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The Austrian Lifelong Learning Strategy – a case of contradictory national responses to European policy proposals

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## Abstract

The results of monitoring/evaluation of the coordinative endeavour to realise the European proposal of developing national lifelong learning strategies are summarised. First the shape of the policy is described; second the main dimensions of its implementation are analysed focusing on its role for the coordination of national education policies in a common European direction, third some evaluative conclusions are drawn from this research: what are the results in terms of policy learning for coordination? Which major mistakes were made in the course of the development/implementation of the strategy?

The strategy LLL:2020 was a big government initiative running over 15 years from the first steps till its silent phasing out. The initiative started with an expert paper in 2004, followed by a public consultation in 2008, and the implementation of the formal strategy from 2011. The empirical basis is – beyond much “participatory observation” – formal research in the early phase (analysis of the consultation process) and monitoring along the implementation until 2016. The theoretical and conceptual basis used are governance concepts (hard vs. soft law), actors constellations (relationships of different logics/scenes, e.g., corporatism, educational structures/constellations, policy fields), policy learning and institutionalism. Questions are (1) how such a multi-actor coordinative endeavour could fail, including the issue of measuring success/failure, (2) in which respect the successes and failures are related to the underlying political structures and conflicts, (3) to which extent the failures could have been predicted by political theory.

Some answers are (1) that governance has not been sufficiently addressed in the preparatory phase, (2) a wide gap between policy and politics, by focusing on short term political advertisement against addressing coordination problems, (3) by setting up a kind of command structure for implementation, without (4) allocating sufficient resources to the process, (5) the European dimension was addressed rather formally than substantially.

## Introduction

Since the 2000s many Austrian education policy makers, administrators, experts, and interest representatives were fascinated by demanding and creating political “strategies” for several purposes, one actor often not being aware of others’ initiatives. Examples are strategies for education for sustainable development, against early school leaving, for lifelong guidance, for digitalisation, for school 4.0, for health of children and youth, for intellectual property rights, for research, technology and innovation, etc. The social partners have forcefully demanded a strategy for lifelong learning in 2007; ten years later despite the existence of the 2011 strategy, they have demanded a further education strategy (Weiterbildungsstrategie) under the heading of Industry 4.0 in 2017.<sup>1</sup> Some of these demanded strategies have been formulated to some degree, and to some extent implemented. Austria has invested much emphasis into the development of a lifelong learning strategy. Starting with responses to the first EU proposals in the late 1990s a huge and complex strategy was developed over almost a decade till 2011, and then implemented with decreasing emphasis till the second half of the 2010s. This paper takes this policy as an example to describe and analyse in more depth to understand the meaning and practices of such a strategy.

It is based on a series of studies and evaluations of Austrian lifelong learning policies, to some extent the author had had also the opportunity of participatory observation in various roles in this process.<sup>2</sup> The methodology includes a kind of genealogy of the two decades of the rise and decline of the strategy, a review of main documents, and a problem-oriented analysis of the creation and delivery process based on the formal monitoring procedures, in which the author has also participated. Because of the involvement in the strategy the author is focusing on the critical points of the strategy, to learn from mistakes rather than

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<sup>1</sup> BEIRAT FÜR WIRTSCHAFTS- UND SOZIALFRAGEN (2007) CHANCE BILDUNG. Konzepte der österreichischen Sozialpartner zum lebensbegleitenden Lernen als Beitrag zur Lissabon-Strategie. Bad Ischl. Online:

[https://www.sozialpartner.at/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/ChanceBildung\\_20071003.pdf](https://www.sozialpartner.at/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/ChanceBildung_20071003.pdf)

Verein Industrie 4.0 Österreich – die Plattform für intelligente Produktion (2017) Industrie 4.0 Österreich. Ergebnispapier „Qualifikation und Kompetenzen in der Industrie 4.0“. Vienna.

<http://plattformindustrie40.at/plattform-industrie-4-0-ergebnispapier-qualifikation-und-kompetenzen-in-der-industrie-4-0/>

See Lassnigg, Lorenz; Bock-Schappelwein, Julia (2019) Die Debatten um Industrie 4.0 und Bildung. Szenarien der Digitalisierung und ihr politischer Widerhall in Österreich und Deutschland. In: Dobischat, Rolf; Käßlinger, Bernd; Molzberger, Gabriele; Münk, Dieter, (eds.) Bildung 2.1 für Arbeit 4.0? Bildung und Arbeit. Wiesbaden: Springer VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, pp. 25-47. Draft online: <http://www.equi.at/material/Ausfuehr-DE-AT-140.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Lassnigg, Lorenz (2010) LLL-Strategie in Österreich. Praktische Überlegungen zu Entwicklung und Umsetzung. Materialien zur Erwachsenenbildung Nr. 2/2010. Vienna: BMUKK-Bundesministerium für Unterricht, Kunst und Kultur. Online [https://erwachsenenbildung.at/downloads/service/materialien-eb\\_2010\\_2\\_LLL-Strategie.pdf?m=1494705322&](https://erwachsenenbildung.at/downloads/service/materialien-eb_2010_2_LLL-Strategie.pdf?m=1494705322&)

Lassnigg, Lorenz (2014) Die österreichische LLL-Strategie im Prozess der Umsetzung: „Gut Ding braucht Weile...“. Weiterbildung Heft 02/2014, 38-44. Online Draft <http://www.equi.at/dateien/LLL-2014.pdf>

Lassnigg, Lorenz (2018) Fakten gegen Ideologie? Möglichkeiten und Grenzen wissenschaftlicher Politikberatung. Weiterbildung Heft 05/2018, 14-17. Online Draft <http://www.equi.at/material/eb-pb-lang.pdf>

Lassnigg, Lorenz (2017) Community Education - Grundlagen, Ziele und Methoden in Österreich. In: Höbsch, Werner; Marxer, Wilfried, eds., Community Education. Stark durch Bildung. Vaduz/Bendern: Europäisches Institut für interkulturelle und interreligiöse Forschung/Liechtenstein-Institut, 147-165. Online Draft <http://www.equi.at/dateien/CE-Liechtenst-draft.pdf>; Book online [https://www.liechtenstein-institut.li/application/files/1015/7435/5004/Community\\_Education\\_2017\\_final\\_0.pdf](https://www.liechtenstein-institut.li/application/files/1015/7435/5004/Community_Education_2017_final_0.pdf)

being biased towards legitimation of success. Some selected concepts of political theory and social sciences are used to illuminate the development, e.g., the distinction of policy and politics that came out very clearly in this process, or the knowledge about the essential role of financing in public policy. A focus is also laid on the issue of applying the idea of "strategy" to public policy, in particular providing a reflection on the ability of policy makers to use and implement complex strategic proposals, which in turn are often created by social scientists in order to provide well-balanced solutions to broad political problems. A look in the literature shows that political science has rather neglected the analysis of the relationship of politics and strategy for a long time, at least in the German speaking regions. In the 2000s, more or less in parallel to the development of the strategy a conceptual discussion has been started about this topic by several publications.<sup>3</sup>

A main message out of this experience is to underline the distinction between policy and politics: at the level of content and problem-oriented policy solutions complex strategic proposals might be adopted, however, at the step from this level of content-oriented *policy* (Sachpolitik) to power *politics* such proposals lose their influence because of the different logics of providing simple signals to the electorate and in competition with rival actors at this level.

In this paper, a reflection of the results of monitoring/evaluation of the lifelong learning strategy as a coordinative endeavour to realise the European proposal of developing national lifelong learning strategies is given. First the genealogy and shape of the policy is described; second the main dimensions of its implementation are analysed focusing on its role for the coordination of national education policies in a common European direction, third some evaluative conclusions are drawn from this research: what are the results in terms of policy learning for coordination? Which major mistakes were made in the course of the development/implementation of the strategy?

#### Genealogy and basic structure of the lifelong learning strategy

The policy discourses about the Austrian lifelong learning strategy go back to the 1996 EU year of lifelong learning and the EU employment strategy in the so-called Luxembourg process in the late 1990s, which was also the first attempt to develop the European "open method of coordination".<sup>4</sup> The first definitive proposals to the member states to develop a comprehensive "lifelong learning strategy" has come from that strand of labour market policy. Austria has in 2000 made attempts to the consultation about the EU commission memorandum for lifelong learning, focusing on the delivery of adult education.<sup>5</sup> A next step

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<sup>3</sup> E.g., Raschke, Joachim; Tils, Ralf, Eds. (2010) Strategie in der Politikwissenschaft. Konturen eines neuen Forschungsfelds. Wiebaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften  
Forschungsjournal Soziale Bewegungen 2008 Volume 21 Issue 1  
Fischer, Thomas; Schmitz, Gregor Peter; Seherich, Michael, Eds. (2008) Die Strategie der Politik. Ergebnisse einer vergleichenden Studie. Gütersloh: Verlag Bertelsmannstiftung.

<sup>4</sup> See European Parliament (2019) Employment policy. Fact Sheets on the European Union. Online <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/54/employment-policy>;  
Eurofound (2010) Luxembourg process. Online <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/observatories/eurwork/industrial-relations-dictionary/luxembourg-process>

<sup>5</sup> EU (2002) Lifelong Learning <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=LEGISSUM:c11047>

was to include a section about lifelong learning into the ESF-(European Social Funds)-programme 2000-06, which included a re-orientation of lifelong learning towards initial school education. The evaluation has shown that the main ESF-support funds has been designed for initial (school) education where it could bring only a small impact in relation to the big overall budget whereas only a small proportion was devoted to adult education where it could have a big impact because of the small public spending in support of this sector of education.<sup>6</sup> This appraisal caused hot debates; at the same time the established adult education institutions were used to receive institutional support, and therefore resisted to the new European project-oriented methods of support, based on ideas of New Public Management. The demand for the development of a lifelong learning strategy still called for political action. Policy making was in the early 2000s strongly influenced by the first period of a right-wing populist ÖVP-FPÖ government, and their hostile turn against the social democratic and labour forces, and against the established neo-corporatist tradition of social partnership between employers' and employees' representatives. In the mid-2000s the ministry has taken a new step by inviting a broadly-based expert group from the adult education and research community, including both sides of social partnership, and mediated by a (quasi)-independent consultancy firm, to develop a first proposal for a lifelong learning strategy.<sup>7</sup> This step created five core guidelines (Leitlinien) which have been carried on through the following steps: (1) lifecycle orientation; (2) learners in the centre; (3) lifelong guidance; (4) competency orientation; (5) support of participation.<sup>8</sup> A broad consultation process was organised as a next step in 2008, based on an extensive discussion paper.<sup>9</sup> A small expert group including international expertise analysed the contributions to the consultation and proposed a draft of the strategy in 2009, including twelve fields of action (Aktionslinien, from early education till education of the elderly) and some cornerstones for governance (legal basis, leadership by a professional

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BMBWK - Bundesministerium für Bildung, Wissenschaft und Kultur (2001) Memorandum über lebenslanges Lernender Europäischen Kommission Österreichischer Konsultationsprozess. Materialien zur Erwachsenenbildung Nr. 1/2001. Online [https://erwachsenenbildung.at/downloads/service/materialien-eb\\_2001-1\\_6051\\_PDFzuPubID396.pdf](https://erwachsenenbildung.at/downloads/service/materialien-eb_2001-1_6051_PDFzuPubID396.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Lassnigg, Lorenz; Steiner, Mario; Scheibelhofer, Elisabeth; Steiner, Peter; Kiessling, Stephanie (2003) Lebenslanges Lernen und Forschung-Wissenschaft-Technologie. ESF-Ziel 3 Sonderevaluierung von Schwerpunkt 3. IHS research report (October). Vienna. Online <http://www.equi.at/dateien/ESF-sp3.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Expert group (2007) Leitlinien einer kohärenten LLL-Strategie für Österreich bis 2010. In einer ersten Konsultation abgestimmte Vorschläge einer facheinschlägigen ExpertInnengruppe. [https://erwachsenenbildung.at/downloads/themen/leitlinien\\_III-strategie\\_endversion\\_2007.PDF](https://erwachsenenbildung.at/downloads/themen/leitlinien_III-strategie_endversion_2007.PDF)

<sup>8</sup> See also Gruber (n.d.) for a documentation until this step.

Gruber, Elke (n.d.) Die EU-Strategie des Lebenslangen Lernens und deren Umsetzung in Österreich. Paper Alpe-Adria University, Klagenfurt. Online [http://www.wg.uni-klu.ac.at/ifeb/eb/eu-strategie\\_III.pdf](http://www.wg.uni-klu.ac.at/ifeb/eb/eu-strategie_III.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> From this step the process is documented on

[https://erwachsenenbildung.at/themen/lebenslanges\\_lernen/online-dokumente\\_datenbankabfrage\\_leben.php?s\\_tag1=strategieentwicklungab2008;](https://erwachsenenbildung.at/themen/lebenslanges_lernen/online-dokumente_datenbankabfrage_leben.php?s_tag1=strategieentwicklungab2008;)

2008 discussion paper for consultation:

[https://erwachsenenbildung.at/downloads/themen/LLL2008\\_Konsultationspapier\\_03c.pdf](https://erwachsenenbildung.at/downloads/themen/LLL2008_Konsultationspapier_03c.pdf)

2009 expert group draft strategy: [https://erwachsenenbildung.at/downloads/service/LLL-Strategie\\_ExpertInnenbericht.pdf](https://erwachsenenbildung.at/downloads/service/LLL-Strategie_ExpertInnenbericht.pdf)

2011 political strategy paper: <https://www.qualifikationsregister.at/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Strategie1.pdf>; overview:

[https://erwachsenenbildung.at/themen/lebenslanges\\_lernen/oesterreichische\\_strategie/aktuell.php](https://erwachsenenbildung.at/themen/lebenslanges_lernen/oesterreichische_strategie/aktuell.php)

council,<sup>10</sup> development of indicators and evaluation culture, systematic core pilot projects) as core elements; the author as part of this group has also produced a more detailed strategic document (Lassnigg 2010).

The further initiative was taken over by the political level, and the final strategy document (LLL:2020) was developed within the mid-level administration of the ministries, and with consultations among the political forces and the social partners, without seeking a deliberative feedback to the expert group. The early guidelines were taken up, and the proposed fields of action were adopted in a reduced version as the main structure of the strategy. The political message was widened by further political principles and the EU-key competences. A double structure of goals and objectives was established,

- a set of a small number (around five per field) soft qualitatively formulated content implementation goals for each field of action (the main bulk of text of the strategy document), which was to some extent consulted or brainstormed with stakeholders from the respective fields,
- and a set of ten quantitative indicators taken from existing data bases (e.g., PISA competences, or the EU early-school-leaving and lifelong-learning-participation-indicator), which were only loosely and selectively related to the fields of action of the strategy.

The governance of the strategy deviated completely from the proposals of the expert group. The analysis of the document and the contributions to the consultation process had already shown a neglect of governance issues; only the demand for participatory opportunities of the various stakeholders was strongly expressed in the contributions. The proposal of the expert group had included the following cornerstones for the governance of the strategy; however, in retrospect, the key eminence of the governance dimension was not sufficiently clear, and not emphasised strongly enough at this stage. The cornerstones were:

- a legal basis for the strategy to be sustainable
- sufficient resources, this was already emphasised in the early guidelines for support of participation
- an independent professional steering group or council, including international contributors
- an incremental and systematically followed-up implementation method using controlled pilots and building an evidence base in the process

None of these proposals was taken over into the political process, just the opposite:

- the strategy was published as a government document signed by four ministers (education, science, labour, economic affairs)
- no resources were allocated to the strategy beforehand, the stakeholders should mobilise resources during the process
- a task force consisting of mid-level officials from the four ministries was established to steer the process
- a set of outcome indicators including benchmarks for 2020 that were weakly related to the structure of the strategy was imposed on the process

The delivery of the strategy was mainly organised in a decentralised manner at the level of the fields of action by field-specific groups of stakeholders (ministries, public employment

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<sup>10</sup> These basic cornerstones were not exotic but compatible with the earlier social partners' proposal from 2007.

service, education providers, social partners and interest groups, NGOs, etc.) who should take responsibility of analysing the field, define activities and reap resources. The main stakeholders were invited to membership in a so-called National Platform LLL:2020 that met twice a year for reporting about the activities in the lines of action. A step-wise monitoring procedure was set up, consisting by a contracted-out research endeavour carried out in a partnership of two research institutes in cooperation with the leading task force. The research institutes produced a yearly scientific monitoring report, that was presented and discussed by the platform, and in a further step the task force produced a political report that was presented and published by the government.

The scientific monitoring report included

- a measuring procedure that modelled the progress towards reaching the benchmarks in 2020
- a detailed description and analysis of the activities carried out in the individual lines of action, including the measurement of the spent resources and the participants reached
- an assessment of progress of the whole endeavour, and of zones for improvement.

A continuous fight about publication took place between the researchers and the commissioning ministries that was lost by the researchers, meaning that the monitoring reports were not published, and are held back until today.

Main issues in the structure and implementation of the strategy

a. Changes of the shape of the strategy in the shift from the expert level to the political level

A first issue concerns the interpretation of the deeper meaning and consequences of how the strategy drafted in the expert paper of 2009 has been changed in the course of the political process of the formulation of the finally adopted strategy 2011. Main characteristics of the creation and shape of the expert paper were: the composition of a mixed multidisciplinary group of experienced experts including a social scientist with much experience at the EU level (chairperson), an Austrian renowned senior professor of adult education, a didactics and learning science professor, an eminent professor from Germany with wide professional expertise in education policy and adult education, and a social scientist with a focus on evaluation and governance in education and labour market policy; the paper was not a scientific but a "mode2"-political consultancy paper<sup>11</sup> informed by the available knowledge and the analysis of the contributions to the consultation process; the paper was driven by high time-constraints that did not allow additional studies of the contextual conditions and the state of lifelong learning in Austria; because of much lack of evidence concrete indicators could not be proposed, and this analysis was therefore shifted to the starting period of the further process; as a compromise and starting point for further work on this aspect the paper provided a thorough overview about available and potential indicators for the measurement of progress; perhaps the more inventive elements of the proposed strategy were first providing a basic architecture of the fields of action that

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<sup>11</sup> See Falk, Svenja; Rehfeld, Dieter; Römmele, Andrea; Thunert, Martin (2007) Kooperative Politikberatung. Ein neues Beziehungsgeflecht zwischen Politik und Politikberatung? Politische Vierteljahresschrift 48(2, Juni):322-337. DOI: 10.1007/s11615-007-0049-y

combined three types of fields, a. three institutional fields of formal and non-formal learning (early education, school education, and institutional vocational and non-vocational adult education; b. two fields of informal learning (workplaces and employment, everyday life and community education); c. seven specific functions or transitions (2<sup>nd</sup> chance qualifications, school-to-work transition, support of work-life balance, support of new occupational orientations in mid-life, securing basic competences of adults, quality of life of the elderly, recognition of competences) and second a more evidence informed development and delivery of key policy measures, using systematic pilot and/or demonstration projects, that should in combination with the professional governing council also innovate the procedures of policy making. The idea (vision) of the outcome of the strategy was

- to build a *sustainable and coherent structure* (landscape) that provides access to learning and qualification at the different stages of the life cycle and also furthers transition between its parts,
- by using the relations between the dimensions of *informal, non-formal and formal learning/education* for motivation and furthering access,
- and in building this structure by providing innovative solutions for a set of experienced/observed *specific problems or challenges* (listed above in the fields of action) in the course of lifelong learning,
- applying more *systematic and evidence informed modes of policy making* that develop and use meaningful indicators and benchmarks at the dimensions of resources/inputs, processes, and results (outputs/outcomes) for measuring progress and success.
- This structure should be established in an observable fashion within a decade or so, then the strategy *has fulfilled its purpose*.

The next phase of the political formulation of the strategy has kept most of the fields of action, however, merged them partly, and reformulated them in a way that removed the inventive architecture and methodology, and created a vast collection of ongoing or envisaged measures rather perpetuating or only incrementally changing the status quo on the background of a broad and overwhelming political rhetoric. Most significant changes were

- the de-facto elimination of the idea of support of informal learning in the workplace and the community as a basic motivation and mode of access to further learning,
- seemingly minor changes in the structure of the fields of action that de-facto eliminated non-formal adult education from attention by shifting it to the community education field thus substituting informal learning
- taking attention away from some essential specific issues by merging the proposed four fields of action of 2<sup>nd</sup> chance qualifications, support of basic competences (literacies), work-life-balance, and new occupational orientation into two ones,
- to completely change the governance structure from a legally based professional council to a political top-down structure in combination with a legitimating stakeholder platform, and
- to neglect any provision of resources for the implementation of the strategy.

These changes were imposed through informal political bargaining processes under the leadership of an experienced official of the education ministry without any formal discussion or feedback to the expert group; a peer-based debate among a wider expert or research community did also not take place. The leading official has started his career as an



expert in the consultation about the EU lifelong learning memorandum, has then been involved from the ministry side in the ESF-evaluation, and has during the first right-wing populist government been a key person in the cabinet of the education and science minister; since the second right-wing populist government he has taken position as the secretary general of the ministry. Under his experienced leadership the strategy was organised and written by members of the leading task force, and the first phase of implementation took place.

#### b. Understandings of “strategy”

A second issue concerns the understandings by different actors of what the development and implementation of a “strategy” might mean. In retrospect, two observations stand out: the understandings among the various actors were vague and ambiguous, driven by practical considerations, on the one hand and they were different, however, the different understandings not being really transparent. The use of the concept has originated in EU policies (e.g., the Employment Strategy, or the Lisbon Strategy), that were focused on bringing the member into some common direction to fulfil European goals. The early evaluations and analyses of related policies show rather reluctance among Austrian actors, in particular in education, to adopt this perspective. Among the actors, the European proposals were rather seen as competing to the national level, than as leading forces for achieving common goals. The co-financing demand for reaping the additional EU funds (e.g., ESF) was – with some exceptions – mainly designed in a way that it required as little as possible changes to the status-quo (an exception was the field of disability policies, where ambitious measures were developed). The 2008 discussion paper for the consultation on lifelong learning has laid its emphasis on content issues, and the contributions to the consultation have consequently neglected the procedural side of the endeavour – a strategy, however, is in fact mainly a *procedure* of finding ways to reach certain goals.

Different understandings of strategy can be found among different actors in the process:

- The *expert group* providing the draft of the strategy has not explicitly clarified its understanding of strategical thinking. Consequently, this aspect remained implicit, and the members of the group had different understandings of what a strategy might mean. One difference concerned the tension between government and governance: should the strategy be built on traditional bases of hard law, and related financial allocations, or rather on governance related to soft law, including more informal mechanisms of mobilising resources? The draft is to some extent ambiguous, by demanding a legal basis and a formal steering structure, however, being more open concerning the necessary resources. However, the group was clear that the development of a lifelong learning strategy would require more or less demanding policy changes. The goal of the strategy was understood as establishing a sustainable structure (or system) of the provision of lifelong learning opportunities along the lifecycle. Because of an insufficient evidence-base at the time of writing, the group did not specify measurable operationalisations of the goals, but provided an inventory of possible and available indicators and recommended further work in this direction. In delivering the draft, the group did not make clear demands for further activities in the policy process, and was released from further formal

activities. A detailed proposal for concretisation by the author (Lassnigg 2010) was more or less neglected.

- The actors taking over the process at the *political and administrative level* were originating in the ministries that have later taken the responsibility for the strategy, and composed from the two coalition parties holding very different positions to education policy. The basic rationale of the strategy paper was political compromise, and the inclusion of the providing institutions. The logic of a strategy was followed in a rhetorical way, by defining quantitative indicators and benchmarks for 2020 for the overall strategy that have measured some important aspects of Austrian education, and by formulating a vision, a set of qualitative goals, and a set of measures for each field of action; the political rhetoric was also extended by several principles, the EU key-competences, etc. The goals and measures have vastly extended the space of the strategy to around 70 measures, by taking up several existing initiatives and priorities of the various stakeholders. The procedural side of the strategy that was not part of the paper, was set up by four *ministers* personally taking the responsibility for the strategy, a *task force* of four mid-level officials from the ministries taking the leadership, and a formal *platform of stakeholders* as a kind of holding for the national delivery structure; the main working units were *groups of stakeholders* taking responsibility for the fields of action (among these groups the public employment service, departments of ministries, and social partner organisations were represented). Thus, a mixture of a hierarchical structure with a quasi-democratic volunteering space was established, in which the officials from the ministries were part of the hierarchical structure. The strategy paper did not allocate financial resources, these should be brought in by the actors in the fields of action. In the strategy language the fields of action can be seen as the tactical level that implements the strategy; however, the strategy included several breaks: first the systematic of the draft proposal was broken by several redefinitions of the fields of action; second the indicators and benchmarks were not related to the fields of action but to the overall strategy so no one was responsible for them; third the qualitative goals and measures were a kind of patchwork, not based on thorough analysis, and also not based in the activities of the stakeholders. In the implementation process the meaning of the strategy quickly became a collection of what the stakeholders do anyway, and thus can demonstrate progress – the lifelong learning strategy became a kind of double structure for education policies without any additional power to specifically develop lifelong learning.
- The *evaluation team* was composed from two leading Austrian economic and social research institutes,<sup>12</sup> and included one of the members of the expert group that has provided the draft strategy. Its task was to yearly follow-up the benchmarks, and to analyse the progress in the fields of action; a half-way appraisal was also foreseen. The evaluation was part of the platform, and required yearly reporting according to a formal template about the activities in the action fields, which was done mainly by officials from the ministries. The information was analysed in a scientific monitoring report that was commissioned and financed by the ministries through the task force and presented to the platform. The evaluation team did also not develop a formal

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<sup>12</sup> WIFO, IHS

and explicit meaning of a strategy; in the background it carried on the understanding of the initial expert group; however, a clear and deliberate exchange about the meaning of a strategy approach did not take place at any stage of the process. Different understandings came up implicitly at many points of the reporting, leading to tensions but not to open discussions about the progress. Main points of tension were the attempts to identify the specificity of the strategy vis-à-vis overall education policy, and to identify the resources invested and the needed for further progress. In the process the evaluation shifted in a kind of ambiguous mid-level position between the leading task-force, increasingly demanding legitimization of ongoing policies and praise for the government, and the stakeholders in the platform, feeling controlled by additional reporting duties.

- The *stakeholders in the platform* should represent the participatory side of the strategy. However, quite severe tensions were visible from the beginning, signalling representation problems and a low identification with the strategy. The contact of stakeholders with the strategy was established mainly through their decentralised participation in the fields of action. A more thorough understanding of the meaning of being part of the strategy was not expressed in the platform, rather were the additional reporting duties perceived critically, without seeing much positive impact. The reporting about the evaluation did not receive resonance in the platform. The stakeholders brought rather certain problems from their positions to the floor than expressing interest in the feedback from the perspective of the overall strategy. Certain gaps or imbalances were visible in the platform. First, the main players in adult education, the provider institutions and the regional governments were only represented in a very restricted way by one representative each. Second, the main de fact financing institution, the public employment service, was only represented in the platform, and had very little say in the overall strategy. Third, the resource restrictions were strongly felt in at least two fields of action, provision of non-formal adult education and education of elderly people.

### c. Implementation and monitoring

The implementation process can be differentiated to some layers of action:

- the ongoing core material action occurred at the decentralised level of the fields of action, this level became increasingly complex by different constellations of players involved in the work of the fields of action, and the number of measures put gradually into practice; the basic structure consisted in the end of the ten fields of action, differentiated to 15 operational areas, which were further differentiated to 70 measures, with about 50 specific soft goals to be reached until 2020
- the steering occurred informally between the task force and actors in the fields of action (some of them being officials of the involved ministries), and formally through the platform meetings, in the early phase steps were taken to build an administrative infrastructure for the strategy
- the yearly evaluation and monitoring activities included mainly the observation of the indicators, the gathering of information about the decentralised activities in the fields of action, and the analysis and provision of the scientific report to the task force and the platform; a formalised template gathered information about the

resources devoted to the measures, the participants projected and reached, and main priorities and activities, the scope of the endeavour did not allow much detailed analysis of the activities

- the stakeholders in the platform met twice a year, to give an overview over the policies and to exchange experience about selected fields, the findings of the evaluation were also reported to the platform; overall these meetings were formal events, lively or productive discussions did not take place, and the atmosphere did not signal feelings of ownership over the strategy by the stakeholders
- the yearly reporting by the task force to the government, and then to the public, supported to some degree by the evaluation and monitoring team, has received increasing attention over time, in parallel to a decline of attention to the content of the strategy; personal changes in the leadership of the taskforce, and increasing tensions within the government coalition were influencing these changes in weight.

The implementation was yearly analysed from 2012-15, then our evaluation was cancelled because part of the taskforce could not accept the results of the analysis.<sup>13</sup> The 2015 report included an overall appraisal of the process, leading to the recommendation of a relaunch of the strategy. However, the taskforce foreclosed the presentation of the results to the platform. Some main issues of implementation are presented in the following that show “technical” flaws in the chosen architecture.

(1) *Lack of resources.* The basic concept that no additional resources were allocated to the strategy derived from a basic political conviction that because of a high level of educational expenditure reforms in this field should be basically cost-neutral. Additional resources should only be invested, if clear needs can be proofed. Two phenomena resulted from this pattern, first some fields of action were blocked because of lack of resources, second fields of action including stakeholders that “owned” resources independently from the strategy flourished more than others.

Two fields of action were definitely blocked at some point of development because of lack of resources. One was the key field of *non-formal adult and continuing education*. From the first guidelines the idea of developing a new rational and comprehensive scheme of financing education, that included adult and continuing education was a key strategic aim strongly supported by the social partners. The idea of a kind of educational account was influential in this discourse (e.g., demanded in the social partners’ paper from 2007). The stakeholder group in this field made the development of a scheme conditional on the allocation of additional funds, the government denied, so work was not really started. The lack of clear responsibilities in adult education, and conflicts between the central and the regional authorities have also inhibited work in this field (these conflicts were also visible in the platform activities). The second was the field of provisions for the elderly. This field was one of the most successful, provided an analysis of the situation and proposals for action, however, the realisation would have depended on necessary additional resources – these were not available within the strategy.

Few measures received most part of the resources allocated (50 of 70 measures did not report any resources), and those measures have been developed independently from the

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<sup>13</sup> Based on a new tender the evaluation was set up by a new contractor, however, no results were published so far, and the platform did not meet since the rudimentary presentation of the 2015 report.

strategy in established policy fields, e.g., in active labour market policy administered by the public employment service, and extension of all-day schooling in education policy.

(2) *No definitive legal basis.* To establish sustainability the expert draft has proposed to base the strategy by traditional hard law, and to create a professional council for governance that would also include international expertise. This proposal contrasted to the widely held political conviction of overregulation in Austrian education, in particular of schools, but supported the demands for a better legal underpinning of adult education. The political decisions have preferred a soft law government strategy according to New Public Management practices, with four ministers taking responsibility for its delivery. In May 2017 the last person of this group left government, the first had already left in December 2013,<sup>14</sup> and the Social and Christian democratic coalition government that has launched the strategy broke-up in 2017, and was followed by a right-wing populist coalition, that again broke-up in 2019; the structure of ministries has also changed twice since the establishment of the strategy by amalgamating the ministry of science first with economic affairs (2014-17) and then amalgamating it (again) with education from 2017. The task force that should bridge the “silos” of different responsibilities was led by the ministry of education, and brought together the political responsibilities for school and adult education, labour market policy with much focus on youth transition, the apprenticeship system, and higher education. As could have been predicted from the beginning, the changes in government have diminished attention to the strategy, leading to a kind of silent death from 2016. Interestingly, in the current government programme from 2020, a revival of the strategy, and an evaluation of adult education, including a redefinition of its legal basis has been announced.

(3) *The overall purpose: punctuality or incrementalism?* Implicit divergences about what the creation of a structure lifelong learning basically requires were influencing the development from the beginning. In the initial phase of the creation of the strategy much consensus existed among players about a necessity of quite radical changes in education policy to move towards substantial lifelong learning opportunities (e.g., the proposal of the social partners 2007 demanded substantial changes of educational governance). The expert draft strategy was based on the assumption, that an effective lifelong learning structure would look different from the existing structure, and outlined the points where substantial development in this direction would be needed. The further steps within the proposed governance structure should have worked out the evidence base and select substantial policy interventions, and allocate them over time according to priorities, resources, etc. The evaluation and monitoring conceived the strategy implementation *as policy measures that are taken in addition to ongoing policies*, in order to conceptually identify changes that are brought about by the strategy, and thus also to identify the “surplus” of the strategy in

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<sup>14</sup> The signing ministers were Claudia Schmied (SP) in education 2007-13 (December; followed by four different persons till 2020), Rudolf Hundsdorfer (SP) in social affairs 2008-16 (January; followed by five persons), Reinhold Mitterlehner (VP) in economic affairs from 2008-17 and in science from 2014-17 (May, followed by four persons), and Karlheinz Töchterle (VP) in science 2011-13 (December, followed by five persons including R.Mitterlehner); the group was originally balanced between the two coalition parties, from 2014-17 the ministries of science and economic affairs were amalgamated, and the minister was at the same time vice-chancellor and leader of the Christian Democrats (ÖVP), who resigned in 2017; after that much change and turbulence arose, the Social Democrats were in opposition, and the Christian Democrats renewed their programmatic substantially (new ÖVP).

relation to ongoing policies. However, this distinction could not be drawn. No one argued against this attempt, but the actors de facto worked in the opposite direction, to bring their ongoing activities under the umbrella of the strategy, some more active than others.

Because of the all-encompassing scope of the strategy, most existing measures could be somehow subsumed under the strategy. As a result, the strategy increasingly doubled the whole of education policy.

For the base-level actors doing the real implementation work in the fields of action, the work in the strategy mainly meant some additional exercise with communication, meetings, reporting, etc. In short, the involvement in the strategy did not bring surplus, but only effort.

At the level of governance this blurring of the boundary between the strategy and overall education policy could have been realised as a new purpose of the strategy of setting up an instrument of deliberately co-ordinating overall education policy. However, for this purpose the structures were much too weak, and nobody took initiative to think in this direction.

Given these contradictions and lack of purpose, it is very plausible that the strategy gradually phased out.

*(4) In-coherent structure.* Among all the various definitions and understandings of strategies a clear purpose and a kind of downstream coherence from the goals to the delivery, and between the levels of strategy and tactics seem to be a common ground. However, the strategy was in fact not coherent, it was rather a patchwork of different elements that were superficially linked to each other. Instead of clear goals a broad collection of vague complex political expressions was combined with a collection of indicators and benchmarks that have expressed important aspects of education systems but were not systematically related to the other elements. The visions, goals and measures in the fields of action could not be derived from the overall goals because clear goals were lacking. Instead these elements were rather developed in a decentralised bottom-up fashion, including various stakeholders in the process. In terms of strategical thinking the formulations of the fields of action would have the position of tactics. At closer inspection the structure of the measures and the soft qualitative goals in the fields of action is not clear but overly extended and complex. The formulation of most of these soft goals is global and multi-dimensional, on average the analysis found in fact three more specific goals per soft goal formulation. Thus, instead of about 50 formulated goals of the 70 measures, the real number of goals was about 150. The degree of complexity was different in different fields, the factor of the real number of implicit goals to formulated goals was varying between 2 and 4 in different fields of action. So, the tactics level that should provide a clear orientation towards the goals of the strategy rather signals complexity and ambiguity.

Empirically the reporting by the actors in the lines of action reinforces the picture of complexity and incoherence. They see the contribution of their activities to the benchmarks in a quite loose and mixed way (most fields work towards several benchmarks, and most benchmarks are addressed by diverse groups of lines of action). Conversely, from the logic of outcomes that means that a change in the indicators cannot be attributed to certain activities, and the reaching of benchmarks is not directly approached by certain activities. The empirical relationships are even more blurred between the fields of action and the field-specific soft goals. These field-specific goals are much more often addressed by other fields than the "own" field: on average for addressing one field-specific goal within the related field, it is addressed almost four times by other fields of action, on average five

fields are involved in this pattern to reach field-specific goals; mostly the actors will be even unaware about these interrelationships (in a firm-specific strategy involving 10 departments this would mean that five other departments would deliberately work towards the goals of a specific department, without the knowledge of this fact by the department in question). This high degree of connectivity might be good for reaching the goals in substance and a high acceptance of the goals also; however, from the perspective of strategical thinking this degree of unspecificity undermines the central assumption of creating a systematic way of addressing specific goals.

*(5) An example: community education:* The fields of action were opened stepwise. Community education is an example that was opened in the second wave. The author has to some extent analysed the situation in this field (Lassnigg 2017). The basic idea of the draft strategy, to find policies that can support informal learning in everyday life has been changed in the political document towards functions of adult education institutions. However, the provisions in the strategy document have not really given advice for the start of work in this field. During the first year of work nothing more than conflict-driven fundamental discussions and some very basic brainstorming documents have been achieved. This example demonstrates that – at least in this innovative field – the formulations in the strategy document did not really help to trigger strategic action.

*(6) A strategic proposal: to identify an "actual-strategy"-pattern in the activities?* As a result of the detailed analysis of the delivery the evaluation tried to identify the pattern of activities which were broadly advocated across the strategy and de facto practiced in the fields of action. The delivered measures/projects as units were classified according to (a) broadly shared goals, (b) size of resources allocated, and (c) number of participants. A set of 10 categories of delivered policies were identified on this basis as a practiced strategy pattern:

#### BIG SIZE AND BROADLY ADVOCATED GOALS

- youth qualification guarantee till 18y
- NQR-service points
- Austrian educational/qualification guidance network
- occupational guidance at schools
- programme for the support of 2<sup>nd</sup> chance and basic adult education

#### HIGH RESOURCES AND/OR HIGH PARTICIPATION

- schools: all-day schooling; psycho-social support; curriculum development; quality assurance
- provision of qualifications in adult and continuing education
- career planning instruments
- case management projects for low-qualified people

#### SMALL SIZE AND BROADLY ADVOCATED GOALS ("SMALL BUT NICE")

- observation/recognition of foreign qualification
- learning regions programme
- 2<sup>nd</sup> chance apprenticeship qualification recognition/acquisition project
- new skills demand foresight council
- model-projects for the elderly

The proposal of thinking about a relaunch of the strategy based on these analyses and considerations has met complete incomprehension among parts of the task-force. A debate in the platform was aggressively foreclosed and the evaluation team changed. The reporting of success to the government and to the public has become a kind of obsession of these actors, not least due to much problems and crises in the coalition. Several other policies in education have moved to the foreground of the agenda, some of them prevalent in the lifelong learning strategy, others not. From 2016 the strategy gradually phased out, the platform did not meet again, and a new evaluation report provided by a newly commissioned research team is not publicly available as the reports before. In 2017 the government coalition broke down, the social democrats moved to the opposition and the Christian democrats have relaunched their party politics completely in preparation for the elections, and then created a right-wing government, that also broke down soon in 2019. This government has proposed far-reaching opposite directions in education policy, making without reference to the lifelong learning strategy. However, the actual government programme 2020 in a new coalition between Christian democrats and the Green party has mentioned the strategy in quite general formulations about taking it up again.

## Reflections and conclusions

### a. Notions of success and failure

Success and failure might be rated on substantive terms of developing lifelong learning at the policy level, or at the political level of how it helped the involved actors to support their political standing and power.

For a reflection of the development we can try to appraise the substantive success and failure of the endeavour, and ask for potential causes. A first dimension might be to assess the main outcome criteria of the strategy. A look at the overall benchmarks and indicators shows a mixed pattern. Among the ten quantitative benchmarks the trend towards 2020 has been estimated by the monitoring reports.

- Only participation in tertiary education performed above expectations, however, this indicator was not much emphasised in the strategy.
- Three indicators developed clearly along the trend to reach the 2020 benchmark, reduction of early school leavers, reduction of NEETs, and the employment rate of the 55-65-years old; policies for the support of youth transition and combating early school leaving have been a strong priority in Austrian policies for decades, and with the support of the public employment service have been one of the strong activities within the strategy, however, the strategy has not specifically contributed to this; employment of the 55-65-year age group also cannot be attributed to the strategy.
- Three indicators are related to adult education; the overall participation indicator is one of those that lagged increasingly behind the trend, with stagnating participation; the two remaining indicators<sup>15</sup> are based on the adult education

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<sup>15</sup> STATISTICS AUSTRIA Online Table LLL1\_2016/17: Bildungsteilnahme im Überblick (non-formal, education background, regions, time 2007-11-16) [https://www.statistik.at/wcm/idc/idcplg?IdcService=GET\\_NATIVE\\_FILE&RevisionSelectionMethod=LatestReleased&dDocName=073112](https://www.statistik.at/wcm/idc/idcplg?IdcService=GET_NATIVE_FILE&RevisionSelectionMethod=LatestReleased&dDocName=073112); Table C01: Teilnahme an nicht-formalen Bildungsaktivitäten (non-formal, education



education survey cannot be measured continuously, participation in rural regions and participation during working time of low qualified have improved above expectations already until 2011, regional inequality was further reduced till 2016, the other indicator rather stagnated.

- The key indicator for school education, the PISA reading risk group<sup>16</sup> has stagnated with an increasing gap below the trend to reach the benchmark; another indicator about maturity exam of apprentices counted also below the trend, however, is not reported regularly.
- Finally, the expenditure for education as a percentage of GDP has not increased but declined.
- From three qualitative indicators, (i) to regulate early education by a central law was declined in the new government programme, (ii) to implement NQF and a validations strategy has made progress, but below expectations, (iii) about quality standards for educators of the elderly concrete information is lacking.<sup>17</sup>

However, as the benchmarks have been shown as only weakly related to the activities, its attribution to the strategy is questionable, and the overall result is rather disappointing. The soft qualitative indicators and the foreseen measures in the fields of action show mixed activities, which do not really comply to the planning; the evaluation has indicated that implicitly a quite different strategy pattern might have been implemented, deviating from the planning. A political debate about these results was prohibited by some of the leading actors, rather the whole strategy-process was silently phased out (at the moment of writing a search for "strategie" at the webpages of the involved ministries finds up to 300 hits, the strategy paper is not found among the relevant hits).

In relation to the idea to build a coherent structure of lifelong learning till 2020, and particularly if the proposals of the expert draft are taken as criterion, the strategy was a failure; it did also not work as an instrument for the coordination or better structuring of education policy across the different ministries – the genealogy shows that the period of developing the strategy lasted longer than its delivery.

The phasing out of the strategy, that was reflected in the lack of enthusiasm by the actors in the platform, can also be seen as an indication of failure in terms of mobilising the relevant actors to move towards developing a vibrant lifelong structure. The mainstream of education policy has also moved towards objects more or less outside the strategy (but was not necessarily more successful), that have attracted much energy of the actors (e.g., teacher education and service law reforms, school autonomy and governance, testing and assessment, an adult education initiative).

In the relationship between the evaluation and the task force two directions were prevalent, one towards the overall strategy and the platform with the objective of monitoring and improvement of the activities, the other towards the government for reporting progress. Subsequently this reporting was the basis of a public announcement

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background, regions 2016

[https://www.statistik.at/wcm/idc/idcplg?IdcService=GET\\_NATIVE\\_FILE&RevisionSelectionMethod=LatestReleased&dDocName=073117](https://www.statistik.at/wcm/idc/idcplg?IdcService=GET_NATIVE_FILE&RevisionSelectionMethod=LatestReleased&dDocName=073117); Table C09: Nicht-formale Bildungsaktivitäten nach Finanzierung (non-formal, financed by employer, 2016)

[https://www.statistik.at/wcm/idc/idcplg?IdcService=GET\\_NATIVE\\_FILE&RevisionSelectionMethod=LatestReleased&dDocName=073118](https://www.statistik.at/wcm/idc/idcplg?IdcService=GET_NATIVE_FILE&RevisionSelectionMethod=LatestReleased&dDocName=073118)

<sup>16</sup> BIFIE, PISA 2018 Online <https://www.bifie.at/pisa2018/>

<sup>17</sup> BM Soziales (2020) Bildung im Alter, Online <https://www.sozialministerium.at/Themen/Soziales/Soziale-Themen/Seniorinnen--und-Seniorenpolitik/Bildung-im-Alter.html>

about the success of the strategy. The attention to the latter direction has strongly increased over time (in the last year 2015 even the responsibility of reporting about the activities in the fields of action was taken over by the members of the task force), the recommendations for improvement have not received much attention by the various actors from the beginning. This kind of imbalance can be interpreted as a bias towards *symbolic politics*. In this sense a success would be an increase of popularity of the protagonists of this policy. Public attention was rather low; thus, this kind of success might be questionable. The inflation of strategies could be interpreted as a popular type of symbolic politics, demonstrating the willingness and competency to act; however, as any inflation might also devalue this type of strategy. The evaluation of this kind of success would need to ask the populace about this type of politics.

For a reflection of the failures of the strategy, we can ask a set of different questions: First, we can ask some techno-political questions: was it a problem of design? were substantial mistakes made in the conception and implementation of the strategy, and if yes, why were they made? could the proposal of the expert draft have worked better? could evaluation and monitoring do a better job? Second, we can ask more theoretical-fundamental questions concerning the potential of strategic action in policy and politics: how does the logic of strategies relate to the political field? is the development of lifelong learning a feasible object for a political strategy? what role do the different EU and national political levels play in such a strategy? what is the potential of experts and consultancy in such an endeavour?

#### b. Techno-political design

A first question concerns whether the expert draft proposal could have worked better than the political proposal. A harder legal basis could have precluded such a silent phasing out before the end of the strategy in 2020, and might have supported a more formal infrastructure of the strategy. However, other examples from education policy show that this is no guarantee for a sustainable strategy; given the political will, also legally based policies can be quickly changed quite fundamentally (e.g., the educational standards assessment, the grading and tracking regulations, the shape of the state research and development institute for education, the framework law of reform of teacher education institutions). The governance through a professional council could have distributed the weights between the governance body, the government, and the actors differently, and – given a proper selection of members – could have led to a more focused programme and (at least a fight for) a better infrastructure and the necessary resources. According to the conception, much more systematic development work might have been employed. However, other examples (e.g., the polytechnics council, or the various councils of the reform of teacher education) also demonstrate, that the external political support is not necessarily better for such a more formalised structure.

As a second question might be asked, whether a substantially higher degree of professional competences in strategic action would have helped, and thus focusing on a more formal application of an available strategic approach or model. However, strategy has originated from the military, and has been applied first with a strong connotation to strategic planning to business corporations more formally from the 1960s or 1970s, with a high degree of

differentiation of concepts and understandings in the 1980s and 1990s. Mintzberg (1994)<sup>18</sup> was influential in differentiating various meanings in his analysis of the rise and fall of strategic planning. The early resonance in policy making might be seen superficially and rhetorically in the NPM wave (in Austrian policy discourses such superficial – and, frankly, stupid – corporate analogies to the nation, or to the school system, have been quite frequent) – this flow has been analysed in institutional theories as mimetic adaptation. However, serious and explicit analyses of the potentials and use of strategy in politics have appeared rather late,<sup>19</sup> in the German speaking discourse more or less in parallel to the development of the Austrian lifelong learning strategy (e.g., Raschke, Tils 2007, 2010, FJSB 2008).<sup>20</sup> A much more small scale understanding of strategic action, compared to the broad application in the lifelong learning strategy has been established, as situation-overlapping calculation about goals, means and environment (FJSB 2008, editorial, 3). The involvement of a consultant from corporate strategy might have explained rather the difficulties of an application of these concepts than advising a concrete approach. The differentiated and multi-level actor structure would have raised the problem of a hierarchical command and/or control structure which is in principle involved in a corporate strategy: despite all versions of flexibility and involvement the leaders must take decisions and direct the corporation (Anderson 2017).<sup>21</sup> In the reasoning about the political application of the concept the tension between the hierarchical necessities of strategies and the demands of democratic action have quickly arisen, that have indeed emerged in the Austrian strategy between the leadership and the platform.

A third design-question is arising with the basic structural contradiction between the denial of a financial base of the strategy on the one hand, and the claim established to steer the strategy by the ministries' task force. This raises the question of why the various actors should bring their resources into an endeavour that is basically controlled by someone else? In a sense the part of the involvement of the actors for the development and delivery of measures in the fields of action could be interpreted as a kind of "fund-raising strategy" for a broader purpose. The steering part brings the hierarchical side into play, that should try to guide the activities towards the common purpose, however, the structure did not give room for hierarchical power. At the point of steering the plenty of institutional and political coordination problems open up that exist among the involved actors, and which should be bridged by the strategy: between the involved ministries that are led by basically competing parties, between labour market policy and education policy, between the regional and central levels of government that own different and competing

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<sup>18</sup> Mintzberg, Henry (1994) *The Rise and Fall of Strategic Planning*. New York: Free Press. See online <https://hbr.org/1994/01/the-fall-and-rise-of-strategic-planning>

<sup>19</sup> The author of an influential book that looks at politics from the military and international strategy perspective even states in 2016 that "I discovered that really very little attention has been paid to this most critical of relationships." (Gray 2016, vi).

Gray, Colin S. (2016) *Strategy and Politics*. Abingdon: Routledge.

<sup>20</sup> „Obwohl strategisches Denken eine Jahrtausende alte Tradition hat, gibt es bislang kaum systematische Betrachtungen von genuin politischer Strategie“ (Fjsb 2008, Editorial, 3)

Raschke, Joachim; Tils, Ralf (2007) *Politische Strategie. Eine Grundlegung*. Wiesbaden: VS.

Raschke, Joachim; Tils, Ralf, eds. (2010) *Strategie in der Politikwissenschaft. Konturen eines neuen Forschungsfelds*. Wiesbaden: VS.

FJSB (2008) *Strategie in der Politik - Anatomie einer Überforderung*. *Forschungsjournal Soziale Bewegungen*. Heft 1/2008 Online: [http://forschungsjournal.de/sites/default/files/archiv/fjsb\\_2008\\_1.pdf](http://forschungsjournal.de/sites/default/files/archiv/fjsb_2008_1.pdf)

<sup>21</sup> Anderson Elizabeth (2017) *Private Government: How Employers Rule Our Lives (and Why We Don't Talk about It)*. Princeton: PUP.

responsibilities, between employees' and employers' organisations, between civil society and government, between the education providers and other stakeholders, etc. What can the strategy provide to bridge these cleavages? The instruments are the loose and incoherent strategy paper, the results of evaluation and monitoring, and the various forms of networking that the strategy initiates for the cooperation of the various actors in the fields of action. The analysis of the implementation indicates that the activities overall produced "more of the same", and that the available instruments were too weak to produce something new. The actor structures within the fields of action have more or less reproduced the patterns that exist anyway in the political landscape, so the actors had to meet once again (beside their normal day-to-day activities), nominate their leadership, and to produce plans and activities under the strategy's proposal of goals and measures, and yearly to report about that – so in fact they had to invest their resources only for keeping the strategy going, without creating any "productive" activities. The classical question by the theories about budgeting and governance in politics, "if you can't Budget, how can you govern?" can be paraphrased for the case of the lifelong learning strategy. We can underline this question by asking, why this question was not asked and answered by the various actors during the long period of preparation of the strategy?

#### c. Broader conceptual and theoretical questions

In this final section we can reflect towards generalisations and ask broader questions, and relate them to certain theoretical concepts or approaches.

First, we can take up the observation of the inflation of strategies and the thesis that this type of policies might be notoriously related to symbolic politics. In the everyday public discourses symbolic policy is quite plainly contrasted to substantive policy, with the connotation that nothing "real" would be done except somehow cheating the public by pretending "real" action. However, in the (still small) research-based literature about symbolic policy this concept is related to the significance of (competing) narratives in policy making (Miller 2012),<sup>22</sup> as a competing kind of thinking to the rational planning ideas conventionally related to strategy understandings. In the German discourse about political strategies the issue of communication is emphasised as a very important element (FJSB 2008). In this sense the various kinds of strategy-discourses might be seen as the – more or less collaborative – construction of narratives to structure a certain field in terms of what could be done. In this understanding the criteria of success and failure of a strategy shift from its substantial implementation to the narrative role, in structuring discourses about what should be done. This role does not necessarily require substantial implementation, on the contrary, implementation might create costs unnecessary for this role.

Second, from the perspective of policy making the strategy is implying a certain relationship between substantial policy and power politics, posing the question of how

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<sup>22</sup> Miller, Hugh T. (2012). *Governing Narratives: Symbolic Politics and Policy Change*. Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press.

See also Lindquist 2009, Pollitt 2013 about narratives and public sector reform

Lindquist, Evert (2009) *Waiting for the Next Wave: Trajectories, Narratives and Conveying the State of Public Sector Reform*. *Policy Quarterly* – Volume 5, Issue 1 – February, 44-52

<https://ojs.victoria.ac.nz/pq/article/view/4284/3785>

Pollitt, Christopher (2013). *The Evolving Narratives of Public Management Reform*. *Public Management Review*, 15(6), 899–922. doi:10.1080/14719037.2012.725761

much policy is possible in relation to politics, or the other way round, how much policy does politics allow for? This question concerns the step from the expert draft strategy to the political strategy. The governance proposal of the expert draft has in some sense put policy over politics: the responsibility for development and implementation should have been handed over temporarily to a professional council that would have to govern a broad array of functions situated in different ministries, and which in turn would influence the functions of them. This might have overstretched the patience of politics for contracting-out. The decision not to foresee a budget for the strategy might have been a specific point in this practice. This decision also followed the established political strategy of reducing the state budget deficits, and not to provide additional resources for education reform – thus we can see competing strategies.

Third, we can ask how the distribution and situatedness of actors across societal and political sectors as well as across the governance levels from the EU to the local one is related to and influenced by the strategy. The combination and conflict of hierarchical with democratic dimensions is seen as a basic problem of political strategies (FJSB 2008); this tension is also prevalent in the Austrian strategy. The main problem is seen in the risk of overruling democracy through hierarchy by a strong strategic centre. There are views that see strategic action as necessarily undemocratic<sup>23</sup> However, among the distributed and multi-level actors in the lifelong learning space rather the problem of establishing a hierarchy, and a strategic centre, arises. The idea of developing lifelong learning strategies was invented at the EU level two decades ago, but given up in the meantime. EU policy proposals for education are rather scattered at the moment. The EU education monitor as a main policy instrument leaves out vocational education and the labour market issues, and thus cannot provide a comprehensive picture of lifelong learning.<sup>24</sup> The Austrian strategy includes EU instruments as the NQF, emphasis on fighting early school leaving and integrating NEETs, and makes also reference to the EU key competences. Networking can be seen as a method of coordinating the diverse actors, but cannot span the institutional cleavages given by federalism and competing policy fields.

Finally, the question can be posed whether the topic of lifelong learning is too broad in scope, and too difficult to define (Lassnigg 2009),<sup>25</sup> to be a feasible policy field for an operative political strategy. There is much rhetoric about lifelong learning, however, the meaning is not clear, and information is widely lacking. We do in fact not much know about

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<sup>23</sup> A big practically oriented handbook (Schröder 2000) with detailed prescriptions for strategic action under the auspices of the German liberal party FDP sees strategy fundamentally as a competitive endeavor including fight and attack. "Strategy per se always has one goal: victory." (p.16) The author emphasizes "...the significance of attack in strategic considerations. Winning is possible only if one attacks. Defence can perhaps avert defeat, but it can never bring about victory" (p.43) and states that "...strategic plans must be dealt with very discreetly. In democratic organisations the tendency is to discuss and develop strategic plans too widely and participatively. This, however, jeopardises secrecy." (p.48)  
Schröder, Peter (2000, German) Political Strategies, Engl. translation Online [https://www.lymec.eu/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Politische-StrategienEnd\\_2012-de-en-FINAL.pdf](https://www.lymec.eu/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Politische-StrategienEnd_2012-de-en-FINAL.pdf) German version: Baden-Baden: Nomos.

<sup>24</sup> See [https://ec.europa.eu/education/resources-and-tools/document-library/education-and-training-monitor-2019-executive-summary\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/education/resources-and-tools/document-library/education-and-training-monitor-2019-executive-summary_en)

<sup>25</sup> Lassnigg, Lorenz (2009) Ökonomisierung des Lernens und Vertreibung der Bildung? "Lifelong Learning" und "evidence-based Policy/Practice". MAGAZIN erwachsenenbildung.at. Ausgabe 7/8 2009. Vienna. Online: <http://www.erwachsenenbildung.at/magazin/09-7u8/meb09-7u8.pdf>

how (much) lifelong learning is instituted in comparative terms.<sup>26</sup> It seems not even clear which parts of the educational structures are concretely involved. Still frequently is lifelong learning identified with the learning of adults, often it is restricted to formal and non-formal learning, leaving out informal learning (e.g., the main quantitative indicator for lifelong learning measures participation in non-formal adult education).

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<sup>26</sup> Very little is known in comparative terms about institutional structures of adult education, which is an essential part of a lifelong learning structure (see some attempts Lassnigg et al. 2007, Gieseke et al. 2009) Lassnigg, Lorenz; Burzlaff, Helen; Davia Rodriguez, Maria A.; Lassen, Morten, eds. (2007) *Lifelong Learning. Building bridges through transitional labour markets*. Apeldoorn-Antwerpen: Het Spinhuis. Online: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/305618578\\_Lifelong\\_Learning\\_Building\\_bridges\\_through\\_transitional\\_labour\\_markets](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/305618578_Lifelong_Learning_Building_bridges_through_transitional_labour_markets).

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