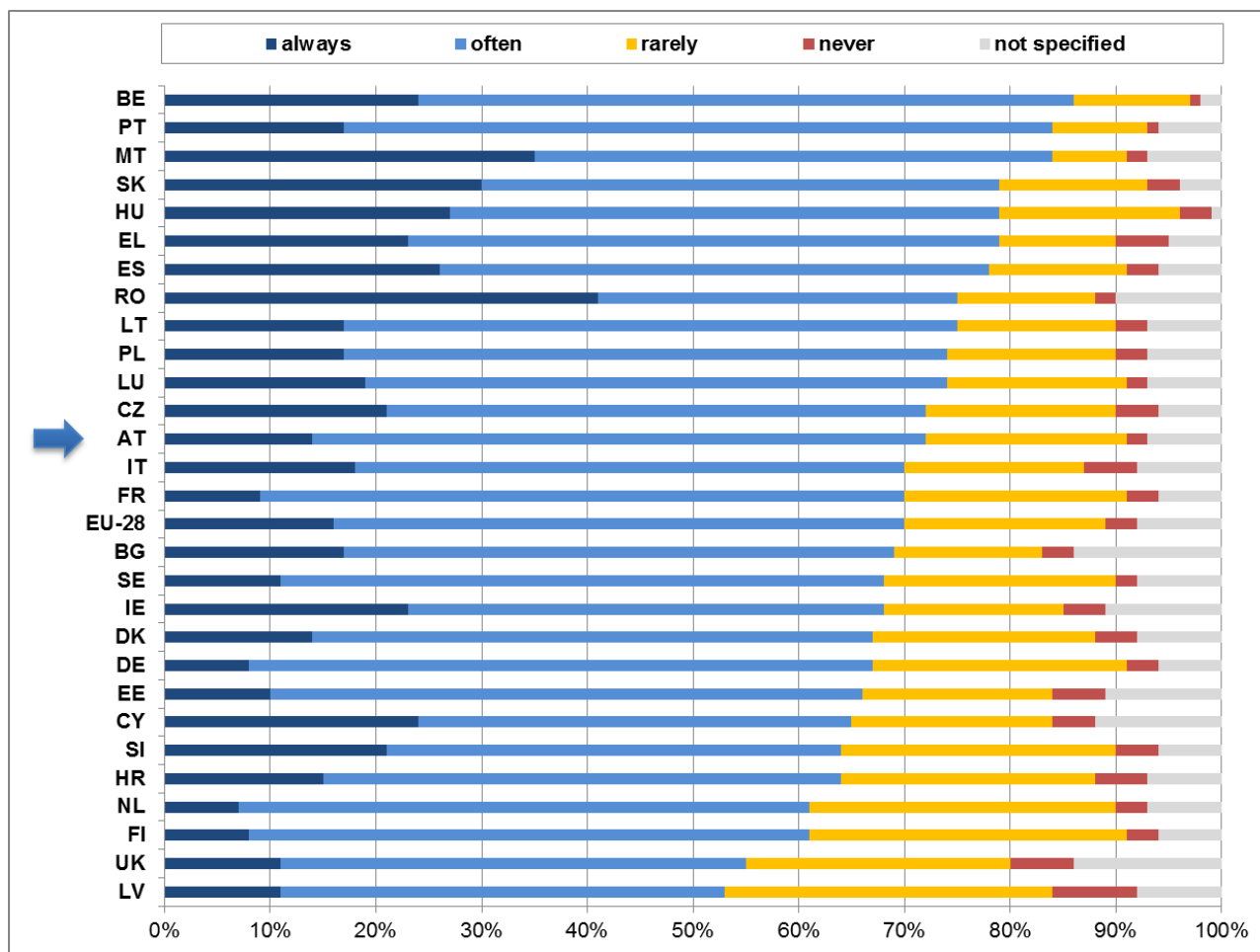
Source: Cedefop 2017

It is remarkable that both in an EU average and in Austria only three out of four respondents believe that VET always or at least often takes place **in a school-based setting (Q2.4)** (cf. Fig. 4b). As practically all VET programmes at the upper secondary level in Europe take place fully or partly in a school-based setting, this response behaviour is surprising: this either reflects a profound ignorance among a considerable segment of the population regarding the location of VET and/or the question was phrased imprecisely/misinterpreted by the survey participants. The latter probably applies to countries with an apprenticeship training system (such as Austria and Germany): this is because 20% to 30% of the apprenticeship training time must be completed in part-time vocational schools. But the given response categories to the two questions are not really appropriate: the response category 'always' would be a better reflection of the real situation. In full-time school-based VET systems it would have been correct to tick 'always' for the school environment and 'often' or 'rarely' for the work environment. In addition, the categorisation has little meaning (even in the case of 'correct' ratings regarding the differences between the countries' VET systems).

Also interesting is the response behaviour regarding the statement that 'VET is about doing **manual work**' (Q2.7). The rate of agreement is very high in all countries (in Austria it is 72% ['always' + 'often']). The fact that an average of three out of four respondents answer with 'always' or 'often', however, cannot be interpreted unambiguously either. Do the respondents think that VET is mostly used/best suited for qualifying for blue-collar activities whereas qualifications for white-collar activities can rather be acquired by attending general education or higher academic programmes? Do they think that blue-collar activities and VET are geared towards manual/practical/handicraft skills, while white-collar competences are linked to school-based, general/higher education? If these ideas are implied, the statement 'VET is about doing intellectual/brain work' should also have been included for assessment to achieve a more meaningful interpretation of the response behaviour. In other words, clearly more aspects/statements should have been included in the survey, especially seemingly contrasting pairs, to facilitate different association dimensions. Otherwise there is the risk of perpetuating stereotypes.

A special challenge is the interpretation of the response categories 'rarely' and 'never': Do one fifth of the respondents across the EU really think that VET is only 'rarely' or 'never' connected with manual work and that it therefore focuses solely/primarily on non-manual activities? Or were these categories rather/primarily ticked by those who think that, although VET is predominantly connected with manual work/occupations, it has nevertheless something to do with non-manual work?

Figure 5: Distribution of the answer to the question whether VET is about doing manual work (Q2.7); ranking of countries based on the share 'always' + 'often'



Source: Cedefop 2017

The basic problem of the question(s) is the following: either the questions are answered in a way that they also apply to VET in all cases. Then the answer would have to be 'always' (or at least 'often'). But then the rate of agreement in a country would be close to 100% and would consequently have no value. Or, by contrast, the answer relates to the assessment of how much relevance the aspect to be assessed has in/for VET: In line with this interpretation, for instance, on an EU average the respondents would think that 70% of VET is always/often about teaching skills for manual, handicraft activities.

It is especially difficult to answer the questions if in a country VET takes place in different programmes, learning formats and settings – such as in apprenticeship training and in full-time school-based VET (as is the case in Austria). In that case, several questions (e.g. regarding the learning sites) can either not be answered meaningfully or the answers relate primarily to only one form of VET (the response behaviour is strongly influenced by the type of VET which the respondents attended themselves and is therefore distorted) or they repre-

sent a mixed assessment (the respondents attempt to evaluate both VET forms 'at the same time' and consequently tend to select 'often'). Also here the result is distorted response behaviour.

Conclusion: The questions are phrased in a way that they can be understood as having two or more different meanings and can therefore not be interpreted meaningfully either, especially not in a country comparison.

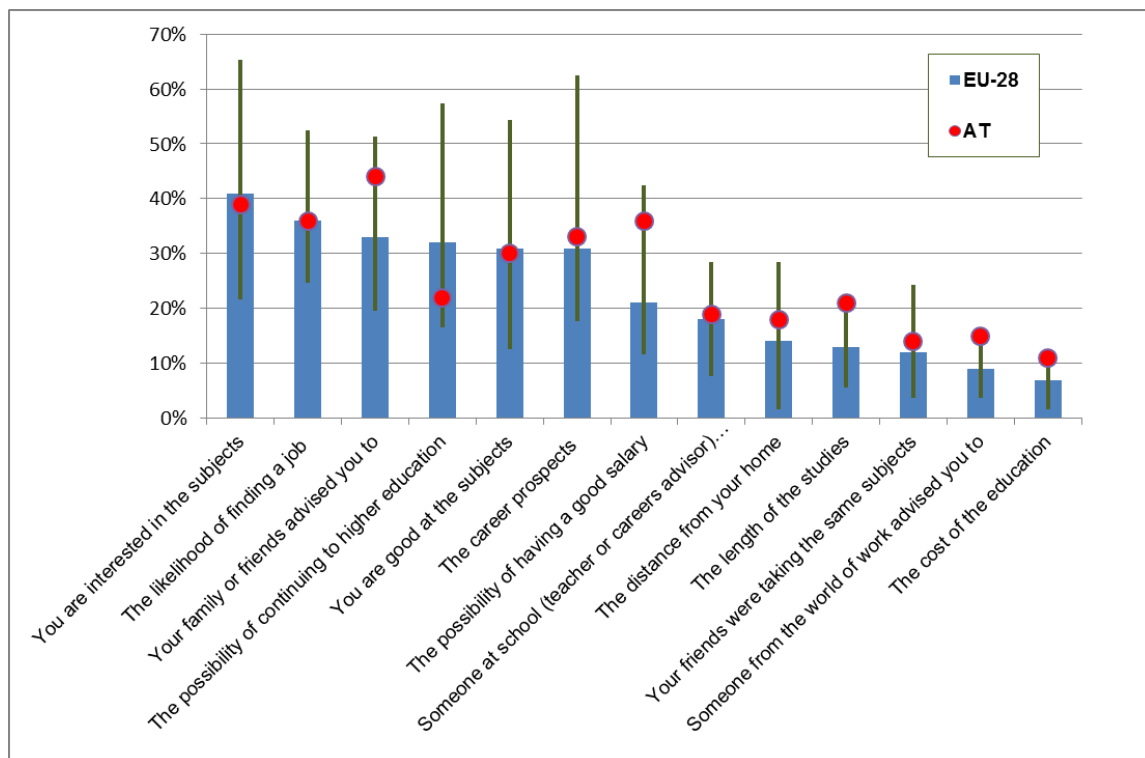
Similar challenges are connected to the question regarding **higher education (Q2.6)**: Around half of the Austrian participants in the survey think that VET 'always' or 'often' takes place at higher education institutions. For the other half, this is 'rarely' or 'never' the case. Does this response behaviour say something about the respondents' perception of the academic focus of higher education institutions or about their level of knowledge about the real system setting as to whether or to what extent there exist practice-oriented HE programmes, such as at universities of applied sciences? Moreover there is certainly also a divergence of opinions as to the extent to which, for example, a technical or medical study course or teacher training can (among other things) be classified as a VET programme.

Based on their own information, around two thirds (68%) of the Austrian participants in the survey were provided with **career guidance (Q6T)** at the time of transition from the lower to the upper secondary sector (where VET starts in Austria). In this respect, the respondents who attended a GE programme at the upper secondary level did not differ from learners in VET programmes. But it is difficult to interpret this result because there is no more information about the extent, quality and depth of information of career guidance and it is therefore not really possible to assess the significance/impact of career guidance on educational/career choice. In Austria there are traditionally very pronounced differences in career guidance provided by schools, not only between the individual school locations but especially between the two school types at lower secondary level (cf. Schmid et al. 2014). Typically, the lower cycle of the academic secondary school (AHS) mainly promotes its 'own' AHS upper cycle (and the five-year higher VET programmes), whereas the general secondary school (NMS) promotes VET (and here especially apprenticeship training). This is connected with the voluntary (AHS lower cycle) versus compulsory character (NMS) of career guidance in the two school types as well as with the self-images of career guidance teachers, the educational objectives of the school types, and partly with the recruitment interests of the school types (this applies especially to AHS upper cycle). All these influencing factors, which are highly relevant for the specific school choice, are not shown in the survey. The simple dichotomous question of whether any information was given on VET when the survey partici-

pants were making a decision about their future educational pathway is too vague to cover the reality in Austria and furthermore suggests a wrong picture. This is also the reason why, based on the survey data at national level, no connection is revealed between the extent of career guidance and educational choice – a correlation which in a European country comparison is in fact sound.

When comparing the relevance of the surveyed potential **influencing factors** for the choice of the training/school form at the upper secondary level (**Q11T**), the values for Austria are mostly near the EU-28 average (cf. Fig. 6). Based on the data, the parents and the peer group as well as the income expectation have a greater influence, however, whereas vertical permeability (to a higher education programme) is less relevant in/for the educational choice. This reflects empirical research findings on the ‘inheritance of education’ (i.e. intergenerational mobility in education), which is above the average in Austria (cf. OECD 2017, Vogtenhuber et al. 2016). The reason why parents in particular but also peers exert great influence on educational and career choice is, on the one hand, due to early differentiation at the lower secondary level (cf. Schmid 2014) and, on the other, the large variety of upper secondary programmes. Although this diversity makes it possible for young people to make such a decision based on their interests and strengths, they are also ‘spoilt for choice’ to a certain extent. In this decision-making process, they are supported – despite the wide range of guidance programmes provided by schools and non-school establishments – by parents and peers. Moreover, at the age of 13 or 14, they are relatively young when making this key educational and career choice. This also explains the great influence of the parents. The comparatively minor influence of the possibilities of transfer to higher education establishments after attending an education or training programme is due to the fact that all programmes at the upper secondary level give access to a tertiary study programme (either directly afterwards or upon completion of related matriculation exams).

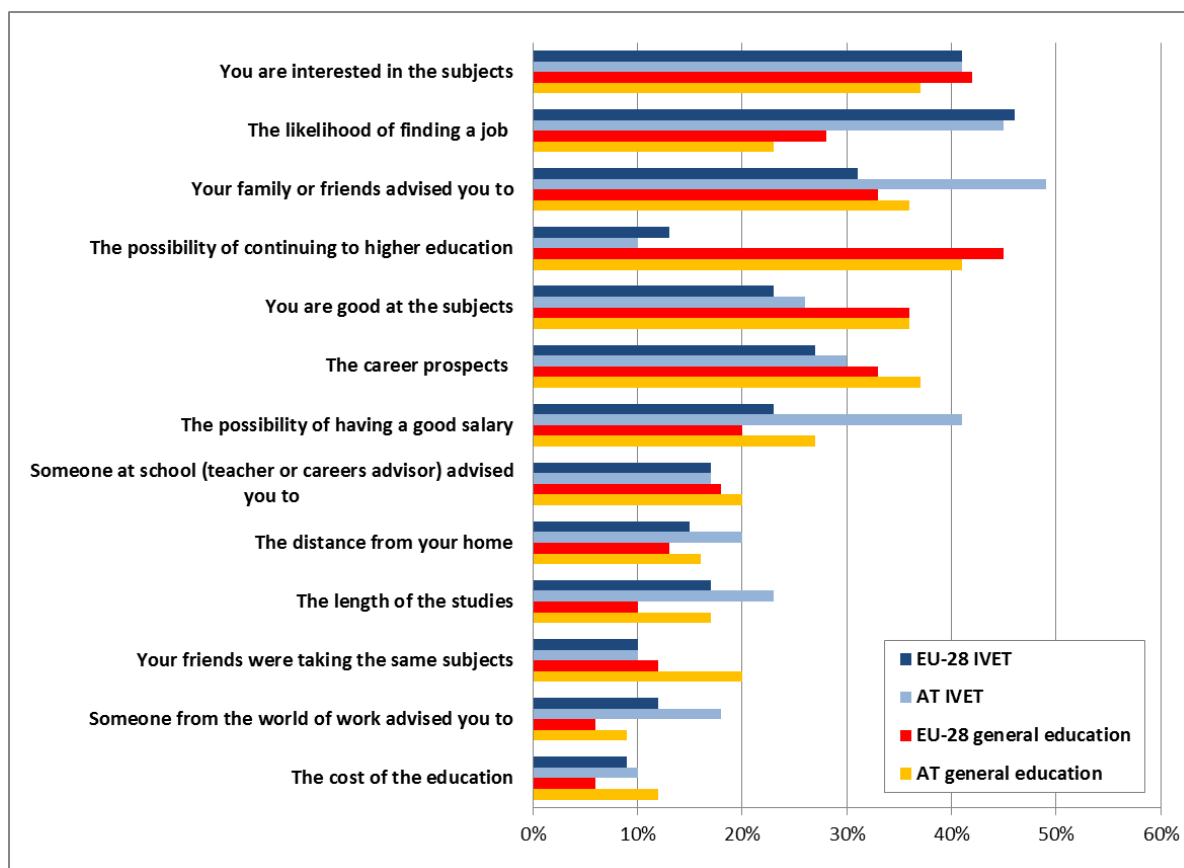
Figure 6: Factors influencing educational choice at the transition to upper secondary level (Q11T), mean values for the EU-28 as well as highest and lowest country values for each question item



Source: Cedefop 2017

When differentiating the statements by respondents who attended a VET or a general education programme at the upper secondary level (cf. Fig. 7), the main difference between these two groups is that, for the first, the possible labour market entry was clearly more relevant (i.e. the probability of finding a job), for the latter however it was vertical permeability (i.e. the possibility of attending an HE programme). Also here, Austria shows very similar findings as the average of all 28 EU Member States. Only regarding the influence of the parents/peer group and income expectations, the Austrian respondents who opted for VET differ considerably from their counterparts in Europe as for them these two motives are clearly more important (for more information about the reasons cf. the text above).

Figure 7: Rate of agreement to factors potentially influencing the educational decision for the sec II level, differentiated by EU-28 and AT as well as between respondents in VET and in GE, ranking by share of EU-28 (for both subgroups combined)



Source: Cedefop 2017

But educational choice can also be influenced by people who discourage learners clearly from VET options (**Q12T**). Every third respondent who ultimately attended a GE programme in Austria was discouraged from attending a VET programme. This is a higher share than the EU-28-average (25%). This question was unfortunately only put to respondents with a GE background. It would be interesting to have relevant information also for previous VET learners because only with this data can it be assessed to what extent such negative statements really have relevant impact on the education choice.

Conclusion:

The survey results suggest that Austria is largely situated in the middle of the EU-28 when analysing most aspects related to the respondents' information level about and the awareness of VET as well as the features of this sector, the amount of career guidance, and the factors influencing the choice of VET or general education. The slightly higher level of knowledge about VET and the higher shares of respondents who associate school settings

and the work environment with VET can be explained/are logical against the background of the higher share of vocational qualifications in the Austrian secondary sector.

In Austria, the choice between VET and general education is more strongly influenced by family and friends. Income expectations are more relevant for VET, whereas future access to higher education is more important for general education. But every third respondent who attended a VET programme had previously been discouraged from this pathway.

Regarding systemic context issues (such as the learning sites, features and assigned objectives) of VET, no real differences between the EU-wide statements and Austria can be found. Due to the wording of the questions, however, it cannot be said with certainty if this reflects the 'true' level of information or view/assessment of the respondents or is rather caused by misleadingly/inappropriately phrased questions (there are several questions with too general/superficial response options⁴ or questions which can be interpreted as having several meanings⁵). In addition, not all groups of respondents were questioned on all aspects, for which reason no complete picture can be drawn (e.g. Q12T). Some questions rather perpetuate stereotypes of VET than also surveying alternative views (e.g. Q2.7).

For Austria specifically this means that information on career guidance does not provide a correct picture especially for respondents with different previous educational pathways at the lower secondary level and that most questions on what is associated with VET cannot be interpreted meaningfully.

⁽⁴⁾ Such as on career guidance Q6T

⁽⁵⁾ Such as on context issues related to learning locations, features and objectives assigned to VET (Q2)

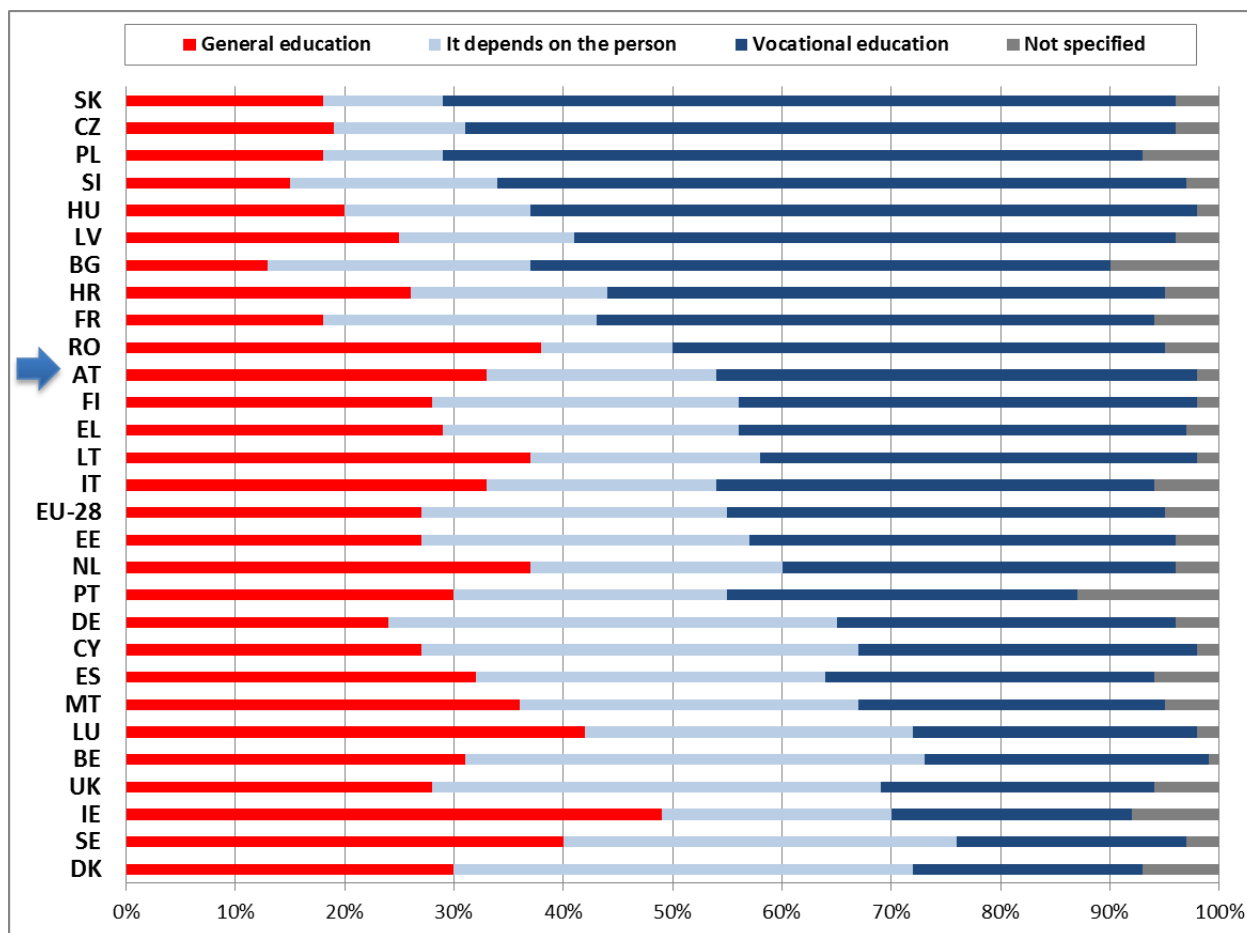
3. Attractiveness and access

The **general image of VET (Q15)** is above average in Austria: three out of four respondents gave a positive overall assessment (68% in an EU average). This means that Austria ranks among the countries with the highest ratings. Similar to the EU average, it can also be seen for Austria that respondents with a VET background tend to have a slightly more positive image of VET than interviewees who attended a general education pathway.

A striking finding is revealed when interpreting VET and GE as a contrasting pair (**Q21.3**): EU-wide and also in Austria, a vast majority think that **GE has a more positive image than VET** (Austria: 69%, EU average: 74%). However, Austria ranks among the countries where the difference is smallest (this is the result of the overall effect of a more positive assessment of VET by respondents with a related background and the size of this group, i.e. the share of respondents who attended a VET programme).

Despite the higher rating of GE compared to VET, the share of respondents who would **recommend VET** (rather than GE) to the young generation is larger both in Austria and in almost all other countries (**Q16**, cf. Fig. 8). As well as Croatia, Ireland, Romania and Slovakia, Austria is one of the countries where the recommendations differ most: most respondents with a VET background recommend choosing VET to the young generation – whereas most respondents with GE recommend GE. In some countries (including Germany, Denmark) this divergence, which is caused/influenced by the respondents' respective educational career/choice, is not so pronounced because most respondents relate their recommendation for VET or GE to the young person in question ('It depends on the person').

Figure 8: Q16: Nowadays, would you recommend general education or vocational education to a young person about to decide on their education at upper secondary education?



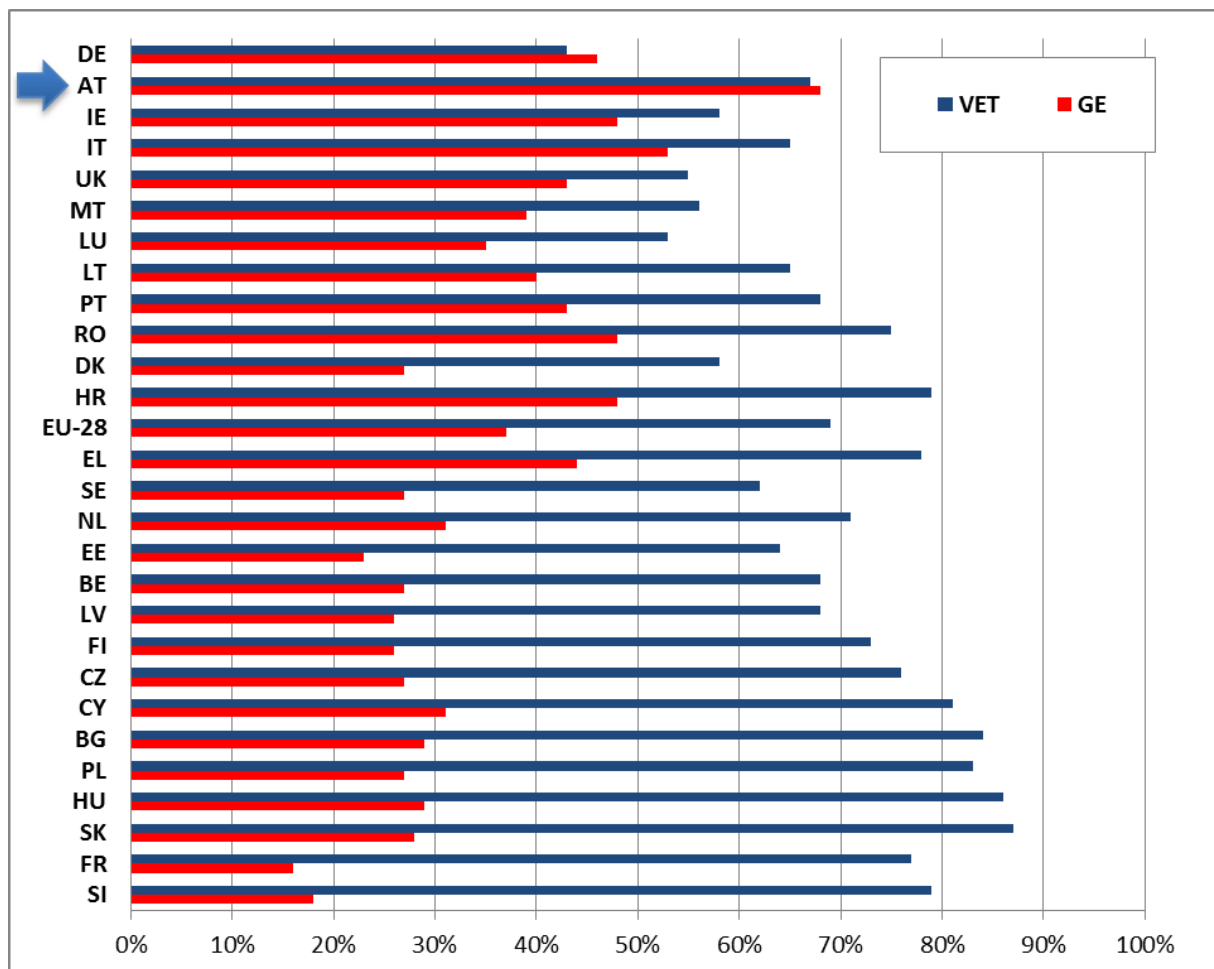
Source: Cedefop 2017

The responses to the question of how to **prioritise future public educational expenses (Q17)** between GE and VET are a logical result of these recommendations: in Austria (and Germany), each group clearly recommends the future prioritisation of funds in line with their own respective previous educational pathway⁶. This is a response behaviour which deviates from most of all the other EU countries⁷ (cf. Fig. 9). Both for Austria and (in a toned-down form) also for Germany, therefore, apparently two different socialisation/self-perception environments are characteristic, each with pronounced social features and with clearly positive self-images, with two fundamental educational pathways (general education versus VET).

⁶ Austria is the country with the highest share (68%) of respondents with general education who recommend a future prioritisation of educational expenses for this education sector. A similarly high percentage of respondents from VET speak up for a future prioritisation of educational expenses for this sector.

⁷ EU-wide around half (53%) of the respondents recommend a prioritisation of public educational expenses for VET. One third would give GE preferential treatment, 11% would treat both tracks equally (Q17). Especially respondents with a VET background both EU-wide and in most countries advocate to an extremely high degree that, in future, funds should be invested in the programme they had attended themselves: around 70% of the survey participants who attended a VET programme themselves speak out in favour of this option as against previous learners of a GE pathway (37%). But many of these respondents therefore also recommend that VET be prioritised (this is the case in France, Slovenia and Lithuania, for example).

Figure 9: Prioritisation of public funds: in VET or in general education? Shares of respondents who recommend prioritisation of public funds for the educational pathway they themselves have attended (Q17)



Source: Cedefop 2017

Three out of four Austrians (which is the EU average) agree with the statement that **students with low grades are directed towards VET (Q21.2)**. The survey did not cover the issue whether this is due to given allocation mechanisms (such as average marks) or self-selection. In principle, a very similar picture emerges for the different respondents even though those with GE tend to agree with this view slightly more strongly. Jointly with Slovakia and Portugal, Austria is, in turn, the country in which the views of the two groups of respondents differ most strongly.

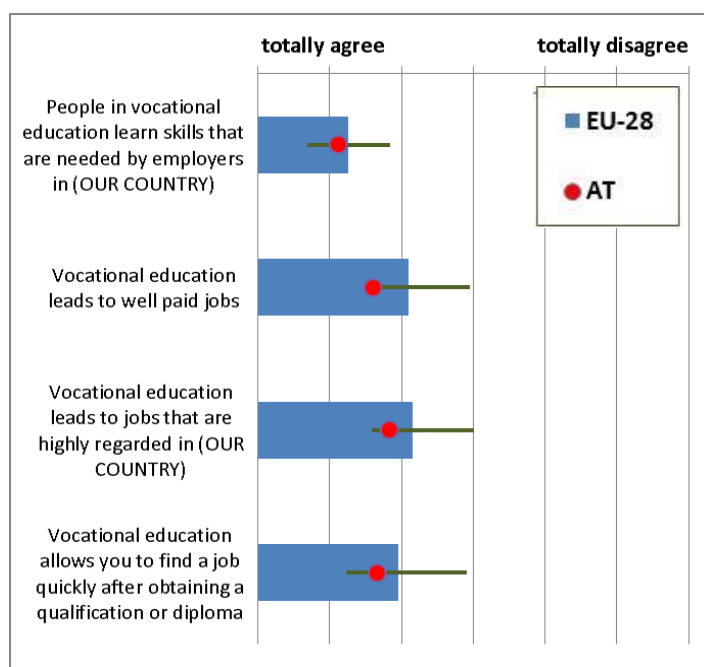
In most countries, the survey participants believe that **qualifications⁸ are acquired more easily in the VET sector than in the GE sector (Q21.1)**. With a share of 63% of people

⁽⁸⁾ Also this question can be interpreted only to a certain extent as it is not clear what the respondents understand by 'qualification'. In addition, a qualification, i.e. a certificate, is acquired both in VET and in GE.

holding this view, Austria is in the EU-28 average (also 63%). Respondents from a VET pathway and a GE programme differ only slightly in this respect⁹.

Attractiveness of VET (Q18.1. – Q 18.4): Austria’s survey participants gave the VET sector very good marks regarding all of the surveyed four attractiveness aspects: the country’s mean value is always better than the EU-28 average and consistently at the ‘top’, that is near the best assessment (cf. Fig. 10).

Figure 10: Attractiveness of VET (Q18), mean values for the EU-28 as well as highest and lowest country values for each question item



Source: Cedefop 2017

A more detailed analysis shows that, although both a majority of respondents with general education and a majority of those with VET agreed with all four aspects, positive answers are more frequently given by people with a VET background, particularly regarding the questions about **demand by companies (Q18.1)** and **payment (Q18.2)**.

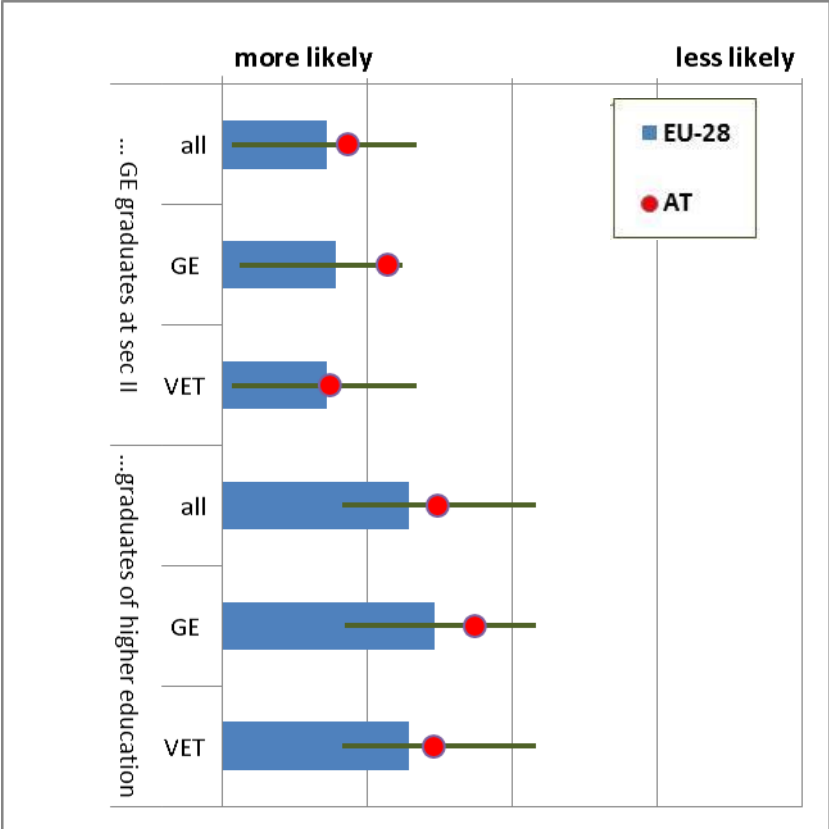
Comparative employment opportunities of people with VET (Q22 and Q23): On an EU-28 average as well as in Austria, the respondents stated that holders of VET qualifications not only have better opportunities of finding a job than graduates of secondary GE schools, but they are also better positioned – according to the interviewees – than higher education graduates, even though the difference to that group is not so pronounced. Those who have

⁹ Solely in France, Ireland and the United Kingdom do respondents with a VET background express this view more strongly whereas in Malta it is people with general education.

completed a VET pathway themselves agreed slightly more strongly to this view than people with a GE background (cf. Fig. 11).

Figure 11: Comparative employment opportunities of graduates (Q22, Q23); mean values for the EU-28 as well as highest and lowest country values for each question item, according to groups of respondents

Q: VET graduates are more likely to find a job compared to...



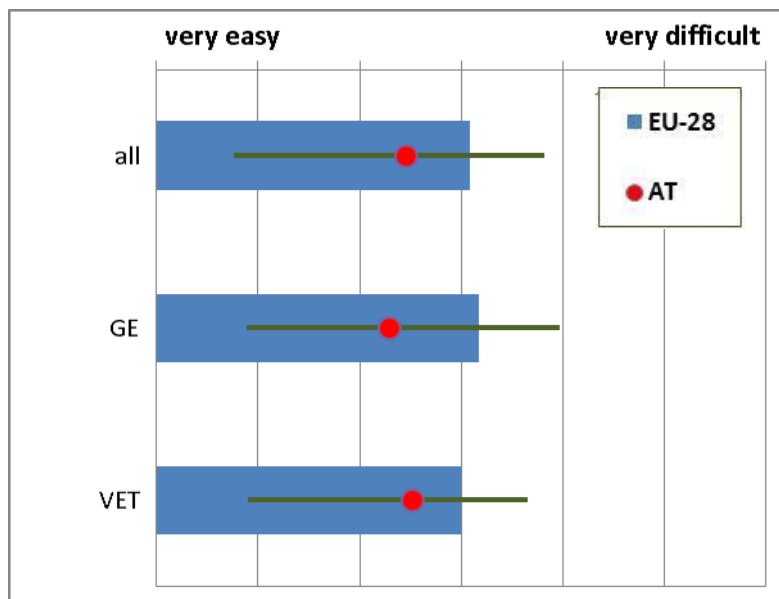
Source: Cedefop 2017

The attractiveness of VET also becomes apparent in the issue of horizontal and vertical permeability. The higher it is, the more options are open to a person to either revise a decision made in the past (horizontal aspect) or continue the formal educational career beyond secondary level (vertical dimension).

The question of the difficulty of **switching from a VET programme** at the upper secondary level taken up in the past **to a GE route (Q20)** reveals a comprehensive range of opinions across the countries. Here the assessment of the Austrians is clearly ‘more favourable’ than the EU average because a greater proportion of respondents assume permeability to be higher. The assessments of respondents with and without VET are very similar here both in Austria and EU-wide (cf. Fig. 12).

Figure 12: Horizontal permeability (Q20), mean values for the EU-28 as well as highest and lowest country values for each question item, according to groups of respondents

Q: How easy or difficult is it to switch from vocational education to general education?



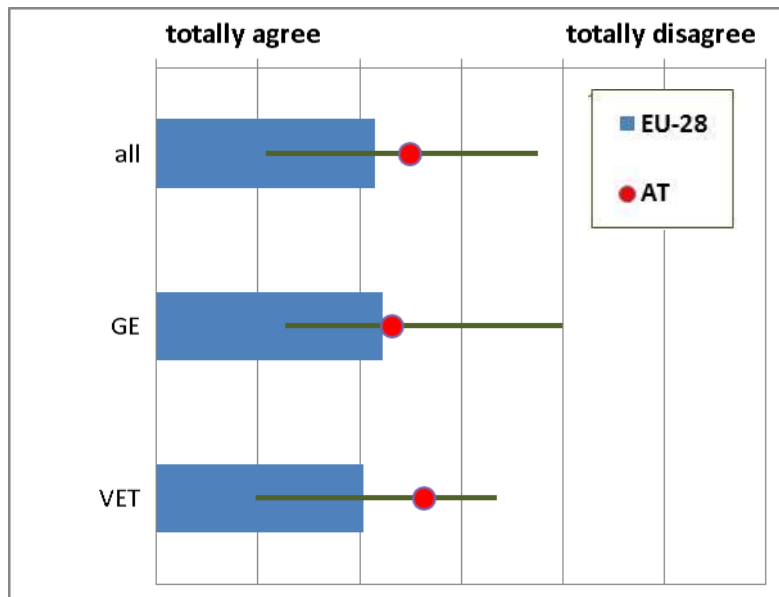
Source: Cedefop 2017

Regarding the aspect of **vertical permeability (Q19.1)**, again a wide spectrum of opinions can be found across the European countries (cf. Fig. 13). Around a half of EU citizens think this is (very) easy, but one third sees it differently. In Austria, access to tertiary education is rated as being more difficult than on an EU average. This corresponds with the traditionally narrow design of the Austrian HE sector, which has only started to develop in the direction of 'mass higher education' (Trow 2000, Schmid 2017) over the past two decades.

On an EU average, respondents with a GE background rate vertical permeability of the national education systems as somewhat more difficult for people with VET than do survey participants who themselves completed a VET pathway (cf. Fig. 13). For Austria, the survey reveals contrary findings. Despite the most recent reforms, the assessment in this country is apparently still strongly influenced by traditional images/system constellations and actual transitions. The reason is that, for a long time, general HE access was only possible for holders of a certificate from an upper secondary GE programme or five-year VET programme. Graduates of a three- to four-year VET programme and an apprenticeship only had access to universities after taking external exams. The establishment of universities of applied sciences (*Fachhochschulen*) from the mid-1990s onwards and the introduction (in 1997) of the *Berufsreifeprüfung* exam (which provides general access to HE for skilled workers and graduates of three- to four-year VET schools) have led to an improvement of vertical permeability especially for people with VET qualifications at the intermediate level.

Figure 13: Vertical permeability (Q19.1), mean values for the EU-28 as well as highest and lowest country values for each question item, according to groups of respondents

Q19.1: It is easy to continue into HE after VET at upper secondary education?



Source: Cedefop 2017

The vast majority of Europeans think that **VET opens up opportunities to study or work abroad**¹⁰ (Q19.2). Around two thirds share this opinion, with slight differences between the two groups of respondents. Interestingly Austria is among the countries with the lowest agreement rates to this question. Against the background of high cross-border mobility rates on the Austrian labour market (both of Austrian workers and students who go abroad and vice versa), this national assessment comes as a surprise. In contrast to the European trend, Austrians with a VET background rate the opportunities for VET graduates abroad lower than respondents with GE.

Brief conclusion:

On the one hand, very positive and, in an EU comparison, above-average image values and an above-average attractiveness (in particular regarding employability) are assigned to VET in Austria. This positive assessment is shared by respondents with general education (although to a slightly smaller extent). On the other hand, VET is seen as an educational pathway that is more predestined for learners with poorer learning achievements and access to tertiary education is considered as being more difficult. Although VET graduates are considered to have better employment opportunities (both compared to general and to tertiary education), general education (surveyed as a direct contrast to VET) enjoys a more positive image.

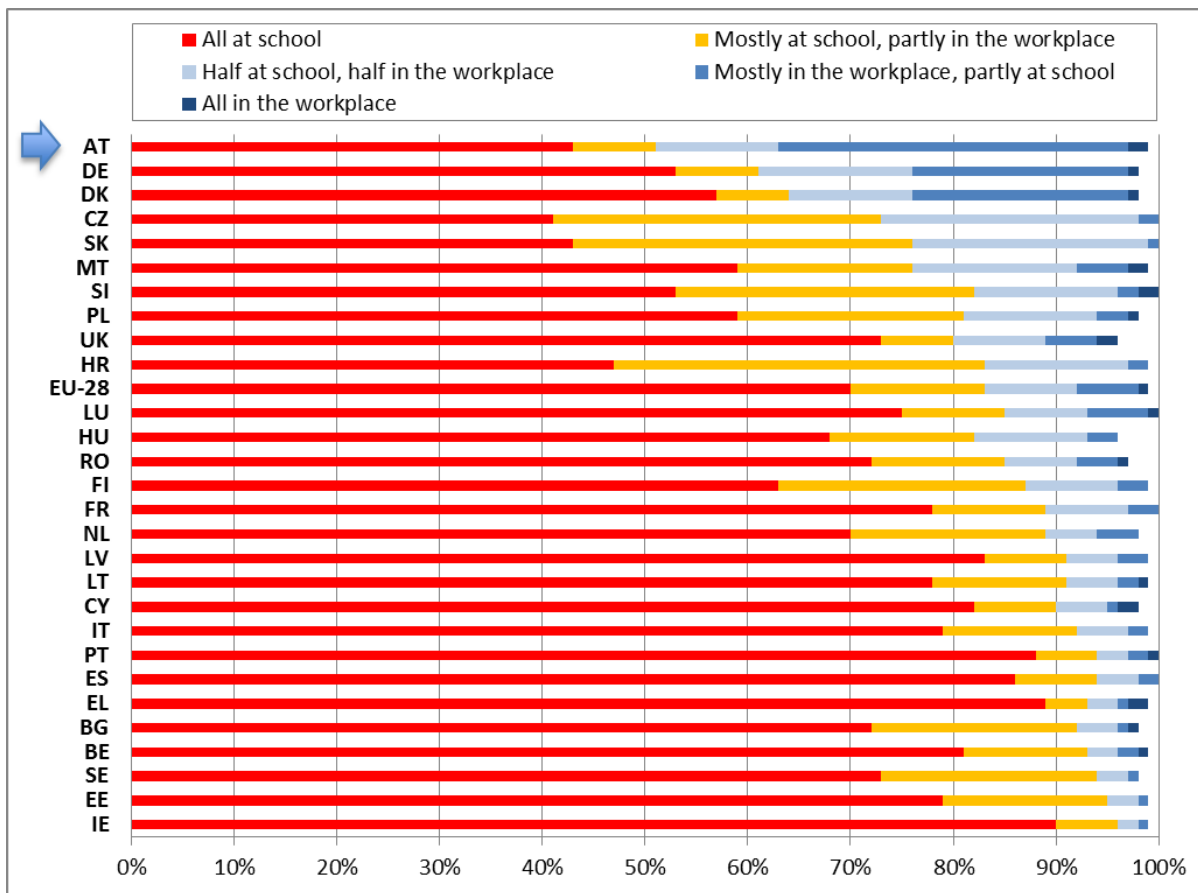
¹⁰ It is recommended to separate these two aspects as the answers cannot be assigned unambiguously to one of the two (or to both combined).

It is conspicuous that the educational environment-specific response behaviour is above average in Austria: all of the respondents rate their own educational career (general education or VET) as more positive than the respective other educational option. This correlates with a prioritisation of public funds for the respective 'own' pathway.

4. Experience and satisfaction

70% of the survey participants on an EU-wide basis attended the upper secondary level exclusively and another 13% mainly in a school setting. Therefore only three out of ten respondents were also able to gather **work-based learning (WBL) experiences** during that time and, most often, this was merely to a small extent (**Q7T**). The situation in Austria is clearly different, which is due to its wide range of education programmes where WBL constitutes a key element: around half of the respondents here have WBL experiences. This means that our country holds the first place in the country ranking (cf. Fig. 14).

Figure 14: School and workplace as learning sites (Q7T), ranking by the share of respondents with at least half of their training time in the workplace

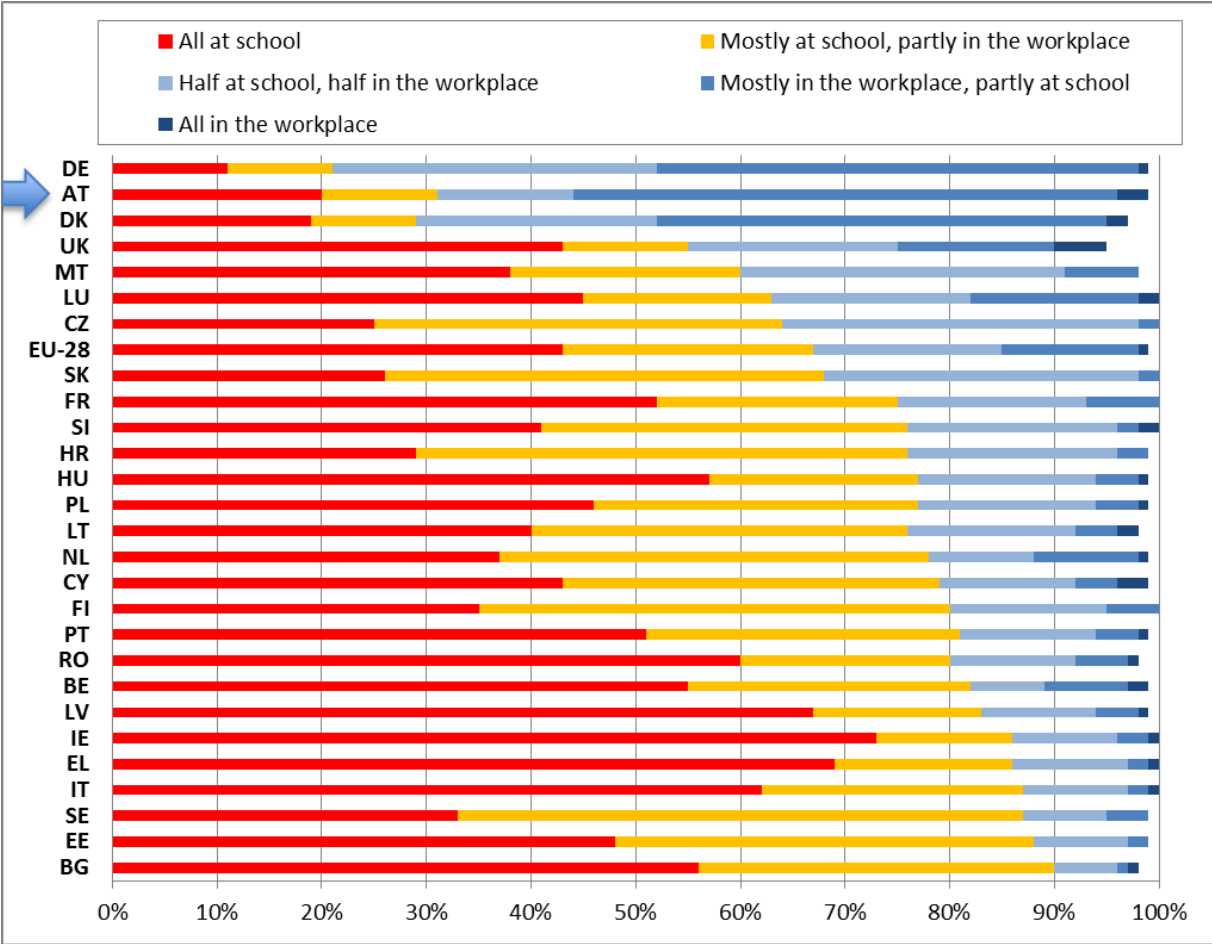


Source: Cedefop 2017

This picture becomes even more concise when analysing the learning situation of respondents with a VET background: it becomes apparent that most VET systems in Europe are school-based, which means that VET qualifications are obtained either exclusively or primarily at school. Only in three countries – Germany, Austria and Denmark – does the workplace

dominate as a learning site. But also in these countries, school was the exclusive or main place of learning of 20% to 30% of the people (cf. Fig. 15).

Figure 15: School and workplace as learning sites (Q7T): only respondents with a VET background, ranking by the share of respondents with at least half of their training time in the workplace

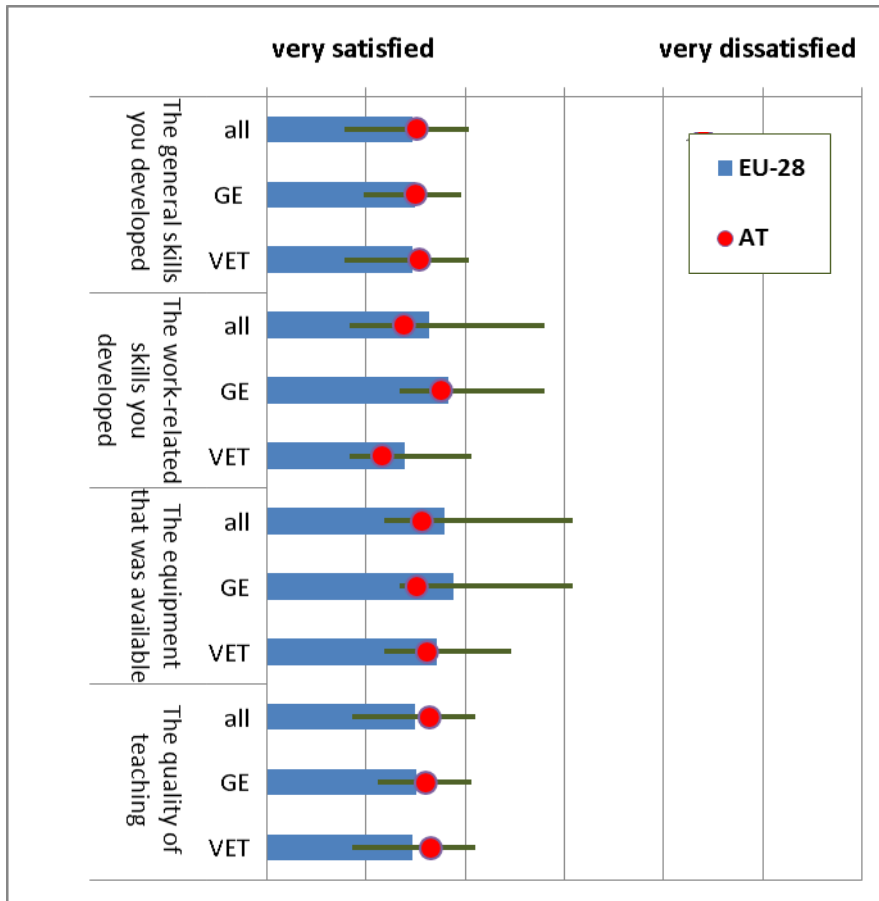


Source: Cedefop 2017

The generally high **satisfaction with the national education system (Q13T)** is, in Austria, the average value of the EU countries and, regarding equipment and the teaching of skills which are relevant for/related to work, it is even higher (cf. Fig. 16). Nevertheless it must be highlighted that there are a few countries where the satisfaction of the respondents regarding all of the four surveyed aspects is higher. Graduates of a VET pathway are, both on an EU average and in Austria, more satisfied with the teaching of work-related skills than graduates of a GE programme. This can also be interpreted as an indicator of the high (and in an international comparison ‘better’) quality of the Austrian VET sector. It is also remarkable that neither on an EU average nor in Austria can any differences be discerned regarding the pedagogical and didactic quality of the teaching between general education and VET. This can

be interpreted as an indication that WBL does not entail any compromises on the teaching/learning quality¹¹.

Figure 16: Satisfaction (mean value) with the education system (Q13T), mean values for the EU-28 as well as highest and lowest country values for each question item, according to groups of respondents



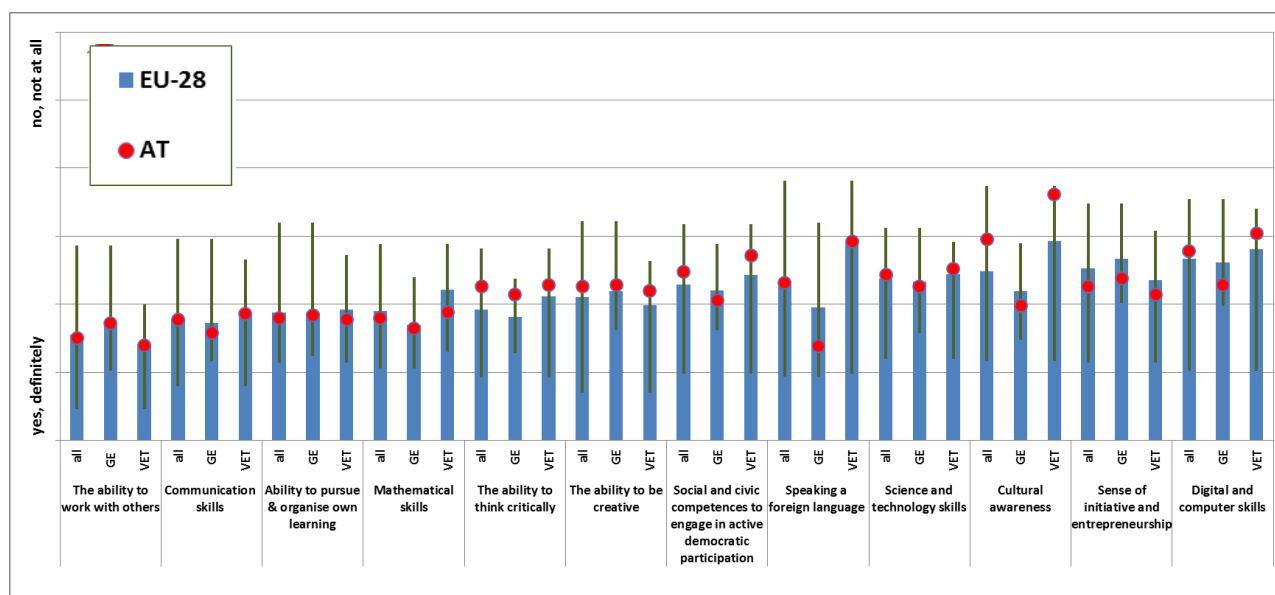
Source: Cedefop 2017

Also the question about **which key competences were acquired** as part of the training at the upper secondary level (Q14T) is highly relevant for the assessment and attractiveness of VET. The pronounced wide range in the response behaviour is striking here. In most cases, the differences between the countries are larger than those between the individual skills (cf. Fig. 17). The degrees of agreement of the Austrian respondents are in most cases near the EU average. In the VET sector, the teaching of 'mathematical skills' is above the EU average, in the sphere of general education this applies to the aspects 'speaking a foreign language', 'digital and computer skills' and the creation of 'cultural awareness'. When looking at both education sectors combined, Austria scores slightly worse than the EU-28 average regarding

⁽¹¹⁾ Possibly workplace-based learning is even better suited for certain fields of learning and/or learning styles. It would be interesting here to carry out a special evaluation based on the individual dataset because this would allow an analysis of the assessment of the satisfaction with the quality of learning/teaching in relation to the extent of school- or workplace-based learning.

'the ability to think critically', 'the ability to be creative', 'civic competences' and 'cultural awareness'.

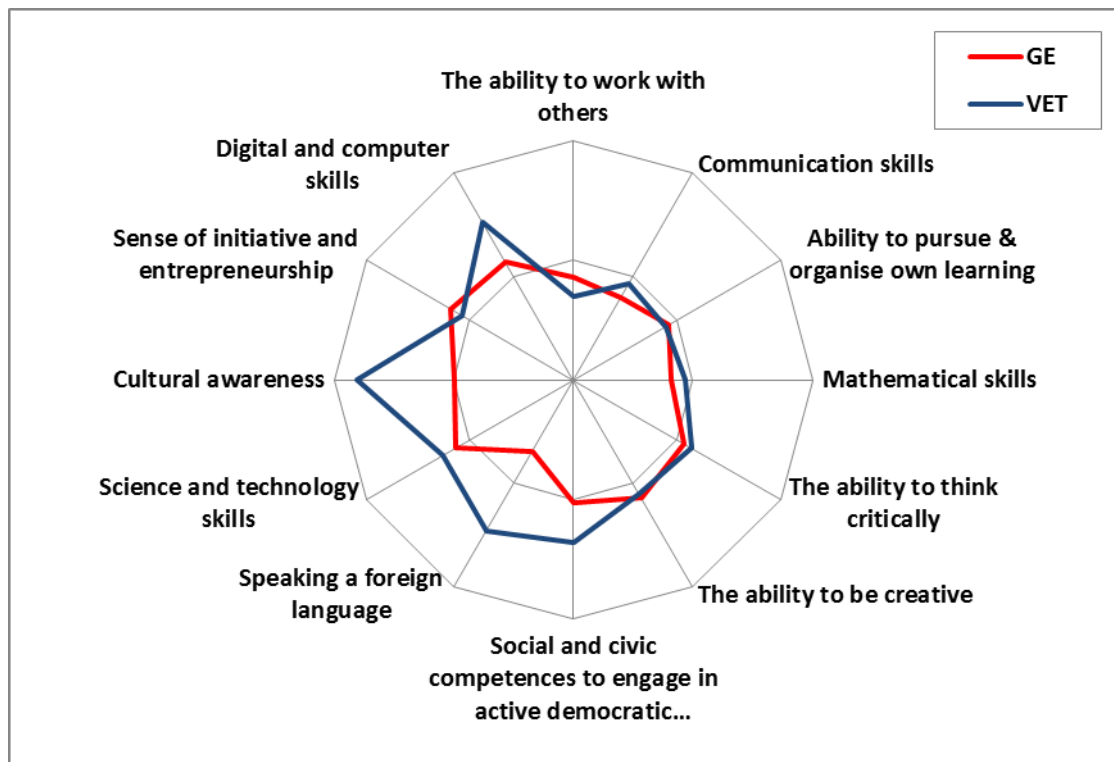
Figure 17: Skills acquisition at the upper secondary level (Q14T), mean values for the EU-28 as well as highest and lowest country values for each question item, according to groups of respondents, ranking of skills based on the mean value for the EU-28



Source: Cedefop 2017

A comparison of the answers of Austrian GE and VET graduates shows that a higher share of the former stated they had acquired skills in the following fields in their school time: 'digital and computer skills', 'cultural awareness', 'speaking a foreign language' and 'civic competences' (cf. Fig. 18). This pattern roughly corresponds to the observed EU-wide pattern. If only the statements of respondents from the VET sector are compared between Austria and the EU average, a high level of congruence is found. Austria only scores slightly worse regarding 'cultural awareness' and 'civic competences' and slightly better regarding 'mathematical skills'.

Figure 18: Skills acquisition at the upper secondary level (Q14T) in Austria, according to groups of respondents



Source: Cedefop 2017

Brief conclusion

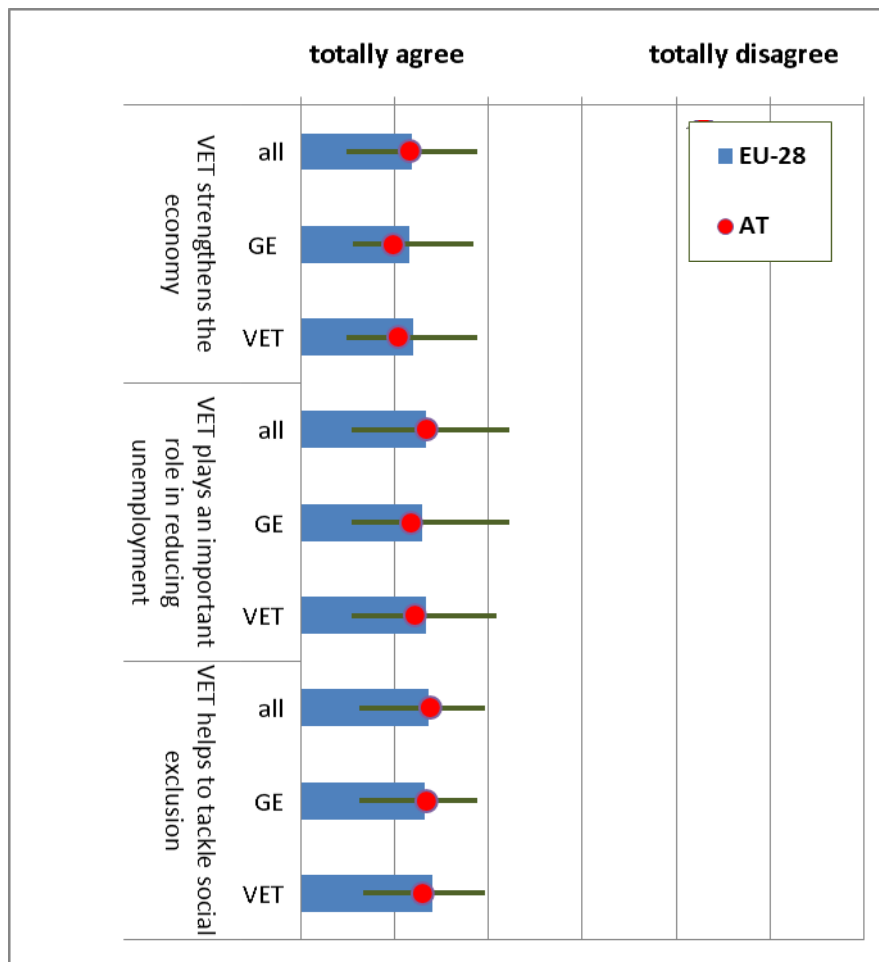
In an EU comparison, Austria is the country with the highest share of survey participants with work-based learning experiences (one third in the EU vs. half in Austria). Even clearer is the picture for respondents with a VET background. Basically it can be seen that most VET systems in Europe are school-based. This means that VET qualifications are obtained either exclusively or primarily at school. Only in three countries – Germany, Austria and Denmark – does the workplace dominate as a learning site.

The high degree of satisfaction (which is on an EU average) with the national education system corresponds with entirely positive assessments of the teaching of (key) competences by the VET sector and regarding the quality of teaching (also in VET). Most frequently, the differences in skills acquisition between Austria and the EU average as well as within Austria between GE and VET are small: respondents with GE state slightly more often that they have acquired 'digital and computer skills', 'cultural awareness', 'foreign language skills' and 'civic competences' in their educational career.

5. Outcomes and effectiveness

VET is in general seen as having a major positive role both EU-wide and also in Austria: whether as a contribution to strengthening the national economy, as an influential factor towards reducing unemployment or also as a way to tackle social exclusion. All the related statements of the Austrian respondents are at the EU-28 average (cf. Fig. 19). This does come slightly as a surprise as Austria, at least in an international comparison, boasts very low unemployment rates. From this perspective, even slightly more significant values of agreement could have been expected.

Figure 19: Social effects of VET (Q3), mean values for the EU-28 as well as highest and lowest country values for each question item



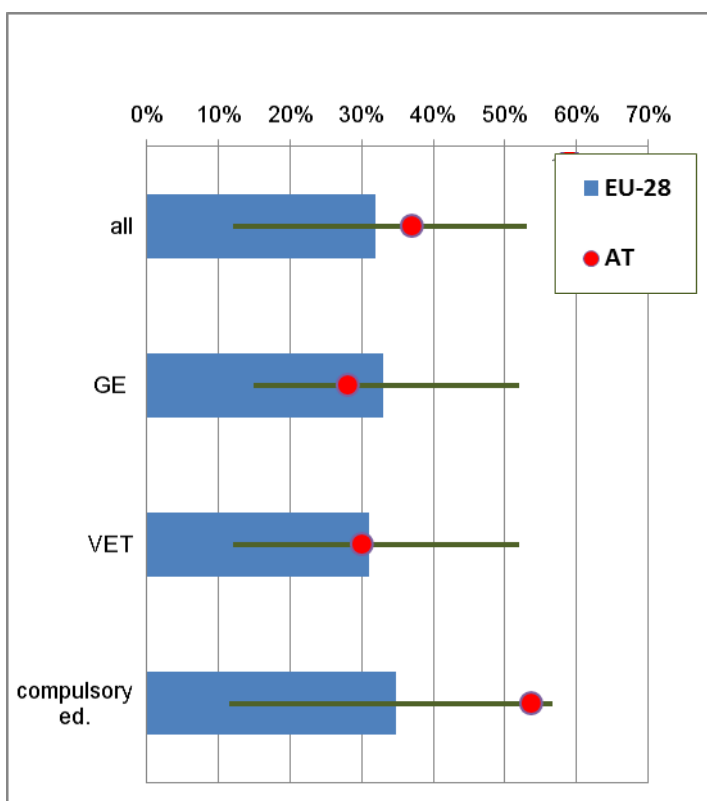
Source: Cedefop 2017

This extensive consistency can probably be explained by the fact that there is, on average, no real difference in the assessments of difficulties in finding a job between the Austrians and the EU citizens. Only in the group of people who completed compulsory schooling as their highest educational attainment do the Austrian respondents show a very high risk of not find-

ing a job (which can possibly be interpreted as the downside of a well-developed VET system), cf. Fig. 20.

The question on difficulties in finding a job has been operationalised in an unsatisfactory way – especially in combination with the long time horizon¹² ('have you ever had') –, as it does not include any additional information about the duration, intensity, etc. It is questionable to what extent the respondents from different countries applied similar criteria here.

Figure 20: D15d: Would you say you have ever had any difficulties in finding a job after completing your highest level of education? Mean values for the EU-28 as well as highest and lowest country values for each question item

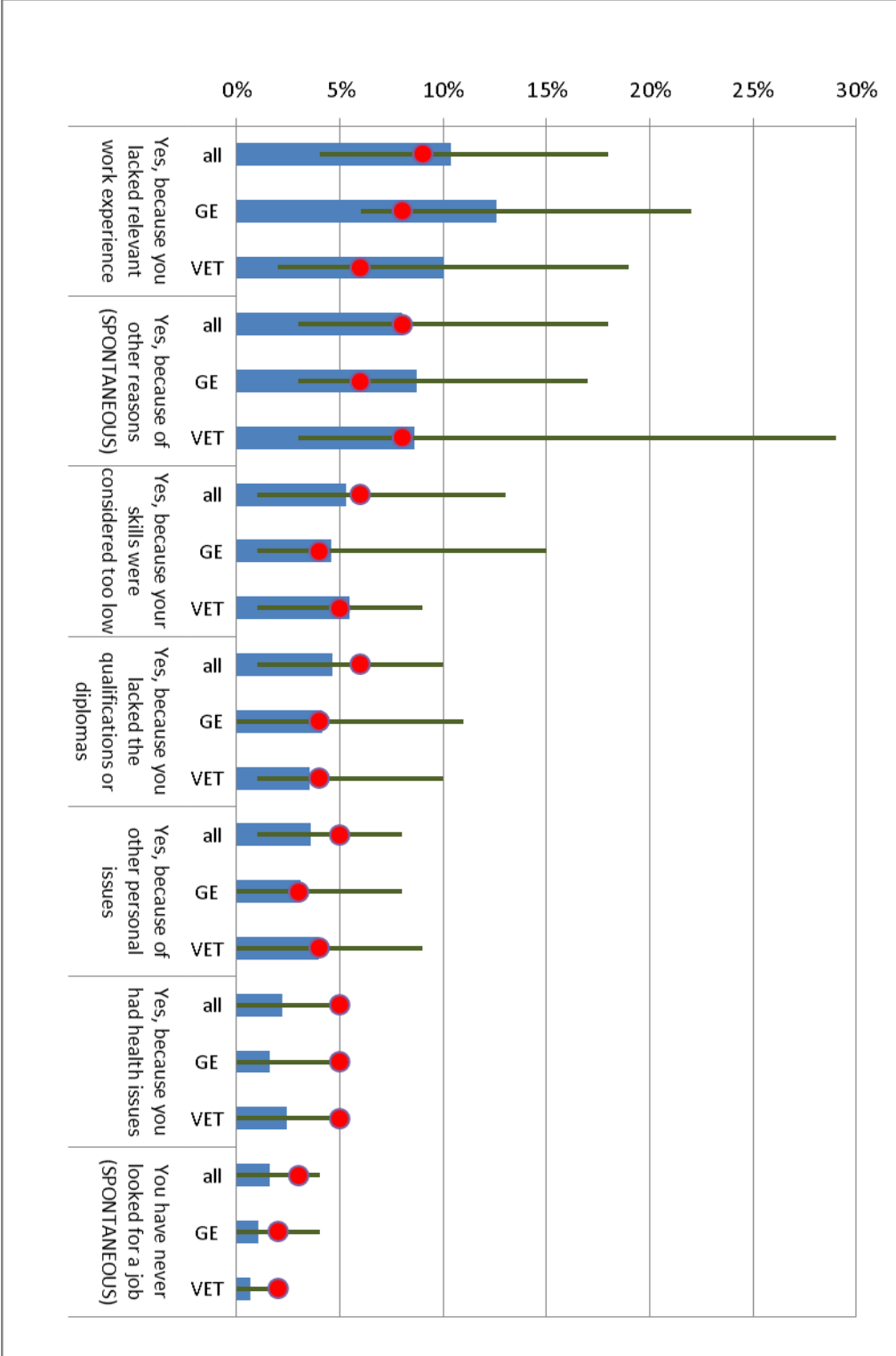


Source: Cedefop 2017

The reasons for the difficulties in finding a job tend to be similar in Austria to the EU average (cf. Fig. 21). But it is striking that lacking relevant work experience was mentioned clearly less frequently in Austria. The shares related to health issues as well as answers to the statement 'you have never looked for a job' are slightly above the EU average.

⁽¹²⁾ This long-term perspective is, as such, an important piece of information, however, because it does not only focus on the current situation and therefore addresses the effects of qualification systems in a better way.

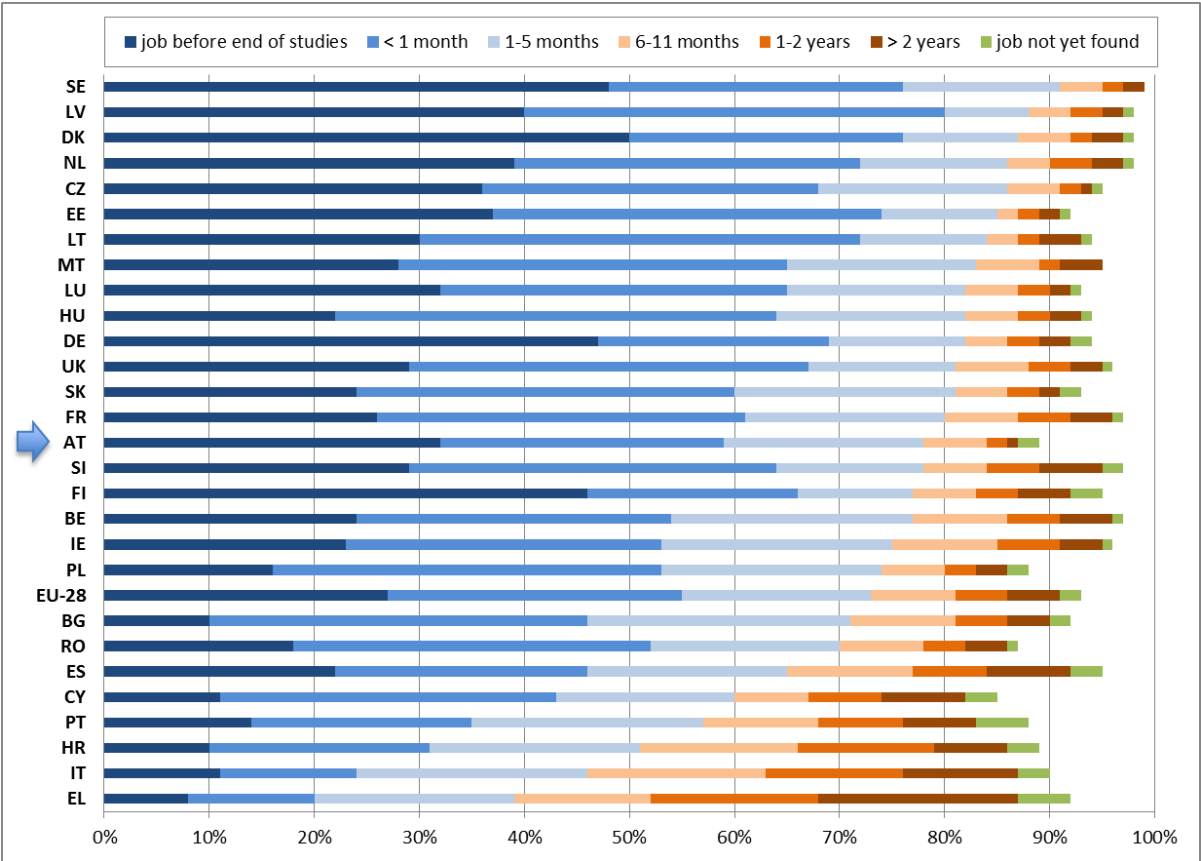
Figure 21: D15d: Would you say you have ever had any difficulties in finding a job after completing your highest level of education? Multiple responses, mean values for the EU-28 as well as highest and lowest country values for each question item, ranking of reasons based on the mean value for the EU-28



Source: Cedefop 2017

The **periods of transition from main studies to the first long-term job** (Q15f) differ considerably between the countries. Austria is situated in the middle in the country ranking (cf. Fig. 22). Around three quarters of all graduates of an education or training programme find their first long-term job within half a year.

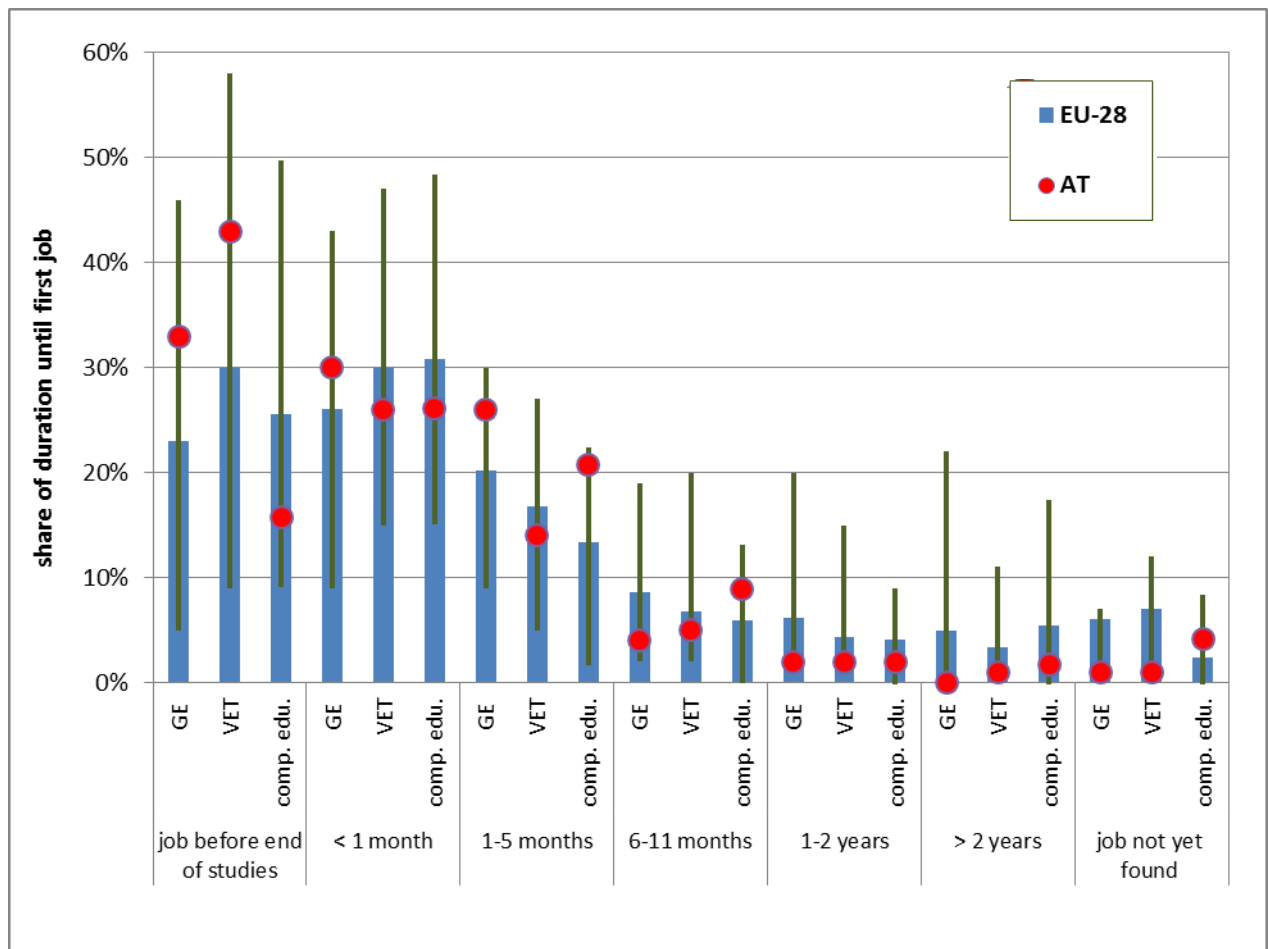
Figure 22: Period of transition from main studies to first long-term job (Q15f), ranking of countries by duration up to a maximum of six months



Source: Cedefop 2017

As can be expected, transition is difficult for people who completed compulsory schooling as their highest educational attainment (cf. Fig. 23). It is striking that the share of GE and VET graduates who have a job before the end of their main studies is well above the EU-28-average. Graduates with compulsory education only have a significantly lower share. This suggests that for Austria the relationship between educational degrees and the transition into the labour market is more pronounced.

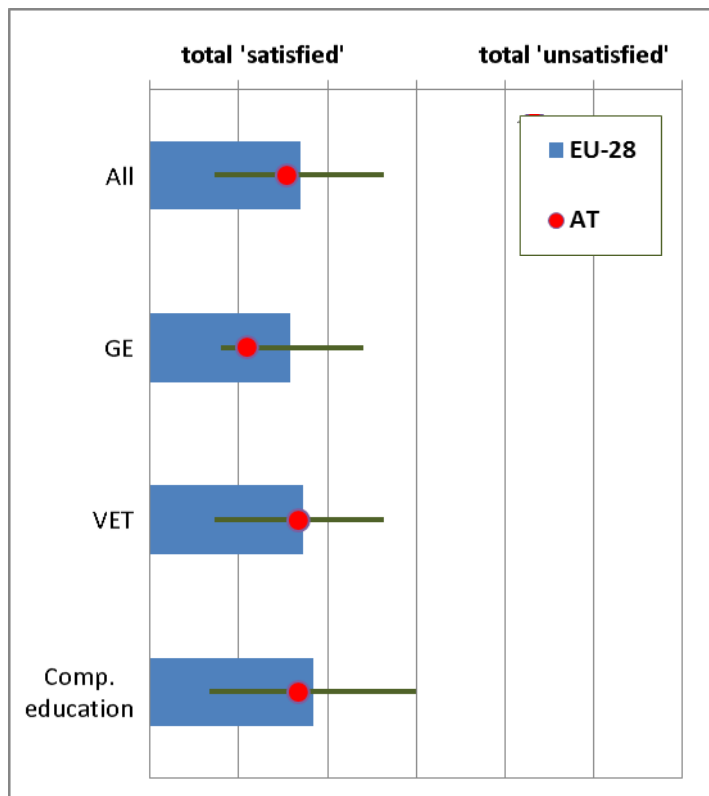
Figure 23: Period of transition from main studies to the first long-term job (D15f), mean values for the EU-28 as well as highest and lowest country values for each question item



Source: Cedefop 2017

Most survey participants are 'very' or 'fairly satisfied' with their respective professional career (D15e). Austria is again at the EU average, only respondents with a GE background are more satisfied. Also striking is the high **degree of satisfaction** of people who completed compulsory schooling as their highest educational attainment (cf. Fig. 24). This is remarkable against the background of their previously stated difficulties in finding a job.

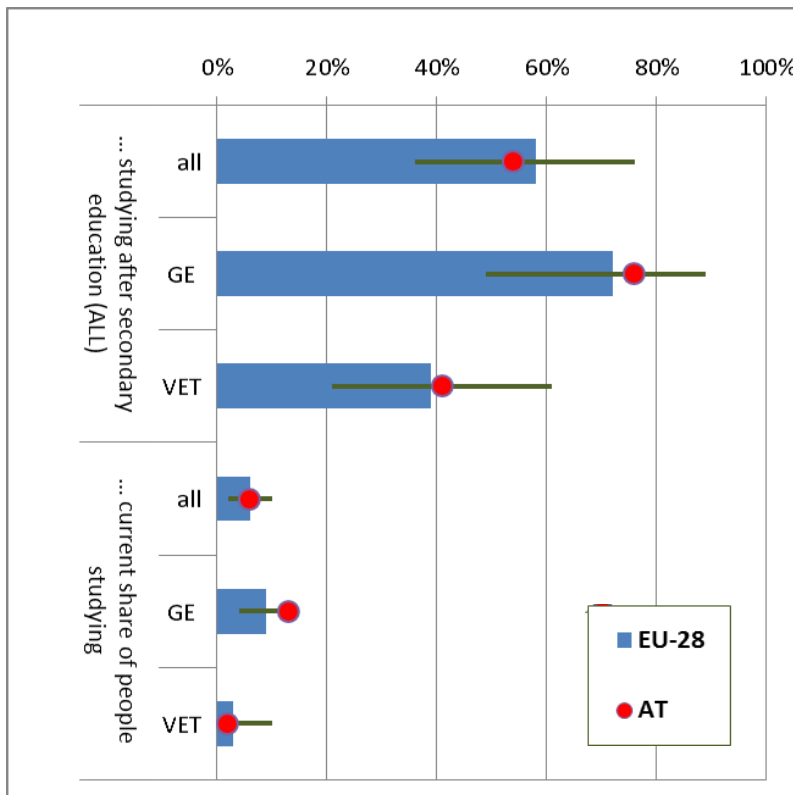
Figure 24: Satisfaction (mean value) with professional career (Q15e), mean values for the EU-28 as well as highest and lowest country values for each question item



Source: Cedefop 2017

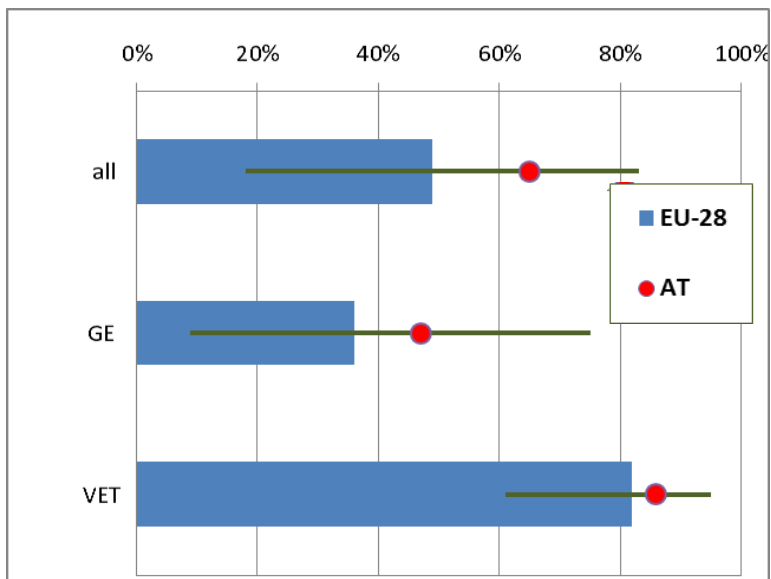
As can be expected, more graduates of a general education programme than VET graduates are enrolled in a tertiary establishment. The **inclination to study (Q24)** is slightly above the EU average in Austria. The pronounced ranges in the inclination to study among the EU Member States are striking (cf. Fig. 25). Many graduates from GE continue their professional careers in a HE programme which is completed with a professional qualification (**Q25**). Here Austria is clearly above the EU average, in particular among the graduates of an upper secondary VET programme (cf. Fig. 26).

Figure 25: Share of upper secondary graduates who continue their educational career (Q24), mean values for the EU-28 as well as highest and lowest country values for each question item



Source: Cedefop 2017

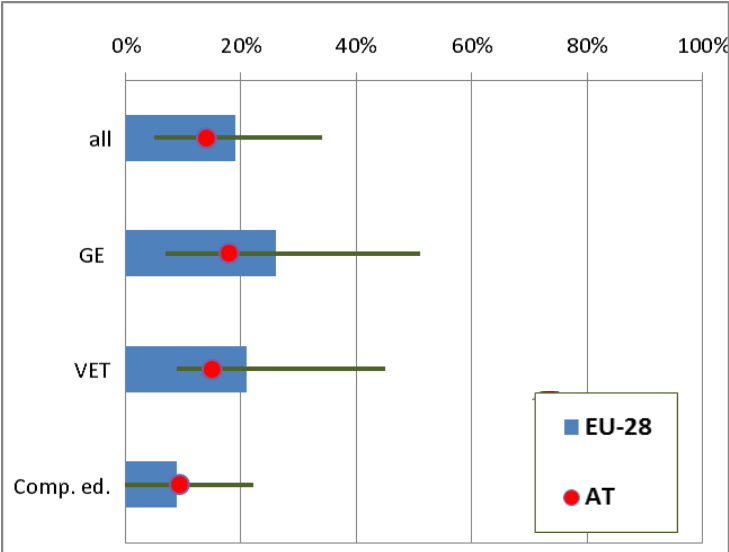
Figure 26: Share of students in higher VET study programmes (Q25), mean values for the EU-28 as well as highest and lowest country values for each question item



Source: Cedefop 2017

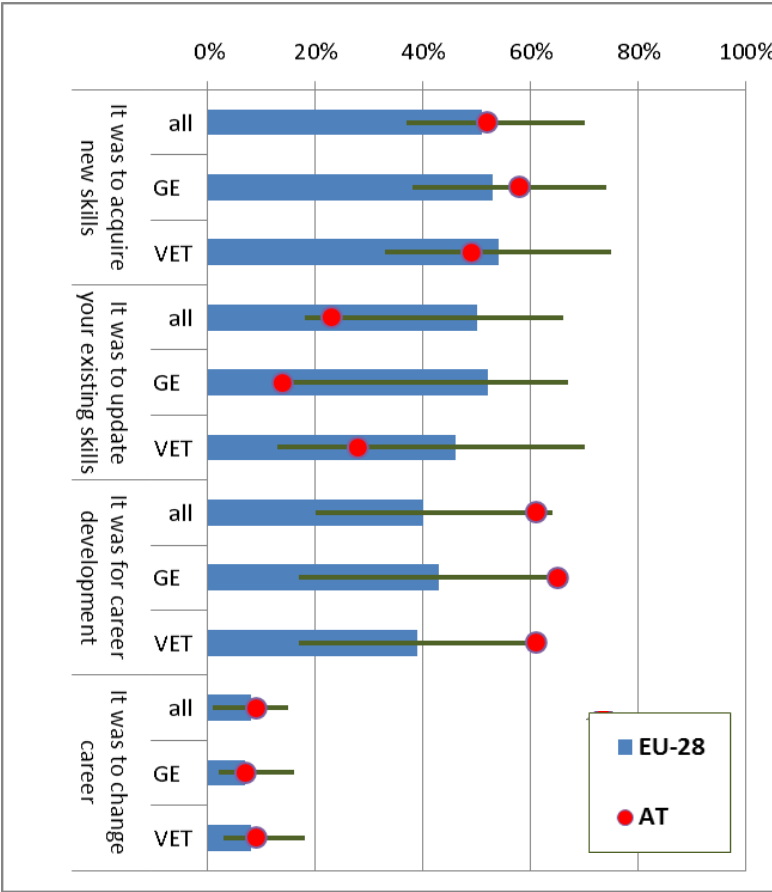
Continuing vocational education and training (CVET): In Austria, a smaller share of the population than the EU average attended CVET over the last twelve months before the survey (Q26, cf. Fig. 27). This is possibly also connected with better skills matching (due to the high share of vocational qualifications at the upper secondary level). Because if the reasons are analysed for the previously attended/completed CVET programme, the motive of skills updating is stated in Austria only very rarely – in contrast to the EU-wide tendency. The promotion of one’s own career and acquisition of new knowledge are among the primary motives that were decisive for participation in CVET (cf. Fig. 28).

Figure 27: Participation in CVET over the past twelve months (Q26), mean values for the EU-28 as well as highest and lowest country values for each question item



Source: Cedefop 2017

Figure 28: Motives for most recent CVET attendance (Q27), multiple responses, mean values for the EU-28 as well as highest and lowest country values for each question item



Source: Cedefop

Brief conclusion

The benefit of VET is generally rated very highly in Austria as well as EU-wide (both regarding individual satisfaction and also in terms of national economic effects). Despite the traditionally most often clearly lower unemployment rates of Austria in an international comparison, a similarly high share of people as in the EU state they had difficulties in finding a job. But the operationalisation of the question item is unsatisfying, therefore doubts arise as to a useful comparative interpretability between the countries. The trend is probably that the difficulties are similar in Austria as on an EU average but work experience was mentioned more rarely as the cause.

The transition period from the acquisition of a qualification to the first long-term job is, in Austria, at the EU average (with a strikingly wide range between the Member States).

Regarding the inclination to study after completion of the upper secondary level, Austria is at the EU average (with pronounced differences between the countries) – but the choice of studies is clearly more strongly geared towards HE programmes in which professional qualifications are acquired.

Attendance of CVET is below the EU average in Austria. The greater importance of career-/ advancement-oriented motives for CVET participation in Austria (accompanied by lesser importance of the motive to update skills) can be interpreted as an indication that skills matching in Austria is influenced by the range and structure of this country's VET sector and that, as a general trend, it is more successful.

6. Main conclusions and further research needs

It can be noticed that the public perception, assessment and rating of VET in Austria is, after all, often near the EU-28 average value: in the case of some items, the reason is simply that practically all countries show very high (or low) rates of agreement. In the case of items where the responses are spread more widely, this is nevertheless remarkable because the Austrian IVET system is characterised by quite a few specific features in an international comparison. As well as having one of the highest shares of young people in VET at the upper secondary level (around 80%), the 'division' of the VET sector into two parts certainly needs to be mentioned: about half of the young people in VET attend full-time school-based VET programmes, the other half apprenticeship training schemes. And with the school type of the college for higher vocational education, Austria has set up a training programme that is completed with a so-called double qualification. Graduation from this school is connected, on the one hand, with the higher education entrance qualification, on the other hand it provides a full vocational qualification, especially for intermediate to higher workforce segments. This is combined with a wide range of educational environment-specific views and expectations of the respondents, most of whom rate their own respective educational career as more positive.

Despite the basically very positive assessment of VET by the Austrian respondents, the survey reveals lasting and widespread stereotypes (such as related to the manual dimension, the performance level assigned to learners, more limited possibilities of vertical permeability, career options, etc.). Some of these stereotypes reflect given realities, but some must be assessed as negative narratives (and possibly also artefacts due to non-optimal wordings of questions).

The high degree of satisfaction (which is on an EU average) of the Austrian respondents with the national education system corresponds with entirely positive assessments of the teaching of (key) competences by the VET sector and regarding the quality of teaching (also in VET). Most frequently, the differences in skills acquisition between Austria and the EU average as well as within Austria between general education and VET are small.

Improvement options: Some of the aspects addressed in the survey can, however, not be analysed at all or only unsatisfactorily. They are explained in detail in the text. Therefore and for reasons of clarity, the question items will only be listed here: Q1, Q2, Q6T, Q12T, Q19.2 and D15d. In addition, it would also be interesting to have information about some individual characteristics of the respondents (gender, age, employment status) because these most likely have an influence on their experiences and opinions (keywords: gender-typical educa-

tional career choice behaviour, labour market segmentations; age-related differences in educational career choice options, and the 'closeness/distance' of their individual experiences to the current situation in general education and VET). For Austria in particular, the VET sector would have to be differentiated even further – i.e. between school-based and dual VET – because both are based on very different settings of learning and associated with different social narratives.

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