

Study

Austria, the land of “educational climbers” – educational mobility between the generations

Marie, Kevin and Bülent do not have the same opportunities.
But they have far better opportunities than many people often claim.

Wolfgang Feller

Think tank



Agenda
Austria

The findings at a glance

"In Austria, education is inherited." This is a popular introduction to articles on Austria's education system. The influence of family background on children's educational opportunities in Austria is not only depressingly strong, it is also far stronger than in many other industrialised countries. In other words, the prospects for educational equity in this country are bleak.

This assertion comes up in countless articles and TV discussions, and in virtually every academic paper on the Austrian education system. Sweeping criticism of the supposed lack of educational mobility is almost part of the arsenal of complaisant and politically correct remarks. It is also part of the accepted wisdom that is passed on largely without a second thought. But does this damning indictment stand up to critical examination? All of the most prominent studies that point to a low level of educational mobility are based on reliable data. It is the interpretation of those data that raises a series of questions. This paper looks at the same statistics in a variety of different ways, but some of the findings are fundamentally different. They show very pronounced upward mobility across almost all educational levels as well as a relatively balanced mix of social groups among people entering university, and that many students at Austrian universities and universities of applied sciences are from sections of society with lower educational opportunities.

How is that possible? Quite easily – by changing perspective. If we were to ask how many children of parents with university degrees went on to obtain degrees themselves, we would gain a completely different picture than if we turned the question around: how many people with university degrees come from households where the parents also have degrees? This paper focuses on the second question and assesses educational mobility from the younger generation's point of view. Evaluating upward and downward mobility on the basis of criteria suited to the diverse nature of the Austrian education system results in another change of perspective. For the purpose of international comparisons, the number of educational levels is reduced from five to three, so if the parents graduated from a commercial school and their daughter has a secondary school leaving certificate, this is not treated as upward educational mobility. However, by Austrian standards this would definitely be seen as a step up.

The results are intriguing: 42% of 45 to 54 year olds have higher level qualifications than both parents, 47% have the same level of education and 11% have a lower level.

Educational mobility relative to both parents

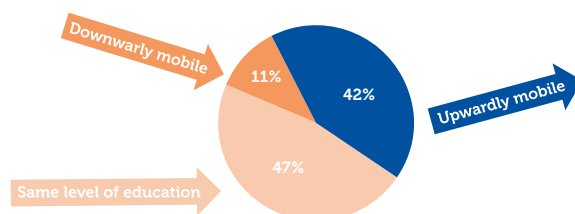


Figure 1
Source: Statistik Austria 2012.

An analysis of the school education of the parents of university entrants confirms this finding: 27% of students entering universities or universities of applied sciences come from households where at least one parent has a degree. About a third are from families where at least one parent has a secondary school leaving certificate, and in 40% of cases, neither the mothers nor fathers of those starting degrees have achieved a higher level of education – in other words, they have no secondary school leaving qualification.

School education of university entrants' parents

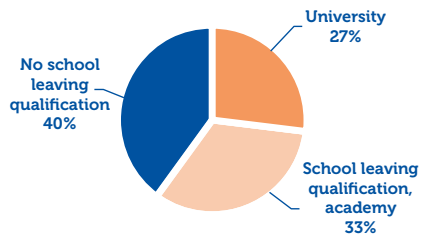


Figure 2
Source: Unger et al. 2012.

The assertion that Austria lags way behind comparable countries in terms of educational mobility also turns out to be a preconception: Austria not only holds its own; as far as upward mobility among university students is concerned, the country is one of the leaders in Europe. Austria is ranked fourth among European countries, with 67% of university students from families where neither of the parents have degrees.

International comparison of highest educational attainment of students' parents

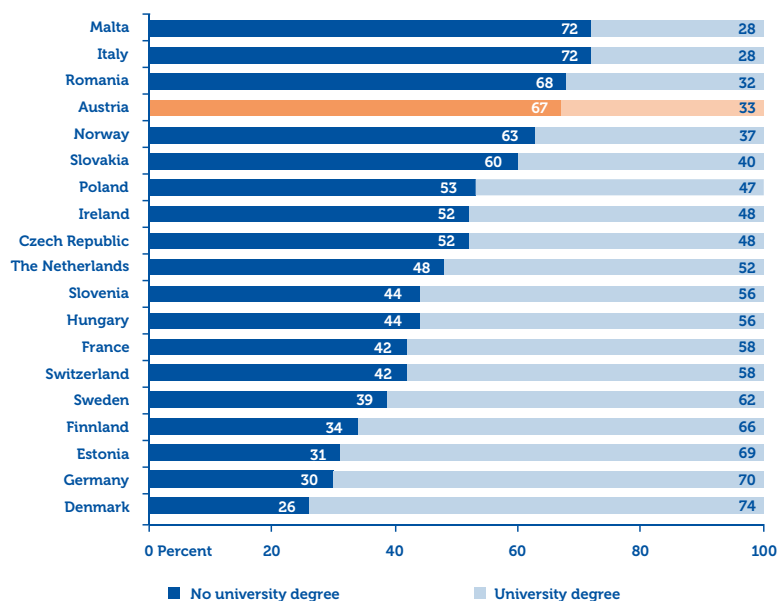



Figure 3
Source: Eurostudent V (2015).



If we look closely, this positive picture is not particularly surprising: many studies have shown that Austria has a very effective vocational education system, which helps to keep the number of early school leavers comparatively low. This highly developed system of vocational middle and secondary schools opens the door to higher education for young people from disadvantaged sections of society. In addition, free access to universities and universities of applied sciences coupled with the well established scholarship system makes a significant contribution to social mobility in Austrian society. This study aims to provide an in-depth assessment of the frequent claim that educational mobility in Austria is low. Many aspects of the country's school and education system are rightly criticised, but accusations of an overall lack of mobility and accessibility are not justified. Criticism of the perceived high level of "hereditary education" is often used as a front for a wide range of demands related to education policy – more money for schools, universities or education as a whole, opposition to tuition fees and to introductory phases for university entrants, calls for comprehensive schools and so on: the imagination seems to know no bounds. Debunking the myth of low educational mobility should force politicians to justify their demands specifically and objectively, instead of basing them on misinterpretations of the level of mobility. This would also enhance the quality of debate on education policy in Austria.

So is everything in good shape? Not at all! In spite of these positive findings, there are still barriers to upward mobility in education. However, further investigation is required to identify where these barriers lie – a comparison of educational mobility between generations is by no means informative enough. There are many strong indications that some obstacles crop up in early childhood education: many under-6-year-olds who do not receive support at home or attend a poor kindergarten never make up the resulting deficit. Proponents of educational reform should focus on this point, instead of permanently banging the drum on the alleged lack of opportunities for advancement.

