



ALOUT

Advancing
Learning Outcomes



Learning Outcomes in Austrian Youth Work

Policy, Challenges, and
Strategic Recommendations



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1. Summary and context

In Austria, youth work is understood as a socio-educational field and an extracurricular socialisation environment focusing mainly on leisure-time activities that promote informal and non-formal learning among young people. Youth work is delivered by a diverse range of organisations, including non-profit associations, self-managed youth clubs, social organisations, municipal authorities, and faith-based or politically affiliated

institutions. Activities take place in various settings such as youth cafés, community centres, parks, and other public or semi-public spaces.

Youth work operates as an interface between multiple sectors, including families, schools, child and youth welfare services, health institutions, labour market services, cultural organisations, and public administration. The sector is regulated within a multi-level governance framework at municipal, regional (federal state), and national levels. The nine Austrian federal states are primarily responsible for technical management and funding, while municipalities play a key role in financing infrastructure and personnel and in providing local youth participation opportunities.

At the national level, the Federal Ministry responsible for youth oversees quality assurance of youth work training. **aufZAQ** operating autonomously as an independent organisational unit within the Austrian National Youth Council is commissioned to support quality development and certification of training programmes. Austrian youth work is generally structured into three main areas: youth work in associations, open youth work, and youth information services. While the first area acts mostly autonomously, the latter two are represented by umbrella organisations, namely the Nationwide Network of Open Youth Work (bOJA) and the Federal Network of Austrian Youth Information.

Primary funding sources include the Federal Ministry for Youth, the federal states' governments, municipalities, and public funding schemes, supplemented in some cases by project-based funding and organisational resources.

1.1. No Formal Recognition of Youth Work Training

In Austria, there is no legally regulated or nationally standardised qualification specifically required to work as a youth worker. However, qualifications in related fields such as social pedagogy, social work, or other psychosocial disciplines are considered advantageous and are often requested by employers.

Education and training opportunities exist across several educational levels:

- **Tertiary level:** Bachelor's or Master's degrees in social work, social pedagogy, or related psychosocial and educational fields. However, there is no degree in youth work.

- **Post-secondary level:** Colleges for social pedagogy.
- **Secondary level:** Five-year vocational schools for social pedagogy.
- **Non-formal sector:** Adult education courses and specialised youth work training programmes provided by private and regional institutions without a legal basis but sometimes formally recognised through mapping to the NQF/EQF.

Non-formal training plays a particularly important role in Austria. Many programmes are certified through quality assurance processes coordinated by aufZAQ. According to available data, a majority of youth workers in open youth work have tertiary education, but a significant proportion enter the field through non-formal pathways.

In Austria, the labour market in youth work and pedagogy is marked by a persistent shortage of qualified staff. Kindergartens, schools, youth centres but also volunteer associations report numerous open positions, particularly in early childhood education and social pedagogy. Employers struggle to recruit trained staff, especially in rural areas. To address this gap, new training pathways and publicly funded programmes aim to attract career changers, offering flexible qualifications and financial support to facilitate entry into the field.

1.2. Typical educational pathway of an Austrian Youth Worker

A typical Austrian youth worker may follow different educational pathways depending on career decisions and opportunities. For example, a youth worker might first attend a vocational school specialising in social professions. After completing compulsory education, they may decide between continuing towards university level qualifications or pursuing a more direct pathway into youth work through specialised (non-formal) training.

Such programmes often last around 10 months and combine theoretical learning with practical experience, including voluntary work in youth organisations. After completing the training, the individual is qualified to work in different youth work settings, such as youth centres or mobile youth work projects.

Alternatively, individuals may first complete tertiary education in social work or social pedagogy and later specialise in youth work through additional (non formal) trainings.

Therefore, multiple entry routes exist, and professional development often continues throughout employment.

Training content typically includes:

- Social pedagogy and youth development
- Communication and counselling skills
- Project and event management
- Conflict management and participation methods
- Legal and ethical aspects of youth work
- Supervised transfer into practice

Educational requirements vary depending on employers and specific areas of youth work, but formal degrees are generally required for positions with higher responsibility or within institutional contexts.

1.3. The Austrian Competence Framework for Youth Work

The Austrian youth work competence framework was developed by aufZAQ in 2017 as a tool to systematise and describe the competencies required for youth work practice. The framework serves as a translation tool connecting youth work qualifications with the Austrian National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and the European Qualifications Framework (EQF).

The framework defines competencies on eight levels and includes knowledge, skills, and responsibility relevant to working with young people. It functions as a quality assurance standard for certified training programmes. Educational providers seeking certification align their curricula with the competence framework, ensuring their programmes receive formal recognition in the qualifications system.

The competence framework is mainly used for:

- Certifying and quality assurance of training courses
- Alignment of curricula with competence levels
- Recognition of diverse learning pathways, including non-formal learning
- Programme development, job profiles, and self-assessment tools

Beyond training providers, the competence framework is also relevant for universities, employers, and practitioners as a reference for professional standards and competence development in youth work.

The competence framework was established as a recognized standard in the field by the youth departments of the Austrian federal states and is one of few competence frameworks in Austria with a broad application in a specific field.

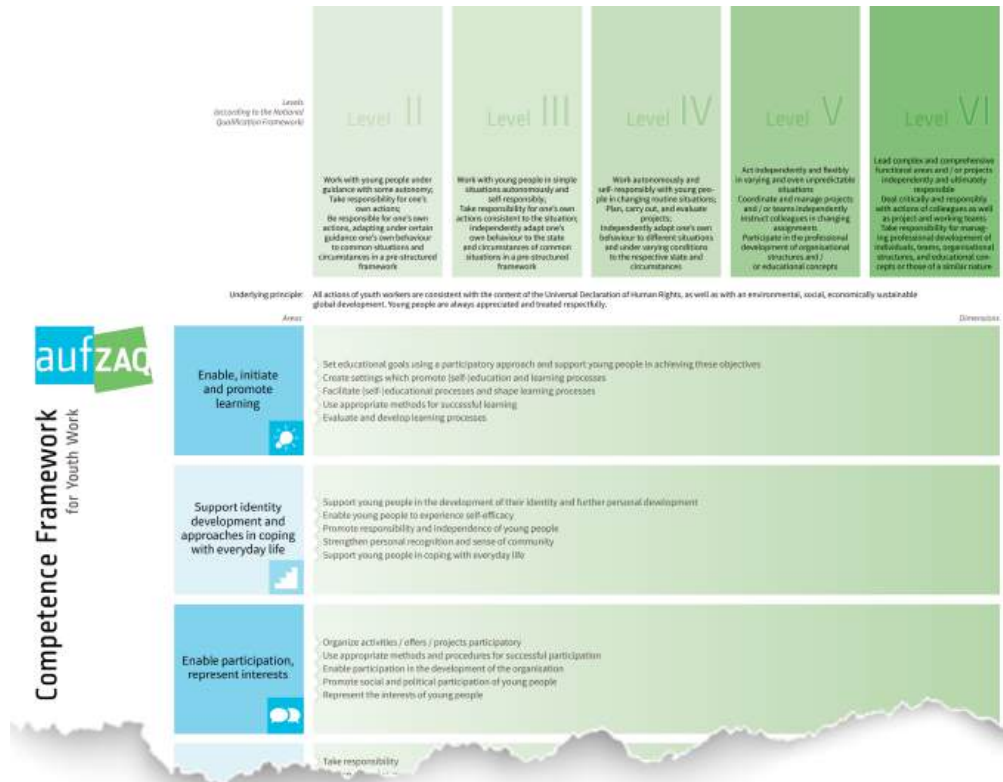


Image 1: The Austrian Competence Framework for Youth Work (preview)

1.4. Report methodology

This report was conducted using the core methodology provided by the project framework. The official template and the recommended interview questions were applied throughout the data collection and documentation process to ensure consistency and comparability with other project contributions.

1.4.1. Interviewed Experts

The interviewed expert, **Erich Pauser**, is an employee of the Austrian Federal Chancellery in Section VI (Family and Youth). He has extensive experience in the field of youth policy and youth work at the national level. He also represents the Federal Chancellery in the NQF Steering Group. In addition to his governmental role, he has been

a long-standing member of the advisory board of aufZAQ, contributing to the development and quality assurance of youth work training and competence frameworks in Austria. His expertise combines policy-level perspectives with practical knowledge of youth work qualification systems.

The second interviewed expert, **Johanna Tradinik**, is the head of the WIENXTRA Institute for Leisure Pedagogy. She has extensive experience in the development and implementation of youth work training programmes and has successfully submitted several courses for aufZAQ certification and alignment with the Austrian National Qualifications Framework (NQF). In addition, she has served as an expert for youth work training for the aufZAQ review committee. Her expertise combines practical training development with quality assurance processes in youth work education.

2. Status of Learning Outcomes and EQF alignment

2.1. NQF/EQF Status and Inclusion

2.1.1. The Status of the National Qualification Framework (NQF) in Austria

Austria introduced the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) after a development phase in 2016 and simply named it NQF (or *Nationaler Qualifikationsrahmen - NQR* - in German). It classifies qualifications into eight levels which refer directly to the eight levels of the EQF. Formal qualifications mapped by law (i.e. bachelor, master and doctorate degrees) need no mapping, non mapped formal education can apply for mapping through the responsible ministry. Non-formal qualifications, which are all not covered by law or order, need to apply for mapping, even if they are offered by state-owned course providers (e.g. universities). Mapping improves transparency and comparability but is of no legal consequence whatsoever. Although introduced 10 years ago, the NQF is not well known among different stakeholders. This lack of reputation, along with a long and bureaucratic mapping process, was identified as one of the main issues during a monitoring process in 2023.

Recently, more and more job advertisements have started mentioning the required NQF level. Qualification providers, such as the University for Continuing Education in Krems, and the Austrian Employment Office have done the same.

2.1.2. Non-formal and Youth Work Education in the NQF

The very narrow Austrian definition of formal education leads to numerous non-formal education courses, even some offered at state-owned schools. Since there is no specific youth work education in the tertiary sector, the levels 6 to 8 of the NQF are yet not covered by youth work. Some formal courses in related areas (i.e. social work, leisure management etc.) are offered in between secondary and tertiary education at a level 5 of the NQF. Non-formal training providers need to be verified by one of six NQF Service Points which work as gate keepers to the NQF and can apply for mapping to the NQF at the National Coordination Point. aufZAQ is the service point for youth work, appointed by the Ministry for Education and funded by the Youth Ministry. A mapping application is usually the result of a successful aufZAQ certification process, which ensures that a training meets both aufZAQ and NQF quality standards. Part of the certification process is linking the training's learning outcomes to the competence framework mentioned above. This determines the NQF level of the qualification. The combination of certification, NQF mapping, and funding for the service point ensured that, from the very beginning, regular mapping requests came from the youth work sector.

Organisations saw it as a nice upgrade, to make them see the specific benefit proved to be challenging as both experts confirmed during the interviews. Despite growing interest and an increasing number of mapping requests, improving the NQF's reputation and demonstrating its benefits to stakeholders in education, the labour market, and organisations remains a significant challenge in Austria. The process itself is still challenging, time consuming and demands a lot of staff resources, which is especially challenging for youth work organisations that mainly rely on volunteers. On the other hand, the process offers a new perspective on the training, which often leads to improved learning outcomes, more transparency and better presentation to areas outside of youth work.

So far 13 trainings were mapped to the NQF by aufZAQ, ranging from level 2 to level 5. The first application for a level 6 training is under review as of February 2026. A typical youth worker working in a youth organisation or in a youth center, usually passed a training at level 4 or 5. Higher levels often represent specialisations within the field.

The area of youth work and the NQF had some rocky beginnings in Austria. There were two major misunderstandings:

- The NQF is focused on output, i.e. reaching and assessing specific learning outcomes while youth work trainings usually focus on the learning process and didactic innovation, an asset not acknowledged by the NQF.

- The NQF is designed for the development of practical skills, especially in producing sectors of the labour market with a generally relatable context. Youth work however is not only a profession with many people volunteering and seeing trainings as personal development but also a social working environment with limited possibilities of standardisation. Communicating this context to the stakeholders of the NQF was challenging.

In 2024, a law was passed in Austria that offers bachelor degrees with a strong accreditation focus that includes knowledge and skills priorly gained from non formal education and/or working experience. This could lead to the first development of a youth worker education on a higher education level.

2.2. Learning Outcomes Implementation in Practice

In Austria, non-formal education is regarded as a starting point for innovation in learning. While formal education was still structured around curricula and prescribed content, non-formal education began focusing on learners' needs and demands in the 1990s. A key driver during this period was the strong adult education community. Organisations used a range of terms to describe learners' knowledge acquisition, such as "competence", "learning objective", or "educational goal". In youth work training, the term *learning outcome* became widely known among key organisational staff when aufZAQ introduced its new certification programme a few years ago. Although most trainings are designed around learners' needs, the term "learning outcome" remains unfamiliar to the majority of participants.

Learning outcomes written in youth organisations often lack quantifiable and measurable terms; they often cover too much and lack specificity. Combined with non-measurable verbs such as "learn", "understand", or "realize", it becomes difficult to determine when a learning outcome has actually been achieved. This is largely because many organisations have no formal assessment process that would clearly reveal such ambiguity. Often, learning outcomes are formulated in a way that extends the learning process beyond the course itself. They are also frequently not well aligned with the allocated learning time or are too narrowly focused on specific organisations, providing no added value for learners beyond that context. Youth organisations perform well when describing short learning sessions and their specific outcomes. They can clearly outline learning outcomes for three trainings in educational play theory, music education, and sex education, but are often unaware that participants have gained a broader

perspective on pedagogy overall and have thereby achieved an additional learning outcome after having passed those three trainings.

There is also a terminology gap, as learning outcome descriptions for the NQF usually follow the terminology of the NQF law and the descriptors, which often asks for a specific jargon. Furthermore, the law has not yet implemented useful EU updates (like changing one area's name from "Competence" to "Responsibility and Autonomy"), making it even less accessible. Also, the differences between different levels are often marginal, which makes translation tools like the aufZAQ competence framework crucial. Such tools are rarely available in other competence areas.

3. Key challenges and policy gaps

3.1. Challenges for Practitioners

Formulating an NQF-compatible learning outcome requires time and effort at different levels. It requires knowledge and the skills to understand how a learning outcome is structured and what exactly it is intended to represent. It is a new approach to the concept of “learning” that must itself first be learned. This requires time and human resources. Especially in the field of volunteering and association-based youth work, this is often difficult to achieve and requires a great deal of additional initiative. The field of open youth work is likewise affected by shortages of time and staff due to limited and insufficient funding. The shift towards learning-outcome orientation therefore also represents a certain hurdle here, the overcoming of which would require additional budget.

3.1.1. Reputation of Learning Outcomes

The mindset “We haven’t worked with learning outcomes so far and have done just fine – why should we start now?” may be prevalent among training providers. It is therefore important to highlight the benefits of learning outcomes. In particular, learning outcomes place learners at the center and communicate what knowledge and skills they will have at the end of a programme. This also applies to future employers, who cannot determine what potential candidates are capable of based solely on module titles on training certificates. Instead, learning outcomes make the demonstration and development of competences visible.

3.2. Institutional and policy gaps

In Austria, responsibilities relevant to the formal recognition of youth work learning are distributed across different governance levels, which creates institutional barriers. While the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) is regulated at the federal level, the training of youth workers falls under the responsibility of the federal states. This division of competences makes it difficult to establish smooth pathways between training provision and processes of recognition or validation. As a result, coordination challenges and differing priorities across levels of governance can hinder coherent policy development and slow down efforts to strengthen formal recognition of learning outcomes in the youth work sector.

3.2.1. What can be done?

Key policy leverage points for future advocacy in Austria include building on existing political commitments, such as the federal government programme (2025), which highlights validation of non-formal learning and the further development of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). Targeted financial support for the development of learning outcomes would strengthen the capacity of providers to engage with recognition processes. Strengthening cooperation mechanisms between the federal level and the federal states is also crucial to ensure coherent implementation across governance levels. In addition, integrating lifelong learning (LLL) more systematically across all policy levels — including embedding adult education and LLL principles in regional government programmes — would create a more supportive environment for the recognition and validation of youth work learning.

4. Good practices and Roadmap needs

This section focuses on solutions and future direction, providing the content that makes the Roadmap feasible and actionable. This uses data from interviews (Q5, Q6, and Q7).

4.1. Good Practice Examples

All of the following youth work trainings have been successfully mapped to the Austrian NQF on level IV.

- The **Basic Course in Open Youth Work Vorarlberg** (Grundkurs Offene Jugendarbeit Vorarlberg) focuses on developing a fundamental understanding of the tasks and content areas covered by open youth work for people without (formally) recognized trainings in pedagogy.
The course was developed as a replacement for a non-formal training at a college in the west of Austria. Development time was short, and the course provider wrote learning outcomes that were set at too high a level (V) for the course duration. These outcomes focused more on individual development than on measurable knowledge gains.. With specific learning outcome workshops, together with combining the assessment settings with objective criteria, the course core could be described in a way that fit very well into the Austrian NQF.
- The **Young Leaders' Training** of the Austrian Nature Conservation Youth Association (Jugendleiter_innenausbildung der Österreichischen Naturschutzjugend) was developed and continuously updated over the last 10 years, involving learners, trainers and organisation officers. Even though the training developers had immense didactic and pedagogic knowledge, they still struggled to write measurable learning outcomes. Their biggest concern was that learning outcomes suitable for the NQF won't be understood by learners anymore. The final learning outcomes are rather sophisticated and together with a very formal assessment system, seems a bit detached from the otherwise very practical and hands-on approach of the training. The organisation introduced a basic seminar to make learners familiar with the terminology which seems to work.
- Established first in 1974, the **Basic Training for Youth Work** (Grundkurs Jugendarbeit) of WIENXTRA is a well known training for youth work volunteers and professionals in Vienna. It is mainly funded by the city of Vienna and recognised by many organisations as a basic pedagogical training. It is also a good example to highlight the gap between a course well established in the field and the incapability of a strict system like the NQF to adapt to specific conditions for the field. While not changing the course design whatsoever, the learning outcomes and assessment criteria had to be re-written two times in order to get the trainings mapped to the NQF, which led to frustration on the training provider's side. The mapping process also shows the necessity of making training

providers familiar with specific terminology, processes and wordings in order to gain mapping to the NQF.

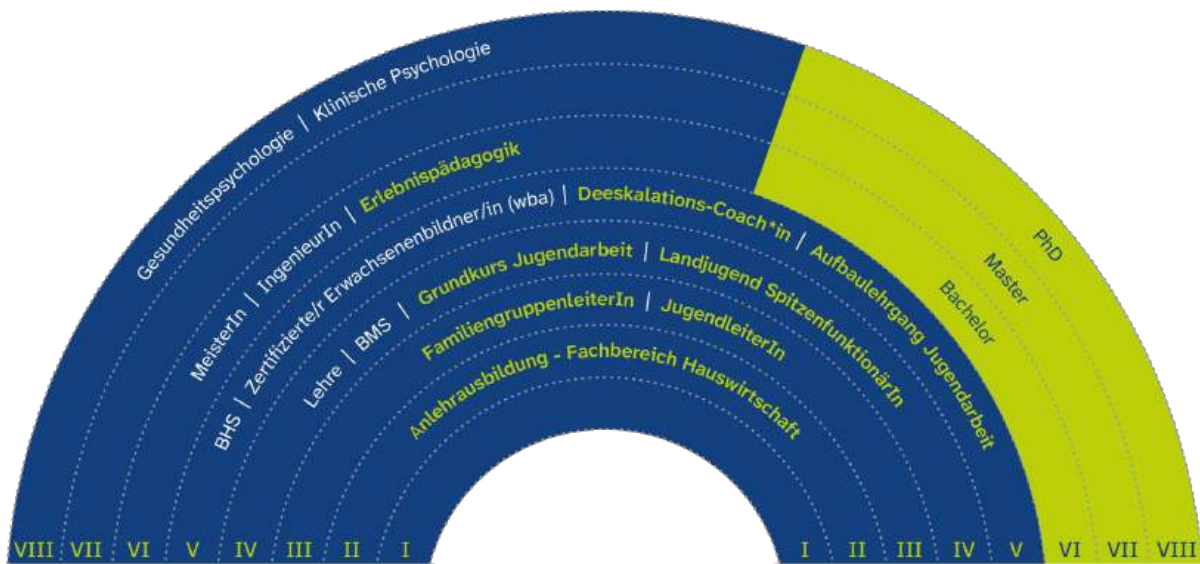


Image 2: The eight levels of the Austrian NQF with the three good practice examples from youth work on level IV (and other mappings from youth work on various levels)

4.2. Need for Support and Tools

To reach a broader audience, the motto must be "digital first". We need tools that work without human interactions, where training development teams can try out new things, get input and get an idea what learning outcomes are. Additionally it has to be understood how learning outcomes correlate with assessment and measuring and how the organisation, learners and future employers will benefit from the system. All measures should use the target language appropriately, without being overly simplified. Writing learning outcomes or mapping a training to the EQF is not a simple task, the communication should reflect that fact.

Speaking from experience from both our work and the interviews, we recommend

- **Online self-check:** What is expected from state-of-the-art didactic design, how far along am I with my development of my training?
- **Tutorial videos:** videos explaining dos and don'ts when writing learning outcomes and making the viewer familiar with the terminology

- **Modular construction system:** A playful approach to form learning outcomes with variations of necessary components
- **Short Guide:** a starter guide including terminology, obstacles and benefits of using learning outcomes
- **Road Map to the EQF:** youth organisations are innovative when it comes to addressing a learner's needs or describing small learning steps. They however lack the appropriate language and the outside view and overall picture that is needed to be mapped to the NQF. This should be addressed in the road map together with clearly stating the benefits of this mapping for different stakeholders and changing interests (youth organisations might also be employers in the future or forced to recognize prior knowledge like formal educational institutions).

4.3. Recommendations for the Joint Report

Brief, forward-looking recommendations from the national partner on 3 key areas the Joint Report should prioritise to improve the national situation.

- **Dedicated Micro-Funding for Mapping Process**
Federal funding to compensate staff hours for curriculum revision like small grants for staff workshops for learning outcome development or assessment settings
- **Develop a Clear Benefit Narrative for Different Stakeholders**
The mapping process is often seen as an administrative burden with unclear return on investment on different levels, therefore we should:
 - Communicate NQF/EQF benefits between state, governance and organisational levels
 - Develop a translation language of NQF jargon for different target groups
- **Capacity Building through tools and workshops**
Enable staff within associations and organisations to build knowledge and skills in writing learning outcomes, designing trainings focused on learners' needs and developing fair and feasible assessment. This will ensure easy mapping to the NQF/EQF. Capacity building should be done with digital tools that allow self study as well as interactive workshops to share experience.
- **Advocate Lifelong Learning**
Promote the systematic implementation of lifelong learning (LLL) across as many policy levels as possible, strengthening alignment and cooperation between federal and regional authorities to ensure coherent and supportive frameworks.



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