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A-Level Alternatives in Austria: Insights into University Entrance Exams in English

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Overview

- Introduction
- University Entrance Qualification
- Structured versus Individual Preparation
- Course Design and Student Workload
- Diagnostic Placement Test and Assessment
- Course Content
- Illusion of Competence and Dropout Rate
- Conclusions

University Entrance Qualification

- University Entrance Qualification Course = Studienbefähigungslehrgang (SBL)
- Designed for working professionals
- Prepares for degree programmes in engineering, social sciences, health care studies
- **Prerequisites:** Minimum age: 20 years, relevant professional qualifications, EEA citizenship or legal equivalence
- **Outcome:** Enrolment in defined degree programmes at FHJ

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Structure of the University Entrance Qualification Course

Heterogeneous Exam Structure

- University of Vienna: 5 individual exams (Essay in German, 2 required subjects, 2 electives)
- FH JOANNEUM Approach:
- - Subjects: German, English, Mathematics 1 & 2, Physics
- - Format: Evening classes or block seminars on Saturdays

Individual Preparation

Exam Format: **Written** (3 hours: translation, essay, reading comprehension), **Oral** (20 minutes per candidate)

- Permitted: Physical dictionaries
- CEFR Level: B2 (Matura level) for English
- 4 skills

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Student Cohort Overview

Academic Year	Internal Participants	Dropouts	Domains	External Candidates	Domains
2023/2024	17	5	Social work, nursing, engineering	20	Mostly upgrade in health care studies
2024/2025	21	4	Social work, nursing, engineering	80	Mostly upgrade in health care studies
2025/2026	35	10	Social work, nursing, engineering	110	Mostly upgrade in health care studies

Diagnostic Placement Test and Formative Assessment

- **Purpose:** Identify prior knowledge, strengths, weaknesses, and misconceptions
- **Components:**
  - Grammar and vocabulary tasks (up to B2 level)
  - Writing assignment (handwritten, no dictionary)
- **Feedback:**
  - Individual talks post-test
  - Follow-up discussions on learning progress
- **Formative Assessment Benefits:**
  - Personalised teaching
  - Early intervention to adjust content/pacing
  - Encourages metacognition (focus on how students learn)

Course Content and Learning Patterns

- **Curriculum Structure:**
  1. Foundations: Grammar (tenses, modal verbs), reading (skimming/scanning), listening > vocabulary
  2. Advanced: Essay writing, report writing, summary writing
  3. Exam Strategies: Common mistakes (articles, subject-verb agreement), real-world tasks
- **Teaching Strategies:**
  - Inverted Classroom: Videos + in-class assignments
  - Gamification
  - Peer Learning: Peer reviews, peer teaching
  - Domain-related Sensitivity: Specific word lists, authentic materials
- **Student Presentations:** Related to professional background + Q&A, encourages note-taking and academic citation

Grammar Topics and Illusion of Competence

Topic	Familiarity (1-5)	Applicability (1-5)
Tenses (Simple vs. Progressive)	4	2
Passive Voice	3	2
Relative Clauses	3	2
Conditional Sentences	3	2
Gerund and Infinitive	2	1

Shift in Learning Preferences

- **From Reading to Listening:**
  - Reasons: Digital consumption habits (podcasts, audiobooks, TED-Talks, YouTube)
  - Shorter attention spans (average of 47 seconds)
  - Cognitive ease of audio (lower mental effort, passive)
- **Benefits of Listening:**
  - Suitable for dyslexia or learning disabilities.
  - Emotionally compelling (tone, music, storytelling)
- **Hybrid Approach:**
  - Pair listening with reading (e.g., TED-Talk + article)
  - Active listening (note-taking, summarising)
- **Language Learning Apps:**
  - Features: Personalised, adaptive learning, bite-sized lessons (5–10 minutes), instant feedback, multisensory learning

Dropout and External Candidates

- **Dropout Reasons:**
  - Underestimation of course demands
  - Ineffective learning methods (procrastination, poor time management)
  - Financial constraints, work-family balance
  - Lack of clear career path
- **Warning Signs:** Irregular attendance, declining grades, withdrawal from peers
- **Interventions:**
  - Motivational coaching, counselling (time/stress management)
  - Peer mentoring (student representatives)
- **External Candidates:**
  - Higher exposure to English (school, workplace, private interests)
  - Self-reported B1–B2 level (CEFR)
  - Outcomes: Lower dropout rate (<20%), high number of excellent/good grades

Conclusions and Takeaways

- **Challenges:**
  - Workload: 150 hours (51 contact hours) → 20–30% dropout rate
  - Illusion of Competence: Overestimation of grammar skills due to passive learning
  - Changing Preferences: Shift from reading to listening (digital habits, attention spans)
- **Solutions:**
  - Curriculum Adaptation: More dynamic, multisensory materials
  - Support Systems: Diagnostic tests, formative assessment, peer mentoring, technology integration (Moodle, language learning apps)
  - Active Learning: Overcome passive habits with active recall practice
- **Future Directions:** Address multifaceted challenges to improve retention and learning outcomes

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