



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

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Abstract

In Austria, the Matura serves as the primary university entrance qualification, equivalent to for example A-levels in the UK. However, several alternatives exist for students seeking different professional pathways. The Berufsreifeprüfung combines vocational training with a selection of academic subjects, allowing apprentices to gain university eligibility. The Studienberechtigungsprüfung (SBP) is designed for adults without a Matura but sufficient professional experience, enabling access to specific university programmes after passing relevant exams in selected subjects aligned with the domain of interest. These alternatives cater to diverse educational needs, ensuring flexibility for students with varying academic and career goals. Thus, this contribution describes the administrative and preparatory steps for the Studienberechtigungsprüfung in English, and the design as well as the execution of the accompanying mandatory evening classes over an academic year. It also draws conclusions after an eight-year period of preparing and examining – starting with a placement test to the final exam – student cohorts in English with a particular focus on formative assessment. Additionally, the contribution contrasts the examination process as well as the success rate of candidates preparing individually for the university entrance exam (SBP). The first part of the discussion analyses the content (re-)development and its adaptation in class, the organisational aspects regarding individual coaching and counselling options, as well as the varying student progress respectively success. The second part addresses the challenges in the execution due to the participants' different professional and private backgrounds, the learning progress, and the constant evaluation process for the further programme development.

Keywords: *University entrance qualification, content development, class design, formative assessment, execution challenges*

1. Introduction

1.1 University Entrance Qualification

In Austria, it is possible to pursue higher education without the designated school leaving certificate – the Matura – an A-level equivalent. The University Entrance Qualification Course (Studienberechtigungslehrgang), which is designed to be taken alongside work, specifically prepares participants for a degree programme in engineering, the social sciences, economics, or the arts. Applicants with relevant professional qualifications for example obtained through the completion of an apprenticeship or a vocational secondary school attend the University Entrance Qualification Course for two semesters. The prerequisite is that prior education is documented by school transcripts, training certificates, or employment and internship confirmations. Recognition greatly varies among individual institutions as many details are determined by the respective administrations. The required minimum age is 20 years. Furthermore, EEA citizenship or legal equivalence under the Persons Group Regulation is necessary for the application for admission to the University Entrance Qualification Course [1].

In this way, the participants in the University Entrance Qualification Course complete the required supplementary exams and, immediately after finishing the course and successfully passing the admissions process, they can enrol in one of the defined degree programmes such as construction engineering or social work at FH JOANNEUM University of Applied Sciences [2].

2. University Entrance Qualification Course and Exams

2.1 Structure of the University Entrance Qualification Course and Exam



The University Entrance Qualification Exams are organised heterogeneously; for example, at the University of Vienna [3] the course consists of five individual exams including a written essay on a general topic in German, two required subjects, and two elective subjects. The required and elective subjects depend on the field of study chosen by the candidate. During the application process for admission, the elective courses from among the available options need to be selected and are listed in the admission letter.

At FH JOANNEUM, the requirements partly differ from the ones described above. The subjects German, English, Mathematics 1 and 2, as well as Physics are offered over the entire academic year with classes either held in the evenings or in block seminars on Saturdays enabling participants to continue working [2]. Additionally, students can prepare individually and take the University Entrance Qualification Exam on given dates. In this case, the external candidates sit a three-hour written examination (translation, argumentative essay, reading comprehension) followed by an oral one (20 minutes per candidate) depending on positive completion of the written part. A physical dictionary (e.g., Langenscheidt's Large School Dictionary) for the written part and when preparing for the oral exam are permitted.

In general, the exam requirements for the University Entrance Qualification Exams are based on the curriculum for the 12th grade (grammar school) or 13th grade (e.g., higher technical college). In English, for example, the proof of language proficiency is at Level B2 of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) – which is Matura level – and includes the four skills speaking, writing, reading comprehension, and listening comprehension. Hence, the aim is to prepare the candidates to understand the main idea of complex texts (with a focus on domain-related concrete or abstract topics), to express themselves fluently and spontaneously on a given topic and to produce a clear, cohesive, and coherent text on again domain-related subjects by explaining their viewpoint on a topic and expressing advantages and disadvantages [3].

2.2 Structure of the Student Cohort in the University Entrance Qualification Course

At FH JOANNEUM, the candidates in the University Entrance Qualification Course are a heterogenous group dominated by the domains of social work as well as nursing and health studies. An overview of participants (internal and external ones) according to their domains including the dropout numbers is provided in Table 1.

The dominance of certain domains, for example, can be explained by a local government decision due to an increased demand on well-trained nursing staff and is demonstrated in the upgrade programme in health studies which involves completing a part-time, fee-based certificate programme of 26 ECTS credits to earn a Bachelor of Science in Health Studies (BSc). Upon completion of the certificate programme, candidates may enter the 6th semester of the “Health and Nursing” bachelor's degree programme, during which they must take and successfully complete required courses totalling 10 ECTS credits.

Table 1. Overview of participants

Academic year	Number of internal participants	Number of dropouts	Domains	Number of external candidates	Domains
2018/2019	20	5	Social work, nursing, engineering		
2019/2020	21	3	Social work, nursing, engineering		
2020/2021	15	1	Social work, nursing, engineering		
2021/2022	12		Social work, nursing, engineering		
2022/2023	11		Social work, nursing, engineering		
2023/2024	17	5	Social work, nursing, engineering		
2024/2025	21	4	Social work, nursing, engineering	20	mostly candidates of the upgrade programme in health studies



2025/2026	35	10	Social work, nursing, engineering	80	mostly candidates of the upgrade programme in health studies
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2.3 Student Workload in the University Entrance Qualification Course

The University Entrance Qualification Course in English is designed to cover the entire academic year starting in mid-September and is allotted 6 ECTS credits; in Austria, one ECTS credit equals 25 hours. Over the entire study period, there are 17 contact sessions of four units with 45 minutes each. This means that the total workload amounts to 150 hours with 51 hours of contact classes (synchronous teaching).

As only one third of the entire workload is covered in class including student interaction, sufficient self-study time needs to be integrated into the overall planning which again depends on the individual candidate's current level of competence. For this asynchronous component over the academic year, Moodle as an easily accessible Learning Management System is used to manage this part not only to serve as a distribution platform for material but also to engage the candidates into using social constructivist learning tools such as forums, wikis or peer assessment. Material is provided there allowing students to access and complete assignments at their own pace and according to their needs. Complemented is this individual learning process by the extensive learning material for adult learners offered by the British Council [4] and structured around the CEFR. The material for adult learners offers interactive content for the core language skills by including specialised audio, video, and text content geared towards professional communication, job interviews, and corporate settings. Regarding grammar and vocabulary, modules targeting rules, interactive context practice and systematic word lists from level A1 to C2 are available.

Furthermore, to support the participants on their individual learning paths assessment is built on an interplay of formative and summative including a diagnostic placement test.

2.4 Diagnostic Placement Test – Formative and Summative Assessment

As the student cohort is heterogeneous in its prior knowledge, prerequisites, misconceptions, strengths/weaknesses and domains, a diagnostic placement test [5] is conducted before the instruction cycle begins to provide the participants with feedback on their real current level of competence and on the areas requiring remediation. The placement test is compiled in accordance with the Common European Framework of References for Languages; it encompasses diverse grammar and vocabulary tasks up to level B2 as well as a writing assignment. The candidates are expected to handwrite their answers and the text without the use of a dictionary. The timeframe is 45 minutes, and the results do not have any implication on the final course assessment.

Diagnostic assessment is in general considered as a type of formative assessment which allows more personalised and effective teaching aiming at improving the student achievement significantly despite the heavy workload and the time constraints. For this reason, the placement test has been adapted over the eight-year period of holding the University Entrance Qualification Course in English to react to the changes in the curriculum (e.g., shift from reading to listening comprehension) and to provide the participants with relevant feedback. One part of the feedback respectively feedforward is a talk with each candidate after the placement test, and it includes the offer for (on-demand) follow-up talks which address the learning progress and the originally (re)-defined areas for remediation.

During the University Entrance Qualification Course, the candidates are expected to sit three written exams and to hold a presentation to have their receptive and productive competencies assessed in English. The first midterm exam is focussed on grammar activities and reading comprehension, while the second midterm exam is expanded by a writing task – an argumentative essay - to shift the focus on the productive competence. The final exam contains alongside grammar exercises a listening task and summary writing. The summative assessment is needed to evaluate the overall student performance/achievement regarding the study admission requirements. It is complemented by continuous checks in the form of (group) discussions, quizzes, interviews during the instruction over the two semesters to monitor the students' progress and to target their individual learning paths. This formative assessment component is applied to reduce anxiety by using low pressure checks and encourages self-regulation meaning to take ownership of the learning progress as it helps student to set individual goals and to recognise gaps more easily. Additionally, it develops an understanding of metacognition in so far that the focus is shifted on how students and not only on



what they have learned. This procedure also allows the instructor to intervene early and to adjust the content and the pacing which strengthens the relationship as it opens a dialogue on the individual learning goals. Despite these attempts to improve retention and to close achievement gaps, *Weigh pig, feed pig, weigh pig* as postulated by Fulcher et al. (2014) [6] refers to a common problem in education and the prevalent dominance of standardised summative assessment formats which occasionally ignore the individual students' development and the identification of individual challenges before they become barriers in the learning process.

3. Course Content Development and Student Learning Patterns

During the synchronous part, teaching is divided into a lecture-based learning approach which predominantly analyses the grammar aspects (see Table 2 below) but also allows sufficient time for individual questions and related hands-on activities. Certain topics are presented in an inverted classroom approach by encouraging students to watch instructional videos and complete assignments in class either individually or in smaller groups which again creates the opportunity to let students work at their own pace. The frequent use of visual clues, for example, in the form of a timeline to work on the concept of tenses is strongly promoted and additionally supported by the activity of taking notes to stay focussed during class, to recall information and to strengthen spelling and writing skills.

As individual and self-controlled learning – two thirds of the total workload are allotted to self-study time – forms a major component of the University Entrance Qualification Course, students are encouraged to outline their learning path by focussing on their areas for improvement based on the diagnostic placement test. This procedure is connected to technology-based learning as an individual learning aid. Here again, the free resources offered on the British Council website [4] provide the participants with clear grammar explanations and practice exercises to flexibly test their current level of competence on A1 to A2 or B1 to B2 level. Certain grammar topics such as the use of the tenses are found on both levels which clearly help monitor progress and the level of mastery.

In Table 2, an overview of the grammar topics discussed during the academic year is provided. In the diagnostic placement test, the topics are organised in accordance with their CEFR categorisation. Additionally, the categories *degree of familiarity* and *degree of applicability* (1 is low, 5 is high) are included as the illusion of competence is a widespread phenomenon among student cohorts. This aspect is addressed in the individual feedback talks, and the students are asked for their personal rating. The total student number over the period of consideration is 152 (n=152); the numbers in Table 2 refer to the mean value according to the degree of familiarity and applicability.

The numbers in Table 2 also indicate that students often mistake familiarity for understanding, effort for mastery, and memorisation for understanding; they believe they understand a certain aspect or can perform a task, but they cannot. They often recognise a term, for example, *progressive forms*, but this does not necessarily mean that they understand the concept of *present simple* versus *present progressive*. Some students repeatedly consult their notes or explanations/definitions in the course material which makes them feel confident, but they fail to recall or apply the information in an exam. This illusory effect is frequently reinforced by passive learning methods such as re-reading the course content, but it also lacks engagement and is connected to wrong retrieval practices such as in the form of an active practice test (e.g., quiz). Often, these students do not rely on formative assessment to correct misconceptions in due time. Instead of "I think I know this", they must adapt their learning patterns and proceed to "Let me prove that I know this".

Table 2. Grammar topics related to diagnostic placement test and class content

Winter semester / Semester 1			Summer semester / Semester 2		
Topics	Degree of familiarity (1-5)	Degree of applicability (1-5)	Topics	Degree of familiarity (1-5)	Degree of applicability (1-5)
(Revision of) tenses, focus on simple vs. progressive forms	4	2	Adjective, adverb, comparison	4	3
Conjunctions, prepositions	4	3	Conditional sentences	3	2
Modal verbs	4	3	Reported speech	3	2
Passive voice	3	2	Gerund and infinitive (verb complementation)	2	1



Relative clauses	3	2			
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The aim of the University Entrance Qualification Course with a total of 17 biweekly contact classes is to equip the participants with B2-level English proficiency and exam readiness. The curriculum is divided into three modules; the foundations part introduces core skills such as grammar (e.g., tenses, modal verbs, passive voice), reading (skimming and scanning activities) and related vocabulary exercises through topics such as education in general, current learning strategies, the working environment and selected topics from the participants' different domains (e.g., health-related topics, resilience). In the field of text generation, the focus is placed on essay writing (discussion of perspectives, cause and effect, opinion expression). More advanced skills in writing encompass report writing including the interpretation of numerical information and graph description as well as summary writing, while reinforcing grammar (e.g. conditional sentences, indirect speech) and exam strategies. The advanced module targets common mistakes (the use of articles, subject-verb agreement, verb complementation and prepositions) and applies skills to real-world tasks such as fostering collaboration and self-assessment. Teaching strategies include gamification (e.g., Kahoot! for quizzes), peer reviews, and peer teaching (e.g., weaker and stronger students are paired to provide (mutual) support according to their strengths), and cultural sensitivity to ensure engagement and relevance.

The topics for reading and listening are adjusted according to student interests and include different task types such as multiple-choice questions, true/false questions and recapping the content. Furthermore, the students are invited to share authentic materials from their domains.

All students hold a presentation related to their current professional background which includes relevant visual aids followed by a Q&A session; additionally, the students are encouraged to cite the sources used to glimpse into academic practice. They are also invited to provide their colleagues with domain-specific word lists to enlarge their linguistic repertoire. From the audience's perspective, talks are ideal to practise note-taking skills again preparing them for summary writing.

In general, the course content is subject to an ongoing evaluation process which can be exemplified in the fundamental change of preference among recent student cohorts from reading to listening assignments. Due to the rapid digital and technological shifts, students consume a vast amount of information either visually and/or by listening to podcasts, audiobooks, TED Talks, and YouTube clips. For them, text-heavy content feels outdated in contrast to dynamic, on-the-go media resources which can be assessed easily on various platforms and be adjusted equally easily according to the listener's needs (e.g., (playback, slow down) speed, subtitles). Furthermore, audio content also suits students with learning disabilities (e.g., dyslexia) very well.

Listening is characterised by a lower cognitive load in direct contrast to reading which involves the decoding of a text, the visual tracking and comprehension simultaneously. Furthermore, listening is receptive respectively passive; hence, it requires less mental effort and can be paired with other activities. The audio-visual content effectively leverages tone, music and storytelling characteristics which make the dynamic content more emotionally compelling than a static text. As the average attention spans continue dropping to an incredibly low 47-second phase according to Mark [7], short-form audio and video clips align better with this trend than long articles. Students mirror these dominant social media features in their learning habits which has converted listening to their preferred study method strongly supported by language learning apps such as Duolingo or Babbel that emphasise listening/speaking over reading/writing as these skills are seen as more practical for communication purposes. As reading still matters for deep understanding of complex ideas and vocabulary growth due to a more diverse use of words in a written text than in speech, hybrid tasks such as to pair listening with reading tasks – TED Talk and a related article – or to use active listening in the form of notetaking or summing up content to make the listening process more rigorous.

Language learning apps do not only foster listening and speaking competencies, but they also foster personalised and adaptive learning offering tailor-made lessons according to individual strengths and weaknesses. The bite-sized lessons of five to ten minutes daily fit microlearning trends by reducing procrastination. They provide the user with instant feedback which boosts confidence and retention. Some of these feature a multisensory learning approach by combining listening (e.g., podcasts), speaking (e.g., voice recording device), reading (e.g., texts), and writing (e.g., chatbots) for holistic learning. All in all, integrating them into the individual and personalised learning approach make ends meet to equip students with the relevant tools and strategies to master the workload in the University Entrance Qualification Course.

4. Dropouts and External Candidates



Despite the efforts to stimulate active and personalised learning, there is a constant number of dropouts as shown in Table 1. In general, participants often underestimate the requirements of the University Entrance Qualification Course; some of them fail to deal with ineffective learning methods and poor time management which is mostly characterised by procrastination – *I will look into this assignment during the Christmas break*. Others pre-emptively drop out because they believe they will fail the exam. Apart from financial constraints and limited funding, intensive schedules such as a six-to-eight-hour workdays plus evening classes on top of typical family obligations often lead to exhaustion and anxiety. Quite often, the participants do not have a clear career path in mind either. They simply attend the course to find out if they might succeed in its completion. The most obvious warning sign in their behaviour is that they do not regularly attend classes any longer which predominantly leads to declining grades. As a further step, the potential dropouts withdraw from peers and start expressing their concerns about positive course completion by giving various explanations and excuses. Despite the different forms of immediate intervention such as motivational coaching, counselling (e.g., time and stress management, learn how to learn strategies) and peer mentoring (e.g., student representatives) it is difficult to keep the retention rate constant.

A direct comparison to the candidates preparing individually for the University Entrance Qualification Exam is not possible due to the lack of available and consolidated data from their preparation phase. In general, these candidates are provided with the exam requirements and criteria upon registration and are invited to assess their current performance individually. Furthermore, they receive advice on learning strategies and complementary practice material including language learning apps. As the written part of the exam shares similarities with the design of the final exam for the internal candidates, certain insights for analysis are provided. Apart from these, talks directly following the oral exams regarding feedback are held and the information gained allows to draw preliminary and tentative conclusions. In general, external candidates report on a higher exposure to English due to various reasons; these range from previous school experience (e.g., dropouts at 11th grade at grammar school due to Mathematics, Latin; social year, year abroad), private interests (e.g., reading preferences, IT, music, gaming) to workplace experience (again IT, social media, design). Hence, these candidates feel confident to have already reached a B1 to B2 level according to the CEFR and capable to tackle the preparation demands. A lower dropout rate (below 20%) and a high number of excellent/good grades provide evidence for their self-evaluation.

5. Conclusion

The aim of the University Entrance Qualification Course is to enable adult participants with different vocational training backgrounds to access higher education in pre-defined domains. However, this is often a difficult and demanding undertaking as candidates have to tackle a demanding workload of 150 hours in English with only 51 hours of contact time, resulting in an average persistent dropout rate of 20 to 30 percent per academic year. A major pedagogical issue is the illusion of competence, where students overestimate their abilities, especially in grammar, due to passive learning methods and a disparity between familiarity and practical application.

Over the years, learning preferences have changed for example from reading to listening, which is motivated by the participants' digital consumption habits, shorter attention spans, and the cognitive ease of audio content. Hence, this requires regular curriculum adaptation towards more dynamic and multisensory practice materials. Although the course implements effective support systems such as diagnostic placement tests, continuous formative assessment, and peer mentoring, these interventions have not significantly reduced dropout rates. The technology integration through Moodle and language learning apps clearly supports self-study but must be combined with active learning strategies to overcome traditionally passive learning patterns. Despite a balanced assessment and curricular adaptation allowing a higher exposure to digital tools, participants must aim at a higher willingness to active engagement and more active recall practice.

All in all, the University Entrance Qualification Course effectively bridges the educational gaps for non-traditional learners but needs to address these multifaceted challenges to significantly enhance retention and improve learning outcomes.

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