

Reform of continuing education at higher education institutions



Timeline



ID number 41819

Background

The demands on continuing education programmes at higher education institutions have become more comprehensive in recent years. This has partly to do with the target groups, which have become more heterogeneous due to different educational backgrounds and life realities. The need to create credit opportunities for previously acquired knowledge and skills (also non-formally or informally acquired) has become stronger in recent years, as has the interest in vocational and labour market-related continuing education. This has also led to discussions about the structure of higher education CET programmes and the possible establishing new formats (e.g. short cycle programmes, microcredentials, etc.).

The range of continuing education programmes offered by higher education institutions has grown considerably in recent years, but at the same time it has become less transparent, more confusing and difficult for interested parties to keep track of. In addition, quality assurance has been neglected in some cases.

Due to different legal bases, the framework conditions for attending CET programmes are defined differently in the individual higher education sectors (universities, university colleges of teacher education, universities of applied sciences, private universities). The degrees are also regulated inconsistently, which has led to a great diversity of titles.

Objectives

The goal of the reform of continuing education at higher education (HE) institutions, anchored in the programme of the current government, is to improve the framework conditions for CET programmes to strengthen their quality, transparency and international reputation.

In the decision of the Council of Ministers of 21 April 2021, which gave the go-ahead for the implementation of this reform, several objectives are associated with this project:

- (a) standardisation of the (legal) framework conditions for CET in the Austrian higher education sector;
- (b) legal anchoring of a new 'continuing education bachelor' study format;
- (c) establishment of two HE CET programmes: academic or artistic higher education continuing education: Bachelor of continuing education or Master of continuing

- education, as well as professionally oriented continuing education: BA Professional or MA Professional;
- (d) promotion of cooperation with non-university legal entities: creation of study programmes that are designed by the universities as continuing education studies and carried out together with professionally oriented CET institutions outside the HE sector;
 - (e) quality assurance through uniform standards and external review options: the aim is to develop an overall quality-assuring and cross-sectoral framework that allows higher education institutions individual flexibility.

Description

In order to implement this reform, the higher education law was amended. The so-called higher education legislation package came into force on 1 October 2021.

The central actor in this reform is the Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research (BMBWF). The four types of HE institutions (universities and university colleges of teacher education, universities of applied sciences and private universities) are also involved. Those interested in continuing education at HE institutions should benefit significantly.

The most important changes to continuing education in higher education, anchored in the legislative package, are:

- (a) equal regulations for CET courses at all four institutions of the HE sector. All sectors should have the same legal framework for CET courses with regard to access, validation of prior learning and professional experience, academic degrees, and quality assurance;
- (b) introduction of the bachelor degree for CET courses and, as a consequence, the alignment of continuing education studies with the Bologna structure (bachelor-master-doctoral degree). This means that a CET master programme can only be taken after completion of a CET bachelor programme. Graduates of CET master programmes can continue with doctoral or PhD studies. This was previously denied to graduates of these programmes;
- (c) reduction in the diversity of titles: currently, more than 60 different titles are awarded in higher education. In the future, courses in the field of general continuing education should conclude with a Bachelor of arts (continuing education), abbreviated to BA (CE) or a Bachelor of science (continuing education), abbreviated to BSc (CE), or the Master of arts (continuing education), abbreviated to MA (CE), or the Master of science (continuing education), abbreviated to MSc (CE). The degrees in professional higher education are Bachelor professional (BPr) or Master professional (MPr). The professional higher education courses are offered in cooperation with non-university education institutions, tailored to the respective occupation-specific specialisation;
- (d) inclusion of university-based CET in the existing, internal quality assurance systems of higher education institutions. The Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research can initiate a quality review procedure (carried out by AQ Austria). If deficiencies are found in the CET provision, the higher education institution must fulfil corresponding requirements. In the case of irremediable deficiencies or non-compliance with the requirements, no new students may be admitted to the programme in question.

2021 Approved/Agreed

On 1 October 2021, the higher education legislation package came into force, which legally regulated the reform of continuing education at higher education institutions.

2022 Implementation

In 2022, the HE institutions began to redesign their existing CET programmes in accordance with the changed legal basis. In addition, the development of new programmes has begun, especially those leading to a Bachelor degree (CE and Prof). The University of Continuing Education Krems, Austria's only university offering exclusively HE-based continuing education, has also started to adapt its study

programmes.

2023 Implementation

In 2023, the redesign of existing CET programmes and the development of new CET programmes continued.

In autumn, the first Bachelor of arts/science (continuing education) and Bachelor professional programmes started at the University of Continuing Education Krems and some others. The last time when programmes under the old rules could be started was in October 2023.

2024 Implementation

In 2024, a few more Bachelor of arts/science (continuing education) and Bachelor professional programmes started, while most providers were still in (re)designing their programmes.

A new higher education law package was passed in 2024, which brought some simplifications to the 2021 higher education law package. Among other things, access to extraordinary bachelor's programmes was made easier in that it is now possible to enter these programmes with several years of professional experience and not necessarily with a secondary school leaving certificate. A Master of Business programme no longer necessarily requires a bachelor's degree. Separate degree titles have been created for STEM studies (BA/MA of Engineering).

2025 Completed

In 2025, most providers have now converted their continuing education programmes to the new system. Nevertheless, new study programmes are constantly being developed. No further relevant developments are expected for the coming years.

Bodies responsible

- Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research (BMBWF) (until 2025)
- Federal Ministry of Women, Science and Research (BMFWF)

Target group

Learners

Young people (15-29 years old)
Adult learners

Entities providing VET

VET providers (all kinds)

Other

Higher VET providers

Thematic categories

Governance of VET and lifelong learning

Engaging VET stakeholders and strengthening partnerships in VET

Modernising VET offer and delivery

Modernising VET standards, curricula, programmes and training courses

Transparency and portability of VET skills and qualifications

Developing and applying qualifications smaller/shorter than full

Subsystem

CVET

Further reading

[Decision of the Council of Ministers \(21/4/2021\): Reform of tertiary CVET](#)

[ReferNet news Austria: Consolidating further and higher VET at tertiary level](#)

[Higher education law package \(in German only\)](#)

Related policy developments

2025 Implementation

Establishing a higher VET field

To realise parity of esteem and increase the visibility and public perception of higher VET qualifications, a discussion on the establishment of a defined educational field for higher VET qualifications was started in 2019 within educational policy.

 AUSTRIA

Type of development

Strategy/Action
plan

Subsystem

CVET

“ ... ” Cite as

Cedefop, & ReferNet. (2026). Reform of continuing education at higher education institutions: Austria. In Cedefop, & ReferNet. (2026). *Timeline of VET policies in Europe* (2025 update) [Online tool].

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