

Hoya, Fabian; Frey, Anne; Pichler, Silvia

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Kontakt / Contact:

peDOCS
DIPF | Leibniz-Institut für Bildungsforschung und Bildungsinformation
Informationszentrum (IZ) Bildung
E-Mail: pedocs@dipf.de
Internet: www.pedocs.de

Mitglied der:


Leibniz-Gemeinschaft

AUSTRIA

Fabian Hoya, Anne Frey and Silvia Pichler

Primary Schools and Teacher Training in Austria

Abstract

Primary education in Austria provides an important foundation for children's academic and social-emotional development, as well as their later school careers. Therefore, primary school teachers are tasked with successfully managing the transition from kindergarten to primary school. At the same time, primary school staff bear the responsibility of supporting children's development through stimulating teaching to ensure that, during their four years of primary school, children receive an education that prepares them for the transition to secondary school. For this reason, it is essential to structure primary school teacher training at Austrian university colleges of teacher education in such a way that teachers are optimally prepared for the abovementioned future tasks. Accordingly, this paper explores the structural and institutional conditions that shape both primary school teaching and the education of future primary school teachers. It also aims to highlight challenges and future perspectives for teacher education in Austria, including the current teacher shortage, early selection at the end of fourth grade, and the recruitment of qualified staff at university colleges of teacher education.

Keywords: Primary Schools, Austria, University Colleges of Teacher Education, Theory-Practice Integration, Austrian School System

1 Introduction

Primary schools provide children with the basic skills on which secondary education is built. This crucial phase of learning lays the foundation for their entire educational journey (Einsiedler, 2014; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2015). Therefore, it is important to create the best possible conditions for children to learn in. This concerns the school system itself but also the environment in which individual schools operate. Primary school teachers play a special role in this context, as they are directly responsible for fostering children's academic and personal growth. For this reason, their training and associated professionalisation play an important role (Baumert & Kunter, 2013).

Despite the importance of primary education, there is a notable lack of comprehensive English-language analyses of Austria's primary education and teacher training systems. This gap limits Austria's visibility in the global education discourse. In light of current challenges such as teacher shortages, equity issues, and the implementation of new standards, this paper seeks to address the above shortcoming by providing a structured overview of the Austrian primary education landscape and teacher training system. The paper begins with a historical overview of the primary school system in Austria, followed by a description of the different types of school that operate within this system. It also examines the preschool sector and the transition from kindergarten to primary education. The structure of primary schools is then analysed in detail, along with the transition from primary school to secondary education and its broader context. Given the importance of teacher education for educational outcomes, a further section focuses on the training of primary school teachers. It provides a historical perspective and discusses recent reforms in primary school teacher training in Austria. Additionally, the entry requirements, course content, and career paths within the teaching profession are presented, along with current research on the effectiveness of reforms and the role of practice schools. Finally, the paper concludes with reflections on ongoing challenges and future perspectives for Austria's education and teacher training systems.

2 Historical Development of the Austrian School System

The origins of monastic schools in Austria can be traced back to the seventh and eighth centuries. Pupils as young as seven years of age were trained for a religious career in monastic schools, where they were taught Latin, Bible reading, liturgical practices, psalms, and the copying of religious texts. While monasteries were used to train monks and Latin was the language of instruction, novices or daughters of noble families could study in convents. During the reign of Charlemagne, 'external schools' were established to take pupils

who did not wish to enter the monastery. Over time, Latin schools were founded for the nobility and clergy in cities, while the middle classes erected their own schools for commercial and craft trades. During the 13th century, the emergence of universities in Bologna, Paris, and other cities fundamentally changed the educational landscape of Europe. More challenging content was removed from previous schools, and interest in schooling increased, especially in urban areas (Engelbrecht, 2015; Seel, 2010).

In 1552, a Jesuit college was founded in Vienna and later became known as the Academic Gymnasium. From around 1600, the Jesuit order established its own Latin schools in all of the larger towns of the Habsburg lands and offered grammar school education. With the dissolution of the order in 1773, many of these schools were closed, taken over by other orders, or converted into secondary schools. This led to a drastic decline in grammar school education; as a result, young people from rural areas and socially disadvantaged backgrounds in particular were effectively denied access to higher education (Czeike, 1993; Schörg, 2018). A decisive turning point in Austrian school history was the 'General School Regulations for the German normal, secondary and trivial Schools in all Imperial-Royal Hereditary Lands' signed by Maria Theresa in 1774 (Seel, 2010, p. 31). This first comprehensive school law in Austria regulated compulsory education, led to the organisation of state schools, and laid the foundation for systematic teacher training. Among other aspects, this document stipulated that all children between the ages of 6 and 12 should attend school. These changes also led to the printing of standardised textbooks (Federal Ministry of Education, Science, and Research, in Austria known as BMBWF, 2025a; Frenz, 2010; Schörg, 2018).

Three types of compulsory education were established by law: the six-year trivial school, which corresponds to today's primary school; the two- to three-year secondary school, which built on the knowledge acquired in the trivial school to consolidate what had been learnt; and the normal school, which trained teachers. A school commission was given the task of monitoring teachers, teaching content and textbooks. A normal school was to be established in each federal state as a model school and teacher training centre. Meanwhile, trivial schools were to be established in all places with a parish or branch church (BMBWF, 2025a; Seel, 2010; Schörg, 2018). The School-Church Act of 1868 legislated the separation of school and church, while the Imperial People's School Act of 1869 established a unified compulsory education system, ensuring that all children, regardless of their religion, had the right to attend school. In addition, the curriculum was structured by grade levels, and compulsory schooling was extended from six to eight years (BMBWF, 2025a; Seel, 2010; Empire of Austria, 1869). Compulsory schooling now included eight years of public primary school. In larger communities, pupils had the option to attend a three-grade citizen school after five years of primary

school. In this system, instruction was gender-specific: while girls had less arithmetic, geometry, and drawing than boys, they received six weekly hours of instruction in needlework (BMBWF, 2025b; Czeike, 1997; Empire of Austria, 1870). Between 1869 and 1927, the citizen school was introduced as a form of secondary education after five years of primary school. It mainly targeted the children of tradesmen and farmers. Bookkeeping was taught alongside arithmetic. Originally frequented by the bourgeois elite, children from lower middle-class families increasingly attended citizen school from the late 19th century onwards (Czeike, 1992). At the same time, the development of the grammar school as preparation for university study continued (Engelbrecht, 2015). After 1918, Otto Glöckel, president of the Vienna City School Board, initiated a school reform that remains relevant today. The reform aimed to ensure that all children, regardless of gender or social background, were educated to the highest possible standards. In 1922, a school experiment was launched with a general secondary school for all 10- to 14-year-olds to reduce the variety of available school types and introduce a single compulsory school. In 1927, politicians reached an agreement that led to the reintroduction of the four-year lower secondary school (Hauptschule), which was divided into two tracks and grammar school (BMBWF, 2025a; Czeike, 1993).

Eventually, the School Acts of 1962 created a uniform legal basis for the Austrian school system, extending compulsory schooling to nine years and replacing teacher training colleges with teacher training academies. In addition, girls were formally provided with access to all educational institutions, which meant that gender segregation in education was legally abolished. Moreover, upper primary level (Grades 5 to 8) was gradually abolished with the introduction of the two-tier secondary school (lower secondary school and grammar school) in Austria. As a result, primary school evolved into a four-year primary school that provided basic general education (BMBWF, 2025a, 2025b; Czeike, 1997; Seel, 2010). Since 1993, 'disabled' pupils have had the opportunity to receive inclusive education at the primary level. With the founding of the compulsory secondary school (Allgemeine Mittelschule) in 2009, which replaced lower secondary school (Hauptschule), the Austrian school system underwent another far-reaching change (BMBWF, 2025a).

3 Current Structure of the (Primary) School System in Austria

The Austrian school system is divided into three successive school stages (primary level and secondary levels I and II) and is characterised by nine years of compulsory schooling. Children aged one to six attend a pre-school institution (crèche and/or kindergarten). Between the ages of six and ten, school-age children usually undergo four years of primary education (primary level). They then have the option of enrolling at either a compulsory secondary school or

the lower cycle of an academic secondary school (fifth to eighth grade, secondary level I). Next, students can continue their education in the higher cycle of an academic secondary school and graduate with the exit exam (Matura). Alternatively, there are several vocational training options (Austria's Agency for Education and Internationalisation, 2025). Austria is divided into nine federal states: Vorarlberg, Tyrol, Salzburg, Carinthia, Upper Austria, Lower Austria, Burgenland, Styria, and Vienna. While school law is largely regulated at the federal level, legislation for the pre-school level is the responsibility of the individual federal states (BMBWF, 2025c; Parliament Austria, 2025). Table 1 provides a summarised and simplified structure of the current Austrian school system.

Table 1: Overview of the School System in Austria (Austria's Agency for Education and Internationalisation, 2025; BMBWF, 2025d)

	Age	School system		Grade	Related teacher qualifications
Secondary Level II	18	Four years of academic secondary school, higher cycle (Allgemeinbildende Höhere Schule, Oberstufe) + Vocational secondary and higher schools, polytechnic schools (different training periods)		13	Secondary school teacher: Bachelor and master's degree programmes (300 ECTS ¹)
	17			12	
	16			11	
	15			10	
	14			9	
Secondary Level I	13	Compulsory secondary school (Mittelschule)	Academic secondary school, lower cycle (Allgemeinbildende Höhere Schule, Unterstufe)	8	
	12			7	
	11			6	
	10			5	
Primary Level	9	Primary school (Volksschule)		4	Primary school teacher: Bachelor and master's degree programmes (300 ECTS ¹)
	8			3	
	7			2	
	6			1	
Pre-school Level	5	Kindergarten			Five-year training programme for kindergarten teachers
	4				
	3				
	2				
	1				

¹Note. ECTS = European Credit Transfer System; 1 credit corresponds to 25 hours

3.1 Preschool Facilities and the Transition to Primary School

In Austria, children under age three can attend crèches, while children aged three to six can attend kindergartens (Austria's Agency for Education and Internationalisation, 2025). Basic education institutions follow a competency-based national education framework that covers all federal states. This framework emphasises that children should be supported in the areas of emotions and social relationships, ethics and society, language and communication, movement and health, aesthetics and design, and nature and technology to ensure that they receive an education that is compatible with primary school (BMBWF, 2009). Since 2010, it is mandatory for children to attend a childcare centre for 16 to 20 hours per week. This measure is intended to help reduce social inequalities between families and provide all children with the best possible foundation for starting primary school (Federal Ministry of Economy, Family, and Youth, 2010). The transition to primary school is a major milestone for children. It involves new caregivers and changes in daily routines. Active support from parents, educators, and teachers can ease this transition. In addition, diagnostic support measures can be used to help identify specific characteristics of the children at an early stage and initiate appropriate interventions (cf. Filipp, 1995; Griebel & Niesel, 2011; Pohlmann-Rother & Then, 2023).

Since these specific measures vary among federal states, the approach and procedures used in Vorarlberg are described below as an example. Kindergarten attendance is continuously monitored by nursery teachers through supportive diagnostic measures. First, this concerns the children's language level (e.g., their vocabulary; Directorate of Education Vorarlberg, 2024a; Rössl-Krötzl & Breit, 2019). Second, children's development is continuously monitored in the six areas of the competency-based national education framework (BMBWF, 2009; Federal Ministry of Economy, Family and Youth, 2010, see above). By mid-January of the year of enrolment, a transition meeting is held with the parents based on the pedagogical staff's observations. The child's current stage of development and language level, as well as individual talents, interests, emotional and social characteristics, school skills, and any diagnosed special educational needs are recorded in a transition report (Directorate of Education Vorarlberg, 2024a). Although parents are not required to forward the report, they often do so to the school principal. The principal is then responsible for conducting the school entry screening to assess the child's readiness for school. This includes an assessment of written language (e.g., phonology), mathematical precursor skills (e.g., counting skills), executive functions (e.g., working memory), and graphomotor skills. In case there is a lack of knowledge of German, the school principal has the option to test the child's knowledge of the language. The transition from kindergarten to pri-

mary school also includes a discussion between parents and principals about the child's development. Based on the abovementioned aspects, the school principal decides whether the child is ready for school. If a lack of German language skills is detected, the child is classified as an exceptional student (Directorate of Education Vorarlberg, 2024b, 2024c). In this case, they would receive special support in German at primary school (School Organisation Act, 1962, Section 8e).

According to §6 of the Compulsory Education Act (1985), children fulfil the criterion of school readiness if they have sufficient language skills to follow lessons in the primary school level without special support and being physically or mentally overtaxed. School-age children who do not yet meet the requirements for school readiness are taught in special German classes or preschool classes with special language support. All children who are assessed as being ready for school are taught together in the first primary school year (Austria's Agency for Education and Internationalisation, 2025).

3.2 General Conditions in Primary Schools

From around age 6, children in Austria attend primary school for four years (Austria's Agency for Education and Internationalisation, 2025). They are generally taught in year groups based on their age. Compulsory education begins on 1 September of each year and lasts for nine years. Children who turn six by 31 August must attend school from September onwards (BMBWF, 2025d). It is also possible to enrol a child in school before their sixth birthday if the parents wish to do so. The child must be six years old by 1 March of the following year (Wohlhart et al., 2015). A regular enrolment procedure is followed, and the child's readiness for school is assessed by the principal at their future primary school. If it is concluded that the child is not ready for school, they are not enrolled. However, it is possible to enrol them in the preschool class (BMBWF, 2025d). In general, there is no free choice of primary schools in Austria. Local authorities follow a district principle. Families and children are generally assigned to a primary school according to their place of residence (BMBWF, 2007). In primary school, all children are taught together, regardless of their individual entry requirements. Accordingly, it can be assumed that there is a group of children with heterogeneous learning backgrounds in primary school classes that needs to be appropriately taught. Concepts such as open classes and inter-year learning are often adopted as strategies to address the diverse learning needs and developmental stages of students in heterogeneous classrooms (Rott et al., 2018). Flexible retention periods are also possible in the early years, depending on the child's developmental level (Liebers, 2008; Wohlhart et al., 2015). Children usually attend school in the morning

from Monday to Friday. However, there are also open all-day schools where children are looked after until the afternoon (Wohlhart et al., 2015). Primary schools follow a curriculum that allows them to plan and manage their teaching, both in terms of content and methodology. However, it is also intended to provide schools with room to manoeuvre and make autonomous decisions. The curriculum is competence-based and includes learning goals for German, mathematics, science, music, art and design, technology and design, physical education and sport, religion, transport and mobility education, and English (BMBWF, 2025e).

Primary school classes are generally led by a classroom teacher. Additional teachers are only employed in certain subjects, such as music or religious education (Wohlhart et al., 2015). In the first year and first half of the second year of primary education, schools are free to choose alternative forms of performance assessment (e.g., narrative assessments). From the second half of the second year, the awarding of grades is regulated by law (BMBWF, 2025e). Assessment is based on a five-level grading scale (1 = excellent, 2 = good, 3 = satisfactory, 4 = sufficient, and 5 = inadequate; Performance Assessment Ordinance, 1974). In the first three years of primary school, there is no provision for the repetition of classes. However, this is possible at the parents' request. A child may be required to repeat a year if they do not perform satisfactorily in a core subject and are unlikely to be successful the following year (BMBWF, 2025e). Children with special educational needs have the option of being taught in integrative or inclusive classes. The latter are smaller in size and taught by teachers who specialised in inclusion during their teacher training. Inclusive classrooms are often supported by an additional teacher. Teaching, lesson preparation, and follow-up are then conducted through team teaching. Lessons are adapted to the needs of each child in the class through specific measures. Special schools continue to exist alongside inclusive education in the Austrian school system (Austria's Agency for Education and Internationalisation, 2025). Children who have been categorised as exceptional pupils due to a lack of German language skills are generally taught German in language start groups and language support courses for a total of 11 lessons per week. This is an alternative support option to regular classes (School Organisation Act, 1962).

3.3 The Transition to Secondary School

The transition from primary to secondary school (Level 1) takes place at the end of Grade 4, at around age 10. Therefore, pupils face another important transition process early in their school career (Walenta-Bergmann et al., 2024; Wohllhart et al., 2015). In the first half of the fourth year of primary school, teachers usually give parents comprehensive advice on their child's further education. The child's achievements and interests are discussed, and in this context, the teacher provides a recommendation for the child's school career. However, parents are not legally bound by this recommendation and may make a decision that differs from the teacher's advice regarding the child's educational path. This decision should be made carefully, although students can still change schools at a later date. After primary school, they have the option of transferring to either a compulsory secondary school or an academic secondary school (Level 1). Both types of school are designed to last four years (fifth to eighth grade). Pupils are assessed using the five-level grading scale that they are familiar with from primary school (Austria's Agency for Education and Internationalisation, 2025).

Compulsory secondary schools are open to students regardless of their academic ability and focus on all students' talents and potential. For this reason, individualisation and internal differentiation are important components of teaching. Secondary compulsory education concludes after Grade 8 (BMBWF, 2025f). Upon successful completion, students may pursue various educational pathways. One option is to continue their education at an academic secondary school (Level 2), where additional support is available if needed. Alternatively, they can choose to attend a secondary school, a higher vocational school, a polytechnic school, or begin an apprenticeship (Austria's Agency for Education and Internationalisation, 2025).

Instead of compulsory secondary school, students may also choose to attend an academic secondary school (Level 1, lower cycle). Admission to this type of school generally requires good to very good performance in German, reading, writing, and mathematics. In cases of satisfactory achievement, a recommendation from the primary school's teachers' conference is required in order to determine the child's next educational steps. If these criteria are not fully met, students can still be admitted to the academic secondary school by passing an entrance examination. Upon successful completion of the lower cycle, students may progress to the upper cycle (Level 2), which takes place over four additional years. This phase concludes with the Matura, which qualifies graduates for university admission (Austria's Agency for Education and Internationalisation, 2025).

4 Primary School Teacher Training in Austria

4.1 Historical Development and Reforms

The history of teacher training in Austria is characterised by many reforms (Hofmann et al., 2020) and spans several stages, including the establishment of normal schools in 1774, the founding of teacher training colleges in 1869, the creation of teacher training academies in 1962, the introduction of university colleges of teacher education in 2005, and the development of universities from the 13th century (Czeike, 1994, 1997; Schörg, 2018; Seel, 2010). The most recent – and comprehensive – developments in tertiary education began in the 1990s. Following the ratification of the Bologna Declaration, teacher training was academised, and degree programmes were adapted accordingly in 2005; the university colleges of teacher education train primary school and special needs teachers in a six-semester bachelor's programme, while universities train secondary school teachers (Hofmann et al., 2020; Seel, 2010). Primary school teacher training was a one-phase programme; in other words, there was no explicit career entry phase. Upon completion of their studies, graduates of university colleges of teacher education enter the profession as a fully responsible educator. Thus, they are no longer in training or under supervision (Greiner et al., 2010; Schratz, 2012). No specific career entry phase was planned, but some federal states developed their own programmes for the career entry phase of new compulsory school teachers to provide them with adequate support during this important stage. Examples include 'WALK – Wege zur allgemeinen Lehrer*innenkompetenz' ('paths to general teacher competence') from 2009 to 2018 in Vorarlberg (Hecht, 2009) and 'Kollegiales Mentoring und Begleiteter Berufseinstieg' ('collegial mentoring and accompanied career entry') in Styria (Holzinger et al., 2015). The consistent pursuit of academisation as part of the Bologna process led to another major reform in 2013: the 'Pädagog*innenbildung Neu' ('Teacher Training New'). For the first time, there was explicit discussion of a teacher training programme consisting of three phases: education (first phase), professional career entry (second phase), and further education and training (third phase; Braunsteiner & Schnider, 2020; Greiner et al., 2010). The training programme was fundamentally changed, as students were no longer trained for specific types of schools (compulsory schools or general secondary schools) but rather specific age groups six to ten years old for primary and 10 years or above for secondary). The programme structure consisted of an eight-semester bachelor's programme for all teacher training programmes (240 ECTS), a two-semester master's programme for primary school teachers (60 ECTS), and a three- to four-semester master's programme for secondary school teachers

(90–120 ECTS). Primary education was exclusively offered at university colleges of teacher education, while secondary education was jointly offered at universities (all subjects) and university colleges of teacher education (choice of subjects). A far-reaching decision was also made as part of this reform: the abolition of a special education degree programme (covering ages six to 15) in favour of a fully inclusive education for all teacher education students at the primary level and the option of specialising in inclusive education within the degree programme for the equivalent of 60 ECTS, with the possibility of extension to 90 ECTS. A similar option is also available at the secondary level. However, since the school system still consisted of mainstream schools, special education centres, and special schools, it could be critically noted that there is a certain gap between education, school, and social reality that still needs to be closed. Training in religious education, which was previously also offered for six- to 15-year-olds, was replaced by the option to obtain a specialisation in primary education (60 ECTS, with the possibility of extension to 90 ECTS). The latest teacher training reform in Austria was adopted in 2024: a new change in the study architecture was integrated with a three-year bachelor's degree (180 ECTS) and a two-year master's degree (120 ECTS) for all teacher training programmes. It represented a more consistent implementation of the Bologna structure and was designed to make teacher training programmes in Austria more internationally compatible. Training for primary school teachers started in 2025, and the introduction for secondary school teachers is planned for 2026 (Parliament Austria, 2024).

4.2 Current System of Primary Teacher Education in Austria

4.2.1 Formal Requirements, Prerequisites, and Opportunities for Primary School Teacher Training

The current model of teacher training in Austria provides for a bachelor's degree in primary education (180 ECTS), which qualifies students to teach children aged six to ten in Grades 1–4 (primary school). Austria has 14 university colleges of teacher education (BMBWF, 2025g) as well as six public and 17 private universities (BMBWF, 2025h). Public universities and selected (private) universities of the arts offer teacher training programmes. However, as mentioned above, primary school studies are only offered at university colleges of teacher education. In order to achieve a high density of programmes, each of Austria's nine federal states has a (public) university college of teacher education (except for Burgenland, which has a partially privately funded institution). In addition, the federal states are organised into four regional development associations; each has a private university college of teacher education in which the churches play a major financial and administrative role.

These university colleges are responsible for religious education. The latter is provided in cooperation with public university colleges of teacher education.¹ During the winter semester of the 2023–2024 academic year, 21,580 out of a total of 400,340 students in Austria were enrolled at university colleges of teacher education; of this number, 5,039 were male, and 16,541 were female. The number of students varies according to the size of the federal state and thus the size of the university colleges of teacher education (e.g., ranging from 493 students at the University College of Teacher Education Burgenland to 3,697 students at the University College of Teacher Education in Vienna; Statista, 2025).

To become a primary school teacher in Austria, prospective students must meet specific admission criteria and follow a structured academic and professional path. First and foremost, admission to the teacher training programme for primary education requires a general university entrance qualification (Matura).² Second, it requires the successful completion of an aptitude test. The latter consists of several parts: an online self-assessment, a face-to-face electronic test on aspects such as intelligence, spelling, and emotional stability; and optionally (depending on the university college of teacher education) other modules (e.g., aptitude test in the artistic subjects or admission interviews; Pfaffel & Ecker, 2024). After successful admission and completion of the bachelor's programme, students can enter the teaching profession but are obligated to complete the master's programme in primary education (120 ECTS) within five years. In order to emphasise the need for a master's degree, consequences for failing to do are established under civil service law: teachers without a master's degree have financial disadvantages (reduction of pension rights) and no job security after five years, as the lack of a master's degree is considered a reason for dismissal (cf. Employment law reform, 2024).

Three variants of the master's programme are offered to students: a full-time programme, a career-enhancing programme (longer study period in case of other employment or care responsibilities), and a part-time professional programme, which also extends the study period and is designed for students employed as teachers. In this case, employment at a school is permitted only up to a maximum 50 % teaching load (i.e., a half-time position). The latter option has advantages for the schools, as students work as teachers despite their studies. There are also advantages for students, as they can integrate their

- 1 It is worth noting that there is a university college of agricultural and environmental education, which is also classified as a university college of teacher education but does not offer primary education.
- 2 Alternatively, other qualifications – such as the vocational matriculation examination (Berufsreifeprüfung), which grants access to higher education for skilled workers – can also provide access to university.

practical teaching experience into their studies, and they have the opportunity to complete their internship at the school where they are employed. Study and teaching are closely linked, such as through supervised practice with reflective units at the university college of teacher education and individual counselling for challenging practice cases. Additionally, as part of the professional master's programme, students are encouraged to draw topics for their master's thesis from school practice or their immediate school environment and to write in their area of teaching and school development in order to establish a direct link to the professional field and make the results relevant for schools.

4.2.2 Curriculum Organisation of the Primary Teacher Training Programme

The responsible Federal Ministry of Education, Science, and Research provides a framework curriculum as a reference for content and allocation of ECTS. However, the concrete implementation and organisation of the curriculum are the responsibility of the university colleges of teacher education at the primary level. These institutions have established internal processes for this purpose (e.g., scheduling and the involvement of committees and stakeholders), but the Federal Ministry retains overarching control. This control includes content-related reviews by the Quality Assurance Council (Qualitätssicherungsrat, known in Austria as QSR) at specific stages in the development process, as well as direct reviews conducted by the Federal Ministry with regard to compliance with study law.

The teacher training programme should be competence-oriented. The Quality Assurance Council (formerly the Development Council) also set guidelines for these provisions. Five areas of competence are defined and should be taken into account in curricula for teacher training programmes (see Table 2).

Table 2: Competences in Teacher Training (Development Council, 2013; Flick-Holtsch, 2023)

Competence	Facets of competence
General pedagogical competence	• Mediation and support skills • Differentiation and individualisation skills • Diagnostic competence • Classroom management skills
Diversity and gender competence	• Managing diversity in the classroom • Managing subjective beliefs about diversity
Professional understanding	• Expertise in quality management • Professional communication of values • Dealing with the experience of professional stress
Expertise and didactic competence	• Expertise, knowledge of the subject • Didactic competence
Social competence	• Shaping the relationship with pupils • Promoting competent social behaviour • Conducting discussions or counselling sessions with parents

Through the teacher training programme, primary education student teachers acquire subject-specific, subject-didactic, and pedagogical-psychological expertise, as well as the corresponding practical skills for all subjects offered at primary school. Accordingly, Austrian teacher education training is oriented towards competences that are considered to be fundamental for professional teachers (Baumert & Kunter, 2013; Blömeke, 2011).

The development of curricula is based on legislation (University Act, 2005), the curriculum for primary schools (BMBWF, 2025e), job descriptions for teachers (internal document), the National Quality Framework for pedagogical-practical Studies (internal document), and guidelines on cross-cutting issues from the Quality Assurance Council (internal document). For the current curriculum development (2025), three central themes are to be prioritised: (a) career and skill orientation and constructive alignment, (b) diversity and inclusion, and (c) artificial intelligence, media education, digitalisation, and globalisation. It is also important to consider the employer's concerns, such as incorporating school law topics into the curriculum, establishing curriculum relevance across all subject areas, and focusing on the profession (teacher job descriptions).

Additionally, the curriculum should include constitutional issues, such as democracy education and national strategies (e.g., antiracism and antisemitism). The primary teacher training programme in Austria comprises multiple parts. Firstly, students engage with the general foundations of educational science. Rather than specialising in individual school subjects, they receive comprehensive academic and didactic training across the full range of subjects relevant to primary education. At the same time, there is the option to pursue specific content-related specialisations and to choose individual areas of focus. The entire programme is accompanied by school-based practical phases (pedagogical-practical studies, University Act, 2005, §§38, 42, Annex 1 to §42). An overview of the programme structure is provided in Table 3.

Table 3: Distribution of ECTS Among the Different Specialisations of the Primary School Teacher Training Programme (University Act, 2005, §§38, 42, Annex 1 to §42)

	Bachelor's programme	Master's programme
General principles of educational science	25 ¹	20
Elementary and primary school pedagogy and didactics	100 ²	20
Specialisation and elective subjects	30	30
Pedagogical-practical studies	25 ³	20 ⁴
Master's thesis		30

Notes. ¹ Six ECTS for German as a Second Language and three ECTS for Inclusive Education (transferable to elementary and primary school pedagogy and didactics); ² Includes five ECTS for the bachelor's thesis and four ECTS for scientific work; ³ At least 15 ECTS of supervised practice; ⁴ Previous teaching experience can be counted towards the professional master's programme

The question of how extensive and in-depth primary school teachers' specialist knowledge should be has been repeatedly discussed (Giest, 2019; Soukup-Altrichter, 2020), as specialisation and generalisation are contradictory. The decision in favour of 'specialised generalists' (Soukup-Altrichter, 2020, p. 47) is primarily based on the need for primary school children to have a permanent mentor. Specialisation is possible for primary education student teachers in the form of elective specialisations, which comprise 60 ECTS of the teacher training programme (30 ECTS for the bachelor's programme and 30 ECTS for the master's programme) and allow student teachers to acquire additional qualifications. The 'Inclusive Education' and 'German as a Second Language/ Language Education' specialisations are required by law and must be offered

by all university colleges of teacher education. There is also a regional focus on 'minority languages' in the federal states of Carinthia and Burgenland and a focus on religious education at the four private university colleges of teacher education (which are primarily financed and administered by the church). In addition, university colleges of teacher education are free to offer additional specialisations or elective subjects, each comprising 60 ECTS.

By ratifying the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Austria has opted for an inclusive school system and inclusive teacher training. There is no separate degree programme for special needs education, but there is an inclusive teacher training programme that offers students the option of specialising in inclusive education. In addition to inclusion efforts, all-day and multi-age education models can be found in schools.

4.2.3 Pedagogical-Practical Studies

Pedagogical-practical studies are a central component of primary school teacher training in Austria. Their aim is to provide student teachers with hands-on experience in everyday school life, which they can then analyse and reflect on using theoretical knowledge gained during their studies. 45 ECTS (25 ECTS in the bachelor's programme and 20 ECTS in the master's programme) are integrated in the curricula of Austrian university colleges of teacher education and span the entire duration of the primary school teacher training programme. They consist of classroom observations and the planning, implementation, and analysis of primary school lessons. Students' learning processes are supported by experienced teachers at their placement schools, who serve as mentors and offer feedback on their development as prospective teachers. Pedagogical-practical studies are also supported by preparatory and accompanying seminars given by teachers at university colleges of teacher education, whose main purpose is to help students analyse and reflect on the teaching units that they have completed. The aspects described above are important components to ensure the continuous and further development of students in primary school teacher training and support them in the professionalisation process (BMBWF, 2025i; Groß Ophoff & Kemethofer, 2023).

4.2.4 Interim Conclusion: Thoughts on the Teacher Training Programme

Teacher training has been repeatedly criticised for being too academic and insufficiently practice-oriented and thus for not adequately preparing students for the profession (Hascher, 2014; Terhart, 2011). However, this overlooks the fact that the shift from a practice-based apprenticeship model to a science-based academic degree was well-founded, as only science and research can initiate innovations and develop teaching and schools to meet growing complexity and challenges such as globalisation, the climate crisis, and migra-

tion. Primary school teacher training is an academic education. Thus, it must fulfil the following functions:

- a) the transfer of knowledge (for teachers, primarily subject-specific, subject-didactic, and pedagogical-psychological knowledge)
- b) the development of practical skills (the practical phases of primary school teacher training offer explicit opportunities to this, as do courses at the university college through, for example, theory-guided work on cases, reflections on work shadowing, and professional collegial collaboration during the programme)
- c) and the development of a professional ethos (Forster-Heinzer & Drahmman, 2019; Zutavern, 2018) and a reflexive habitus (Helsper, 2016)

However, it is neither desirable nor feasible to fully capture the complexity, breadth, and dynamics of the teaching profession within a degree programme (Keller-Schneider, 2009). Therefore, it is all of the more important to understand teacher professionalisation as a continuum (Braunsteiner & Schnider, 2020) that is designed as a three-phase process (study, career entry, and further education and training) that does not end with entering the profession.

4.2.5 Career Entry into the Teaching Profession

A structured and formalised career entry phase is essential for successful integration into the demanding and dynamic field of teaching. It not only contributes to the successful mastery of professional requirements (Hericks, 2006; Keller-Schneider & Hericks, 2014; Keller-Schneider, 2020) but also has a positive impact on the quality of teaching (Baer et al., 2011), job satisfaction, and thus long-term commitment to the profession (Dammerer, 2016). As mentioned above, since the 2019–2020 school year, there has been a formalised career entry phase in Austria that is mandatory for all school types and thus all teachers at the beginning of their teaching career; it serves both to qualify and assess new entrants to the profession (Employment Law Reform, 2013).

During the career entry phase, teachers are assigned a mentor with at least five years of professional experience and appropriate qualifications (e.g., further training or nomination by school management). During this period, early career teachers work autonomously and receive an appropriate salary (Federal framework law on the introduction of a new teacher training programme, 2013; Employment Law Reform, 2013; Contract Employees Act, 1948). The Career Entry Handbook (BMBWF, 2025j), which is updated annually by the BMBWF, informs stakeholders about expectations, obligations, rights, and opportunities for the respective school year. It currently specifies that university colleges of teacher education are responsible for career entry courses, in-service training, coaching programmes, and the qualification of

mentors. The Directorate of Education determines the scope of the courses to be taken, which must be completed in blocks before starting work, depending on the new entrants' previous education. In the first part of the training, new entrants with a high training obligation receive a nationally standardised, asynchronous online course covering the following topics: 'methods of lesson planning and implementation', 'classroom management', 'diversity/inclusion', 'language', and 'digitalisation'. They also complete a second online module on the topic of 'law' (nationwide). Additionally, school-type specific events are held on 'structures of the school system', 'professional awareness', 'communication', and 'school as an organisational field', which take place either at the school site or at the university college of teacher education. New entrants with a lower in-service training obligation only attend the second part of the programme. Novice teachers have the opportunity to receive coaching from university colleges of teacher education to support their development and overcome challenges. The career entry phase generally lasts one year. However, if a novice teacher demonstrates sufficient professional competence, it may be shortened to six months. In such cases, the school management must submit a formal request to the Directorate of Education, which will then decide whether to approve the early completion of the career entry phase.

The focus of the mentoring process is to promote and support teachers in the career entry phase to the profession (Dammerer, 2020; Helms-Lorenz et al., 2016; Keller-Schneider, 2019; Schnebel, 2020). Legally defined tasks include advising them on lesson planning and design, analysing and reflecting on teaching processes, and supporting professional development. In order to fulfil these tasks, mentors should also observe novices' teaching to an appropriate extent. In addition, they should familiarise themselves with the particularities of the school location and the current focus of school development (Employment Law Reform, 2022, §39a). Successfully mastering the developmental tasks that are specifically defined for those entering the profession (Keller-Schneider, 2009, 2020) plays a central role in the professionalisation of new teachers. Therefore, these tasks should be addressed and reflected upon during mentoring, as initial evaluation studies for Austrian career starters have shown (Frey & Pichler, 2022a, b). School leaders are responsible for selecting mentors, organising regular networking and advisory events, and documenting and evaluating career starters based on their own observations or in consultation with the mentor. According to Prenzel et al. (2021), a professional or geographical match between mentors and career starters is not required by law but would benefit the quality of mentoring. Recent literature has critically discussed the expert-novice paradigm underlying mentoring (Frey et al., in press; Keller-Schneider, 2022; Kraler et al., 2023). The importance of the mentor-mentee relationship for a successful career entry has also been ques-

tioned and debated (Führer & Cramer, 2021; Richter et al., 2013). Studies in Austria have shown that a constructive, collaborative, and learning-oriented mentoring style is associated with increased competence assessments among career starters (Frey et al., 2023). These findings can inform the further development of mentor training to provide high-quality support to those who are entering the teaching profession and contribute to a successful career start.

4.2.6 Studies on the Effectiveness of Teacher Training after the Teacher Training New Reform

In a long-term study on teacher education in Austria, Weber et al. (2022) found that, over the course of the degree programme (as restructured under the Teacher Education New reform), students showed positive development in teaching-related attitudes and in at least one aspect of their professional self-concept. The authors regarded the results as concerning, as the programme proved to be effective in only a few areas. They stressed the importance of fostering autonomy and self-efficacy during teacher training, which are linked to positive outcomes. Another study was a large-scale evaluation of Teacher Education New conducted by a consortium from neighbouring Switzerland on behalf of the Federal Ministry (Schnider et al., 2023). The study included, among other components, a cross-sectional design to measure students and young teachers' self-ratings of specific competences during different semesters. The five areas of competence (see Table 2) that the Quality Assurance Council considers to be essential for teacher education were examined (Development Council, 2013; Quality Assurance Council, 2014), namely general pedagogical competence, diversity and gender competence, subject-specific and -didactic competence, social competence, and understanding of the profession (see Flick-Holtsch et al., 2023b for the questionnaire).

However, the study by Schnider et al. (2023) was conducted under the exceptional circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic and should therefore be interpreted with caution. Additionally, the study relied on self-assessments, which do not provide conclusive evidence of the actual development of competences or the quality of teaching. The main finding – that young teachers rated themselves highest in each of the five areas of competence – was seen as positive, suggesting that the teacher training programme was effective. However, there was no consistent or equally noticeable improvement across all the aforementioned facets. For example, greater variance was observed in the facets of diagnostic competence and parental discussions/counselling compared to other areas. This highlights the need for action to intensify these aspects within the programme. The analyses showed positive correlations between students' perceived competence and their perception of how well university teaching aligns with practical school experience, as well as with the evaluation

of the practice placements. This also provides important insights for universities and university colleges of teacher education, highlighting areas where further attention is needed (Flick-Holtsch et al., 2023a). These findings were incorporated into the most recent reform and subsequent revision of the curricula.

4.2.7 Practice Schools: A Speciality in the Austrian Education System

Practical schools in Austria are educational institutions linked to university colleges of teacher education. As model, innovation, and research schools, they are characterised by a close interconnection between theory and practice. There are currently 23 practice schools in Austria: 12 primary schools and 11 compulsory secondary schools. Student teachers at university colleges of teacher education have the opportunity to gain initial teaching experience as part of their pedagogical-practical studies during their teacher training. In addition, the practice schools offer optimal conditions for the realisation of research projects. Aspects of school development and the further advancement of pedagogical approaches are often developed within multi-professional teams, consisting of specialists from practice schools and university colleges of teacher education, the latter often serving in an advisory capacity. Thus, practical schools play an important pioneering role in Austrian teacher training (BMBWF, 2025k; Krainz-Dürr, 2019).

4.3 Challenges and Future Perspectives

4.3.1 Early Selection for Secondary Schools

In Austria, selection for secondary school takes place after fourth grade and therefore at a very early stage in a child's school career. This early selection is controversial, not only because it affects children's educational careers but also because it reinforces social inequalities. Children who are assigned to a particular educational path as a result of poor grades in primary school and/or career recommendations from teachers often have fewer opportunities to switch to higher educational paths. At the same time, the school system suggests that they lack the skills needed to pursue a higher educational path. This can lead to the fixation of educational pathways, which can make social advancement considerably more difficult (Maaz, 2020; Maaz et al., 2010; Wohllhart, 2015). In Austria, it is possible to transfer to a secondary academic school after attending a secondary compulsory school. However, a number of emotional and cognitive problems can arise from changing schools.

Another criticism of early selection for secondary school is that it exacerbates social inequalities, as children from higher-income families and those with a higher socio-economic status have better access to educational resources

(e.g., tutoring and support) compared to children from families with lower incomes and socio-economic status. As a result, these social differences lead to unequal conditions for success within the education system (Fuchs-Heinritz & König, 2014). In addition, teachers' assessments are often found to be highly error-prone. For example, analyses from the Primary International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS; Stubbe et al., 2017) and a study by Dumont et al. (2014) showed that children from socially disadvantaged families often receive lower grades and transition recommendations, despite demonstrating comparable abilities and talents to their peers from more advantaged backgrounds. These findings highlight the impact of socio-economic factors on educational outcomes, as children with similar competencies are evaluated differently based on their social background.

Social inequalities are also exacerbated by the fact that a disproportionate number of children from families with a higher income and socio-economic status attend a higher type of school, which means that social segregation is already taking place. As a result, children are much less likely to encounter those from families with a lower income and socio-economic status (Brune-forth et al., 2024).

In response to ongoing criticism, there have been repeated calls for reform of the education system in Germany and Austria. One way to address this problem would be to give children more time to reach their full potential. For example, a longer period of common learning (possibly until sixth grade or beyond) and a later decision on future schooling could lead to more educational opportunities for all children (Tillmann, 2013). In 2013, the state government of Vorarlberg commissioned a large-scale project titled 'Schools for 10- to 14-year-olds in Vorarlberg', which surveyed students, parents, and teachers. The recommendations of the research group were clearly in favour of establishing a common school from grade 5 to 8 based on individualisation or personalisation and internal differentiation (Böheim-Galehr & Engleitner, 2014; Böheim-Galehr et al., 2015). However, this reform was not politically feasible at the time but is still under discussion.

4.3.2 Teacher Education

A current challenge in education is the shortage of teachers, which is a major international issue and not limited to Austria (Kreis et al., 2024; Schnider & Braunsteiner, 2024; Terhart, 2023). Due to the large number of expected retirements (i.e., 30 % of all teachers in Austria are expected to retire in the next few years) and other factors (e.g., changes in the number of pupils due to migration, young teachers' desire to work part-time, educational policy decisions such as all-day schooling, inclusion, and team teaching), the demand for teachers cannot be met at present and is predicted to remain so until the

end of the 2020s (Schnider & Braunsteiner, 2024). To counteract this phenomenon, alternative pathways into the teaching profession are increasingly being offered in Austria (Flick-Holtsch et al., 2024). In general, four groups of new entrants to the teaching profession can be distinguished within the country: graduates of teacher training programmes (approximately 50 %), people who are still studying to become teachers (approximately 20 %), second career teachers ('Quereinsteigende'; only possible at the secondary level, approximately 10 %), and people with different qualifications who enter the teaching profession via a 'special contract' (approximately 20 %; data according to Schnider & Braunsteiner, 2024).

Training for second career teachers in Austria is only available at the secondary level, as this requires a relevant degree in a subject and professional experience. Moreover, the teacher training programme at university colleges of teacher education focuses on didactic and educational science aspects. The programme qualifies for teaching in one subject. A 'special contract' can be used, for example, to recruit people with a school-leaving qualification or a qualification in primary education. These contracts are limited in duration and entail a salary reduction of up to 25 % in comparison to the remuneration received by fully qualified teachers employed under regular contracts. In cases of second career entry, there is an obligation for the teachers to complete a qualification (20, 60, or 90 ECTS, depending on previous education) at a university college of teacher education within eight years from the start of their contract. Recent data reveals that only about half of new entrants are fully qualified teachers. This has fuelled an ongoing discussion about the deprofessionalisation of teaching (Flick-Holtsch et al., 2024, p. 386).

Porsch (2021) indicated that teachers trained through alternative programmes are less qualified compared to fully trained teachers. It is often argued that such training, which often consists of professional practice and prior or concurrent education, does not sufficiently contribute to the development of reflective attitudes and does not train teachers for practice but by practice (Reintjes et al., 2020). Studies in Austria have shown that students in second career programmes (who were simultaneously employed and studying at higher education institutions) exhibited a lower prevalence of constructivist beliefs compared to traditional students (Groß Ophoff et al., 2024; Gamsjäger et al., 2025). Since constructivist beliefs are generally considered conducive to high-quality, cognitively activating teaching (Bernholt et al., 2020; Voss et al., 2011), this lower prevalence may be a concern for the effectiveness of their teaching. Furthermore, recent studies reveal that career changers and teachers with special contracts report significantly higher perceptions of competence than those who completed traditional teacher training (Beer et al., forthcoming). It is important to stress that these results are based on self-assessments and

do not permit conclusions about the actual quality of teaching. Nevertheless, the clear differences in perceived competence have sparked discussions about potential long-term implications for the teaching profession, particularly with regard to training pathways and perceptions of professional competence.

Second career teachers and teachers under a special contract with alternative training programmes also have less training that cannot replace a full academic education with a master's degree. Furthermore, the fact that people with alternative qualifications continue to work as teachers can lead to a devaluation of the profession (Bauer & Kost, 2023). Issues of (de)professionalisation have also been raised in relation to early career entry (i.e., working as a teacher while studying). Bacher et al. (2024) found that 7 % of bachelor's students and 30 % of master's students were already working as teachers. In-depth interviews revealed high perceptions of self-efficacy among participants, which can mainly be explained by the fact that students experience little autonomy during their internship at school but significant autonomy in their work as teachers. The authors clearly highlighted a 'deprofessionalisation due to a lack of reflection' (p. 70) and discussed the importance of a formalised career entry, which cannot be clearly delineated in the professionalisation process due to the overlap between phases and the double burden of study and work. Beer et al. (2022), who found that just under 42 % of master's students (primary level) in their study were already working full-time and just under 38 % were working part-time as teachers, also highlighted the burden of simultaneous study and work. As a result, the researchers called for 'a more intensive examination of the central importance of reflection (processes) in the context of higher education didactics in the future' (Beer et al., 2022, p. 255).

4.3.3 Structural Challenges at University Colleges of Teacher Education (Focus on Research)

Due to the historical development of teacher education (see Section 4.1), primary education in particular was not academised until late, mainly with the establishment of university colleges of teacher education in 2005. The increasing scientific orientation of teacher education is evident in teacher training and has led to increased research in the primary school sector. A major issue is that university colleges of teacher education have little autonomy and are politically subordinate to the federal ministry. Although they are legally responsible for the initial, further, and continuing training of teachers and research in the field (University Act, 2005), they do not have the authority to award doctorates themselves. Thus, the promotion of young academics is only possible through workarounds, including cooperation with institutions that are entitled to award doctorates – such as university colleges of teacher education in Germany or (inter)national partnerships with universities. These conditions

also make it difficult to attract high qualified academics as professors. However, there are current efforts in Austria to strengthen research in the field of primary education. For example, the biennial Graz Primary School Congress (Grazer Grundschulkongress), an international scientific conference on primary school education, takes place in Austria. The conference proceedings, published each time the event is held, provide participants with the opportunity to present both empirical and conceptual contributions, making them accessible to a broader audience.

5 Conclusion and Outlook

Although the Austrian school system is rated as high-performing, it has also been viewed critically, especially in the area of educational (in)equity (Brune-forth et al., 2012). International comparative studies such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) repeatedly show that other school systems – especially those with a more inclusive approach, tend to outperform the Austrian school system (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2023). For this reason, the logic of secondary school selection after only four years of primary school and the highly differentiated school system at the secondary level have been particularly criticised (Herzog-Punzenberger, 2023). Children and young people with a migrant background and from socially disadvantaged families are usually the ones who are negatively impacted. Therefore, action is needed in Austria. Commitment to an inclusive education system and models such as common school for 10- to 14-year-olds are signs that efforts are being made to increase equality in education, but they often fail politically when it comes to implementation. However, there is a variety of proposals for a school of the future, addressing key aspects of school development. These ideas have the potential to enrich ongoing discussions about the future of education and spark innovative developments in teaching practices, school structures, and student learning experiences (Richter, 2024). Teacher training in Austria is characterised by many reforms, some of which were implemented within a few years of each other. As a result, teachers who work in schools have been trained in very different ways. However, the reforms shared the common goal of academising teacher education, especially at the primary level, which has enhanced Austria's international compatibility in education. In addition, the mandatory specialisation in 'Inclusive Education' and 'German as a Second Language' for all higher education institutions is a political sign that efforts are underway to promote an inclusive education system. Moreover, evaluation studies have shown an increase in students' skills and knowledge (Flick-Holtsch et al., 2023a; Weber et al., 2022), a result of the reforms aimed at strengthening the academisation of teacher education.

However, this progress should be continued in a consistent and structured manner. It would also be beneficial to expand and systematically research alternative pathways into the teaching profession (career changers), which have become increasingly important in terms of academisation and alignment with standards due to the current shortage of teachers. This is the only way to achieve the goal of effective teacher training and, in turn, high-quality teaching for all pupils in Austria.

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Author Information

Hoya, Fabian, Prof. Dr.

University College of Teacher Education Vorarlberg
Institute of Primary Education and Learning Development

Areas of Expertise: Teacher Feedback, Artificial Intelligence in Education, Teachers' Inquiry Stance, Gender Stereotypes, Inclusive Education, Internationalization of Education

Address: Pädagogische Hochschule Vorarlberg,
Liechtensteinerstraße 33–37, 6800 Feldkirch, Austria

E-Mail: fabian.hoya@ph-vorarlberg.ac.at

ORCID: 0000-0003-4077-0635

Frey, Anne, Prof. Dr.

University College of Teacher Education Vorarlberg
Vice Rector for Research and Professional Development

Areas of Expertise: Professional Research, Entry into the Teaching Profession, School Development, Classroom Management, Inclusive Education Systems, and Educational Management

Address: Pädagogische Hochschule Vorarlberg,
Liechtensteinerstraße 33–37, 6800 Feldkirch, Austria

E-Mail: anne.frey@ph-vorarlberg.ac.at

ORCID: 0009-0002-0722-6443

Pichler, Silvia, Prof.

University College of Teacher Education Vorarlberg
Institute of Primary Education and Learning Development

Areas of Expertise: Teacher Professionalisation, Teacher Training, Pedagogical-Practical Studies, Mentoring, Teacher Career Entry

Address: Pädagogische Hochschule Vorarlberg,
Liechtensteinerstraße 33–37, 6800 Feldkirch, Austria

E-Mail: silvia.pichler@ph-vorarlberg.ac.at

ORCID: 0009-0004-1249-9424