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The Participatory Development of the Styrian Youth Strategy With an Action Plan

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~ The Styrian Youth Strategy was developed through a participatory and evidence-based process to provide a strategic framework for improving the living conditions of young people in Styria, Austria. Recognising youth as a cross-cutting policy area, and in alignment with the Austrian Youth Strategy and the European Youth Goals, the project combined qualitative and quantitative methods between 2022 and 2023. These methods included semi-structured interviews with adolescents ($n = 15$) and youth sector professionals ($n = 16$), an online survey of professionals ($n = 60$) and five workshops involving professionals, young people and administrative leaders. Aims for ten thematic fields were formulated, accompanied by an action plan. Of the ten areas identified, seven are described briefly while three are explored in depth: participation and political education (embedding youth voice, co-decision, and civic engagement); health promotion and prevention (integrating behavioural and structural determinants, with a focus on mental health, risk-informed behaviour, and coordinated services); and diverse education and information (promoting equity across formal, non-formal, and informal learning; encouraging multi-professional cooperation; and providing guidance for educational and career pathways). The strategy was accepted by the Styrian Provincial Parliament and incorporated into the Styrian Youth Act, influencing funding cultures and administrative practice. Limitations include the challenge of adequately representing a heterogeneous youth population within finite resources. Ongoing evaluation, inclusive participation formats and international exchange are recommended. This process shows how participatory governance, intersectoral coordination and data-informed planning can transform criticism into constructive institutional development and consensus-based implementation.

Keywords: youth strategy, intersectoral governance, youth health and well-being, political education and participation

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Participatorna priprava strategije za mlade z akcijskim načrtom avstrijske Štajerske

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~ Strategija za mlade avstrijske Štajerske je bila pripravljena v okviru participativnega in na dokazih utemeljenega procesa, da bi zagotovila strateški okvir za izboljšanje življenjskih pogojev mladih na Štajerskem v Avstriji. Ob priznavanju mladine kot medsektorskega področja politike ter skladno z avstrijsko strategijo za mlade in evropskimi cilji za mlade je projekt v obdobju med letoma 2022 in 2023 združil kvalitativne in kvantitativne metode. Te metode so vključevale polstrukturirane intervjuje z najstniki ($n = 15$) in s strokovnjaki s področja mladih ($n = 16$), spletno anketo med strokovnjaki ($n = 60$) in pet delavnic, v katerih so sodelovali strokovnjaki, mladi in vodilni strokovni sodelavci. Oblikovani so bili cilji za deset tematskih področij, ki jih spremlja akcijski načrt. Od desetih opredeljenih področij je sedem opisanih na kratko, tri pa so podrobneje obravnavana: sodelovanje in politično izobraževanje (vključevanje glasu mladih, soodločanje in državljanska udeležba); spodbujanje zdravja in preprečevanje (vključevanje vedenjskih in strukturnih determinant s poudarkom na duševnem zdravju, vedenju, ki upošteva tveganja, in na usklajenih storitvah); raznoliko izobraževanje in obveščanje (spodbujanje enakopravnosti v formalnem, neformalnem in v informalnem učenju; spodbujanje medpoklicnega sodelovanja; zagotavljanje usmerjanja za izobraževalne in poklicne poti). Strategijo je sprejel Deželni zbor avstrijske Štajerske in jo vključil v Zakon o mladih avstrijske Štajerske, kar je vplivalo na kulturo financiranja in upravno prakso. Med omejitve sodi izziv ustreznega zastopanja raznolike mladinske populacije v okviru omejenih virov. Priporočajo se: stalno ocenjevanje, vključujoče oblike sodelovanja in mednarodna izmenjava. Ta proces kaže, kako lahko participativno upravljanje, medsektorsko usklajevanje in načrtovanje na podlagi podatkov kritiko spremenijo v konstruktiven institucionalni razvoj in izvajanje, ki temelji na soglasju.

Ključne besede: strategija za mlade, medsektorsko upravljanje, zdravje in dobro počutje mladih, politično izobraževanje in sodelovanje

Introduction

Youth – Between Challenges and Opportunities

Youth is an exciting and challenging phase of life, during which many decisions are made that will shape the future. This applies not only to the personal life path of each young person, but also to society as a whole. The direction in which our society moves depends largely on how young people grow up, the experiences they have and how they develop today. Therefore, creating the best possible living conditions for young people is a socio-political obligation. This is highly relevant in the present day, but will also have an impact beyond that.

In this sense, youth can be understood as a phase involving a series of developmental tasks and crises (Havighurst, 1953; Quenzel & Hurrelmann, 2022). These must be experienced and completed against the backdrop of individual resources and circumstances in order to finally leave the phase of youth behind and ideally be equipped with everything necessary for full participation in society.

Alongside these ideas about the socialisation of young people, there are also notions of viewing young people of a certain age group as a homogeneous entity. According to Mannheim (1964), generations are defined as groups born into specific structural conditions (e.g. economic, political, educational and technological) that shape the opportunities available during their upbringing. Following on from this, Fend (1988) posits that this results in the cultural expression of a generation, comprising the patterns of thought, values, worldviews and lifestyles that people of a similar age use to shape their lives (Albert et al., 2019).

Social changes and the associated changes in the conditions of growing up therefore result in new demands on young people, reflected in specific behavioural patterns. The numerous crises, as well as the undeniable improvements in certain areas, thus shape the challenges and lifestyles of adolescents and young adults belonging to Generations Z and Alpha. To support all young people in this context, adaptive structures are needed, with additional support for those unable to develop appropriate opportunities for participation independently or within their immediate environment.

Youth Strategies – Research Problem and Questions

The Austrian government is pursuing a youth strategy. This strategy is dynamic and updated regularly. Since 2020, more than 30 youth goals have been developed (Bundeskanzleramt, 2024). In Europe, the European Youth Goals are prominent (EU, 2018).

Based on these strategies, our research addressed the need to develop a future-oriented, evidence-based and participatory youth strategy for Styria (as a federal state of Austria), which is scientifically grounded and can be implemented across sectors. As youth is a cross-cutting policy domain, isolated departmental action is insufficient. The challenge was to integrate the perspectives of various stakeholders, including young people, youth workers, educators, health and social services, administrators and politicians, into a strategic document and action plan that would improve living conditions and participation opportunities while remaining realistic within legal, organisational and budgetary constraints.

Based on this problem, the study pursued the following research questions:

1. How do adolescents and youth-sector professionals in Styria prioritise the most relevant thematic areas for a youth strategy, and what justifications underpin these priorities?
2. What objectives, target groups, measures, principles of action and implementation conditions are proposed by these stakeholders across the identified fields?
3. How can these diverse contributions be synthesised into a coherent set of action areas that are aligned with national and European frameworks and command cross-party and cross-departmental support?

Method

It is important to emphasise that the empirical data form the basis for developing the strategy through communication group processes.

Participants

The study targeted three primary stakeholder groups in Styria (Austria): Adolescents and young adults aged 15–22 were recruited to reflect diverse socioeconomic backgrounds and life situations. They were recruited through organisations that deal with youth work. Youth-sector and youth-related professionals who worked in areas such as participation, open and organised youth work, youth culture, street work, child and youth welfare, education, careers guidance, media education, health, research and youth policy were also recruited. Administrative staff from several Styrian departments also participated in a validation workshop. All of the professionals were recruited by the Styrian provincial government.

Instruments for Data Collection

Three instruments were used to collect data for the present study. These include semi-structured interview guides, online questionnaires, and validation workshops.

Semi-structured interview guides were designed to be administered to both adolescents and professionals. Part 1 elicited open reflections on the content, structure and organisation of the strategy. Part 2 introduced pre-identified topic areas, and participants were asked to justify three priority topics, as well as to articulate the associated objectives, target groups, necessary measures, principles of action, and implementation conditions. Interviews lasted about 60 minutes and were conducted with the participants' consent in accordance with data protection guidelines.

Online questionnaires were designed to be administered to professionals. These mirrored the content of the interviews, collecting information on prioritised topics and objectives. The consultation yielded 104 distinct objectives, each with a justification and description.

Five externally moderated validation workshops (three with professionals, one with young people and one with cross-departmental administrators) used structured discussion guides to review draft texts and capture suggestions for amendments.

Research Design and Procedure

Work on this youth strategy began in April 2022 with a constitutional meeting of a steering group to discuss and agree on an implementation concept that had been developed previously. This was followed by an investigation of national and international youth strategies and relevant literature to establish compatibility with the thematic structure of previously published youth strategies.

The research was conducted as a sequential, mixed-methods, participatory process from April 2022 to June 2023.

Phase 1 (April–August 2022): A steering group was constituted and the implementation concept was agreed; desk research mapped national and international strategies and literature to frame topics.

Phase 2 (September–October 2022): Qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted with adolescents ($n = 15$) and professionals ($n = 16$). In parallel, an online sectoral survey was conducted in October 2022 (invitees $n = 214$; respondents $n = 60$), which broadened input and triangulated priorities.

Phase 3 (November 2022–January 2023): the analysis synthesised the outputs of the interviews and the survey into a classified set of objectives across the relevant fields of action for the strategy. The steering group reached a consensus on the thematic architecture in January 2023.

Phase 4 (February–April 2023): draft strategy texts and an initial action plan were produced and iteratively validated across five workshops, with feedback systematically integrated.

Phase 5 (from June 2023): Finalisation by the steering group in close collaboration with the Youth Department of Unit 6 “Education and Society” of the Provincial Government of Styria.

Results

Vision

As an essential starting point for work on the youth strategy, a vision was developed to provide guidance and direction throughout the entire process. This vision establishes the framework for all subsequent considerations and defines the horizon towards which the individual goals and measures are directed. It describes the desired future for young people in Styria as follows:

“All young people in Styria find living conditions in which they feel comfortable and which they can actively influence. They are given spaces, places and opportunities to grow into independent, self-confident young adults. They can develop their personalities in an open society according to their interests and inclinations, and they are recognised as individuals with all their diversity. They are strengthened in their development and supported across the board with high-quality individual and structural-level services in line with their needs and requirements.”

Topics

From the multitude of possible topics, ten subject areas were identified that were given particular focus. For each of these areas, four elements were initially formulated: a vision of the future; key terms; the initial situation; and strategic goals. These were accompanied by a brief commentary. Additionally, an action plan for the period from 2024 to 2026 was published, outlining the goals and planned activities of each subject area. When naming the topics, it was important for the core intention to be communicated in the name itself. We also wanted to make the presence of young people particularly visible, which is

why we included individual quotes from them. To provide an insight into the subject areas, seven topics will first be presented briefly, followed by a more detailed introduction to three of them.

Being Protected – Violence Protection and Youth Protection

Young people are exposed to numerous dangers, including accidents and drugs (Sande et al., 2025). The aim is to empower young people to recognise and avoid dangers, while also designing structures that minimise risks. Violence poses a real danger to young people and can have serious consequences. The effective protection of young people requires prevention, safe living environments, qualified personnel and clear framework conditions. Protecting young people means more than just prohibitions; it also involves empowering them, educating them, and enabling them to deal with risks responsibly.

Being Unique – Personality and Identity

For young people, developing their identity means shaping their uniqueness in confrontation with norms, role models and expectations. To achieve this, they need freedom and opportunities to experiment, as well as support on their journey towards independence and developing their own sense of self. A social atmosphere that tolerates individual life stories is part of peaceful coexistence.

Living Together – Coexistence and Community

As social beings, people need respect, support and a sense of mutual responsibility in order to live together harmoniously. Family, peer groups, intergenerational exchange and intimate relationships have a particularly strong influence on young people. Participation, equal opportunities and freedom form the basis of an open society that is founded on solidarity, tolerance and collective action.

Expressing Oneself Culturally – Youth Culture and Leisure

Young people need access to culture and creative outlets to promote identity, belonging, and recognition. Youth culture is changeable and dependent on the generation in question, and is often a source of innovation. Leisure activities can include analogue and digital socialising, art, sports, engagement, celebrations, and relaxation. However, not all young people have equal access to free time and opportunities.

Growing Up Hybrid – Digitalisation and Media Literacy

Digital transformation is shaping all areas of life, especially for young people who live in a hybrid world of analogue and digital. Digital media facilitate social contact, creative expression, political participation and access to knowledge and skills. However, risks such as social isolation, cyberbullying, radicalisation, data misuse and commercial exploitation also arise. A key challenge is distinguishing between reliable and manipulated information. Young people need media and information literacy, as well as self-confidence, to be able to critically evaluate content.

Feeling at Home in the Region – Regions and Municipalities

As of 2018, Styria consists of seven regions which are managed regionally, with the intention of ensuring a high quality of life for individuals. Young people play a central role in this, as they represent the future, the workforce, families and innovation. In order to prevent migration, regions must create attractive opportunities in terms of education, work, housing and leisure, as well as strengthening social infrastructure. Clubs, meeting places, and public transport are particularly important. Regional Youth Management (RJM) ensures that youth issues are addressed, coordinated, and implemented with concrete measures in all regions.

Sustainable Design – Sustainability and Climate Protection

Young people are growing up in a world marked by crises such as climate change, species loss and the over-use of resources. While many are actively involved, not all have equal access to participation, which can lead to feelings of powerlessness. Education should promote environmental awareness, highlight constructive ways to take action, and provide opportunities for young people to contribute to solutions without making them feel responsible for previous generations' failures.

Three of the ten topics will now be selected and discussed in more detail, based on the Styrian Youth Strategy.

Getting Involved – Participation and Political Education

The picture of the future is of young people in Styria who view democracy as an essential social attitude. They possess the interpersonal skills necessary for exchanging ideas with others regarding the development and implementation of plans, as well as communicating with one another. They actively shape their living environments and contribute to the management and

transformation of organisations. Their views are heard and their intentions are taken into account.

The initial situation refers to participation rights, such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Austrian Committee for Children's Rights, 2026), and highlights the democratic goal of people participating in social development and life. It is expected that the effects of a culture of participation in all areas of life and organisations will include greater identification and improved quality. This should encourage young people to take responsibility for themselves and the common good. Participation begins in the family and continues in school, clubs and the workplace. Programmes in youth centres (Gspurning & Heimgartner, 2016), life in the youth welfare system (Heimgartner & Reichner, 2023) and subjects and teachers in schools (Bugram et al., 2014) should be co-determined by young people. Many areas of daily life, such as interior design, programme development, media design or house rules, can be developed in a participatory manner. Participation is not the responsibility of one person alone, but rather involves equitable dialogue and constructive cooperation. Professionals must recognise young people's expertise in relation to their living environments, listen to them and take them seriously. Grassroots democratic action, socio-political engagement, and active voting behaviour are important for political development.

The goals to be achieved through participation are diverse and relate to both the young people themselves and the content being worked on. A primary goal is to improve services by enabling young people to represent themselves. Additionally, young people should be prepared for life as active and responsible members of society. Participation is intended to promote identification with social life, compliance with rules, respect for the environment and, ultimately, the well-being of all. The complexity of society and coexistence, particularly in diverse European societies, requires active participation to ensure continued innovation and unity.

At its core, participation involves information, having a say, joint decision-making and involvement. Options are discussed and selected together. Action steps are designed together. Young people are actively involved in all phases of a project wherever possible, and experience the effects of their participation first-hand. Problems arise when young people are marginalised, disappointed, or discouraged from participating. It is particularly important for young people that their contributions are taken seriously. Clear communication of the framework conditions and objectives is essential for participation processes. Conversely, young people need to learn that not all of their concerns can be realised in a democracy and that a great deal of negotiation is necessary

to reach joint agreements that take into account the needs of everyone involved. The goals and areas of action are listed below:

Goal 1: Young people are recognised as individuals; their opinions are heard and they are treated as equals.

The key to integrating young people's concerns into social processes in a sustainable way is to anchor their participation in institutions and organisations that work with young people on a structural level. At the same time, it is crucial to empower young people to freely develop and express their own opinions. To this end, suitable spaces and platforms must be created to enable open and respectful dialogue.

Goal 2: Young people have a say in their living environments; they participate and make decisions. In doing so, they experience participation in all areas of society and at all levels of political action.

It is vital that young people are actively involved in social and political life. Participation projects designed specifically for young people enable them to contribute their ideas and perspectives. Taking part in local council meetings enables young people to influence municipal decisions and engage with relevant issues. There, young people can express their views on important social issues in a structured setting and learn about political decision-making processes. Such initiatives empower young people, encouraging them to play an active role in shaping their living environment and developing an understanding of democratic processes.

Goal 3: Young people have the opportunity to engage with civil society, thereby contributing to social life and well-being.

It is essential to recognise and value young people's voluntary work as part of youth development. Targeted programmes and recognition motivate and strengthen young volunteers. It is also important to actively support young people in implementing their own projects. This provides them with the necessary technical and organisational support, as well as the opportunity to develop ideas independently, express their creativity (Sušić & Brebrić, 2025), and gain valuable experience in practical implementation.

Goal 4: Young people receive the information and acquire the skills they need for democratic coexistence.

Promoting political education is crucial for encouraging young people to participate actively in social processes. It is also important to raise young people's awareness of their role within Europe and the global community. This enables them to better grasp global challenges and contexts, and recognise their place in an interconnected world.

Promoting international mobility among young people is particularly valuable. Through cultural exchanges, such as stays abroad, projects or international youth encounters, they can broaden their horizons, develop intercultural skills and contribute to cross-border dialogue. This combination of political education, global awareness, language skills (Rozmanič et al., 2025) and international mobility empowers young people to actively shape the future as responsible, cosmopolitan citizens.

Growing Up Healthy – Health Promotion and Prevention

A desirable prospective future was defined as providing healthy living conditions for Styrian adolescents that would help them to maintain and restore their physical and mental health. Furthermore, adolescents' personal resources should be strengthened so that they learn to appreciate themselves, recognise their strengths and weaknesses, act with self-efficacy, and face adversity and crises with resilience.

According to the *Ottawa Charter* of the World Health Organization, "health is created by people within the settings of their everyday life; where they learn, work, play and love" (WHO, 1986, p. 7). While individual lifestyles such as eating, exercise and consumption habits influence health, they are also heavily influenced by the extent of social integration (e.g. family, peers, school and workplace), which in turn is influenced by living conditions (e.g. mobility, access to leisure opportunities and school situation) and ultimately, at a macro level, by socio-economic, cultural and environmental factors. The interplay between individuals and their environments has been described in models such as Dahlgren and Whitehead's (1991) health determinants (also known as the rainbow model) and Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 2000).

In summary, health largely emerges from everyday social interactions in the places where young people live, go to school or work, learn, and spend their free time. These environments directly and indirectly impact young people's lifestyles and health prospects.

However, health promotion and prevention are sometimes restricted to interventions that aim to change individual lifestyles or strengthen health literacy. Such interventions undoubtedly play a vital role in enhancing adolescents' sense of self-efficacy. However, it is evident that individual health behaviours always emerge from living conditions that largely lie beyond adolescents' control. For instance, initiatives that promote physical activity will be ineffective if young people do not have access to appealing spaces in which they can be active.

Therefore, it is essential that the planning and implementation of health objectives and interventions for young people address all relevant health determinants, ensuring the well-coordinated integration of behavioural and environmental structural policies and measures. Therefore, adolescent health-related quality of life is an issue that cuts across multiple policy domains. Political decisions and outcomes substantially influence young people's health. Creating health-promoting living conditions for adolescents can be significantly enhanced through intersectoral collaboration between sectors such as health, education, social services, the economy and labour markets, as well as with the active engagement of stakeholders in the youth sector.

Furthermore, enhancing adolescents' personal resources and competencies is crucial for fostering their well-being and enabling them to actively promote their physical and mental health. The latter is particularly salient during adolescence, with recent years witnessing a notable increase in mental distress and burden among young people. Evidence from international (Keyes & Platt, 2023; Odgers & Jensen, 2020; Schlack et al., 2022), national (Felder-Puig et al., 2023) and regional (Auferbauer & Straßegger-Einfalt, 2021; Lederer-Hutsteiner et al., 2024; x-sample, 2023) studies indicates a high prevalence of compromised quality of life and psychological distress, including anxiety, sleep disturbances, depressive moods etc. There is also evidence of engagement in conflict-prone behaviours such as the problematic use of digital applications and devices (x-sample, 2023). Across these studies, female adolescents consistently report substantially higher levels of psychological distress. Accordingly, interventions within the healthcare system, such as expanding psychotherapeutic services for children and adolescents, as well as systematically promoting life and health competencies among young people, are essential.

Adolescence is associated with numerous developmental and orientation tasks that require individual skills for successful navigation, in addition to favourable living conditions. Life and health competencies can enhance self-efficacy and resilience, and help to compensate for adverse living conditions, particularly in times of crisis. Furthermore, they protect against the negative impact on self-esteem of content encountered on social media. According to Radulović and Stančić (2017), interventions aimed at enhancing life competencies can make a wide range of individual resources visible. Consequently, such interventions also have a strong universal preventive effect against addictive behaviours and contribute to promoting overall health. Based on this initial situation, the following youth health-related objectives and measures were formulated:

Goal 1: Adolescents and their families are engaged, irrespective of their socioeconomic background, through the provision of tailored information,

counselling and health services.

The health of young people is a key issue requiring comprehensive information and support. One important approach is to improve communication and information provision regarding youth health for caregivers. Parents and other caregivers play a vital part in raising awareness of health issues among young people and supporting them (Loch, 2016). It is also important to promote health-related information and counselling services for young people, thereby empowering them to take responsibility for their own health. Such services should be easily accessible and tailored to their needs. Another important aspect is providing information about free preventive and vaccination services and ensuring continued access to them. These measures support preventive healthcare, ensuring that young people can take the necessary protective measures.

Goal 2: Enhancing adolescents' mental health through strengthening internal resources and empowerment activities.

Promoting the mental health of young people is becoming increasingly important and requires comprehensive, tailored measures. A key approach is to develop and expand programmes dedicated to strengthening mental health. As well as having a preventive effect, these programmes should offer targeted support to help young people cope with mental health challenges. Additionally, preventive initiatives within extracurricular youth programmes are highly significant. Taking place in the spaces where young people spend their free time, these initiatives provide opportunities for the early detection of mental health issues and raise awareness of mental health issues, while also providing immediate support.

Goal 3: Adolescents develop the skills to engage with substances and health-risk behaviours in a risk-informed and responsible manner.

Promoting the health and social development of young people, particularly with regard to sensitive issues such as problematic internet use and substance abuse, requires a joint, interdisciplinary approach. A key step towards this is the active involvement of all relevant institutions and stakeholders in extracurricular youth work in implementing the *Styrian Action Plan for Addressing Problematic Internet Use*, commissioned by the Styrian Health Fund (Lederer-Hutsteiner & Koberg, 2024). The aim is to raise awareness of problematic internet use and provide timely support to young people and their caregivers through a coordinated approach. At the same time, great importance is attached to strengthening preventive, counselling and support services relating to substance use.

These services are designed to help young people develop a conscious and responsible approach to addictive substances, and to recognise and cope with risks at an early stage. To further increase the effectiveness of these measures, the establishment of a competence group for youth-related substance use is being promoted.

Goal 4: To reinforce awareness of adolescent health issues among policymakers and administrative decision-makers through targeted advocacy, while actively strengthening networking and collaborative efforts.

In order to promote the sustainable health of young people in Styria, a strategic and well-coordinated approach is required. A key step in this regard is the establishment of a dedicated coordination office for youth health. This office will serve as a central point of contact, bringing together various health promotion measures and stakeholders in a targeted manner, and ensuring the effective implementation of projects. This coordination structure will exploit synergies between different stakeholders and enable the health needs of children and young people to be targeted more specifically. Another important part of this process is the regular collection and reporting of data on the health of children and young people in Styria. This systematic data collection will provide valuable insights into the health status of young people and the key challenges they face.

Goal 5: Promoting adolescents' health encompasses all levels of health determinants, with a particular focus on fostering health-supportive living conditions.

Promoting health and raising awareness of preventive measures are key components of holistic youth development. An important approach in this area is to provide youth workers with ongoing training opportunities to enhance their health promotion and prevention skills. These courses enable professionals to respond specifically to the needs of young people and implement effective programmes. Furthermore, collaboration and knowledge exchange between health experts, youth workers, child and youth services, and educational institutions is essential. Another focus is on programmes tailored to specific target groups that aim to improve young people's health literacy in all areas of education.

Diverse Education – Education and Information

The vision for education and information of young people is that all young people in Styria acquire the information, skills and qualifications needed

to lead good, self-determined lives, regardless of their background. Educational opportunities should provide spaces for experimentation while balancing openness and guidance in navigating social change (Sardoč, 2021).

Education is a central social resource and encompasses formal, non-formal and informal learning. Learning takes place in families and peer groups, youth work, schools and other institutions, with informal learning being particularly important as many skills are acquired outside formal curricula. Education therefore extends beyond school and should provide young people with opportunities for learning, experimentation and educational and career development. Lifelong learning is both a labour-market requirement and an opportunity for personal growth and reorientation.

In a rapidly changing society, skills such as communication, organisation, negotiation and compromise are particularly developed in real-life settings such as clubs, youth centres and peer groups. At the same time, school remains crucial, as qualifications strongly influence access to further education, employment and long-term financial independence (Meusburger et al., 2021). Greater educational equity is needed, as social background continues to influence school careers. Psychosocial support, school social work and cooperation with specialist agencies are therefore important (Koschmieder & Unterköfler-Klatzer, 2025; Schmich & Itzlinger-Bruneforth, 2018).

Closer cooperation between formal education and youth work, supported by structured exchange and joint professional training, is particularly relevant with the expansion of all-day schools. Early access to education and positive attitudes towards learning can help prevent dropouts and stereotypical educational pathways based on gender, class, ethnicity or ability. Supportive structures can compensate for disadvantages and help unlock the potential of all young people. The following objectives and measures were derived from this initial situation.

Goal 1: Young people should be able to discover and develop their individual interests and talents.

It is essential to promote creativity and individual talents in order to support the personal and social development of young people. A key starting point is creating and expanding spaces where young people can experiment and enjoy freedom. In such environments, young people can explore their interests and discover their potential, growing as individuals in the process. These protected spaces give young people the freedom to develop new ideas, unleash their creativity and gain valuable experience. Additionally, targeted programmes promote the development of talents and gifts. These initiatives particularly support gifted

young people, helping them to reach their full potential by building on their strengths. Comprehensive non-formal educational opportunities also play a central role in structured forms of extracurricular youth work.

Goal 2: Young people are well-informed about the educational and career opportunities available to them.

Strengthening and targeting the expansion of educational and career guidance services is a key measure for providing young people with diverse and forward-looking opportunities at an early stage. As part of the Styrian strategy for educational and career guidance (BBO-LG 2017), these services are continuously being developed and adapted to meet the evolving demands of the modern working world. A particular focus is placed on providing young people with comprehensive information and supporting them in making their own decisions. Another important aspect is engaging companies and institutions in educational and career guidance. Working with businesses gives young people the chance to learn about different job sectors, gain practical experience, and make direct connections with potential employers.

Goal 3: Young people experience school as a place of education, development, cooperation and support.

Supporting young people in educational institutions is essential for creating an environment that fosters their development and considers their individual needs, enabling them to fulfil their potential. One important approach is to provide targeted support for specific groups, empowering children and young people and fostering their independence and skills. These measures support pupils in their personal lives and accompany them on their journey. Additionally, the focus is on designing schools as environments that promote the health and well-being of young people. Schools should be places that educate and promote the physical, mental, and social well-being of pupils. This can be achieved through health promotion programmes, exercise opportunities, a positive school atmosphere and psychological support. Another key point is to intensify multi-professional cooperation in schools. Close collaboration between professionals such as teachers, school social workers, psychologists, and special educational needs teachers enables problems to be identified early and targeted support measures to be implemented.

Goal 4: Young people receive the information and acquire the skills they need to lead a self-determined life.

Promoting education and prevention is central to supporting young

people in their development and helping them to overcome today's challenges. A key approach is strengthening extracurricular youth work facilities and schools as important venues for prevention and information. Another focus is expanding projects that promote young people's financial and economic skills. As handling money and economic relationships consciously is becoming increasingly important for their future, it is crucial that young people learn to make economic decisions and deal responsibly with topics such as budget management, consumer behaviour and savings opportunities.

Conclusion

The project demonstrates the willingness of young people, professionals and government employees to shape the future. Since the Styrian Youth Strategy was unanimously approved by all parties in the Styrian Provincial Parliament, it demonstrates that a consensus can be found with the appropriate effort and commitment.

It is also important to note that the atmosphere during the implementation of this project was very positive. There was a palpable sense of optimism. Providing people with the opportunity to participate in the development of structures enables them to overcome passivity or anger. They are confronted with the task of bringing about realistic change and can engage with their own ideas in a concrete way. Shifting from criticism to constructive development is an important element of the strategic approach.

The tremendous support from colleagues in the relevant department was crucial to the project's success. They played a key role in organising and coordinating stakeholders. The action plan's concrete details and the dissemination of information to communities were largely based on these colleagues' experience. Part of this support involved trusting social science and evidence-based approaches.

It is also clear that putting this into action requires a lot of human effort. In light of the warning that the strategy might not produce any tangible achievements and that things might simply continue as before, great importance is now being placed on implementing the strategy. The goals and measures derived from the strategy can only be implemented through the cooperation of all those involved.

The Styrian strategy has now been incorporated into the Styrian Youth Act and influences the funding culture. The idea of including young people in all areas of politics is an attempt to recognise the important role they play in the development of society and the future of a country.

Limitations

When a strategy is developed through a participatory process, it becomes evident that its quality improves significantly when a broad range of stakeholders are adequately involved and actively participate. However, when it comes to integrating the concerns of young people into policymaking across all areas, it is important to recognise that young people are not a homogeneous group. They represent a highly diverse demographic, encompassing individuals with different life situations, access to resources, and legal and socio-economic circumstances. Limited resources, time constraints and logistical challenges make it difficult to adequately engage and represent every segment of such a varied group. Thus, while the participatory approach is recognised as essential for high-quality strategies, it also brings with it the responsibility to continuously strive for greater inclusivity. This involves actively seeking ways to overcome barriers to participation and ensuring that the unique voices of all young people are considered to the greatest extent possible.

Further Research

The development and implementation of youth strategies is a dynamic process that requires continuous adaptation to new social, economic, and technological conditions. Specific measures, programmes and principles should be evaluated to better understand which approaches achieve the desired goals and where optimisation is needed. Future research should also focus intensively on the realities of life and the needs of different target groups. Additionally, there is a need to focus more strongly on youth participation in research. Innovative forms of participation could be explored, such as the use of digital tools or creative dialogue formats, to strengthen democratic participation and empower young people. Finally, research could contribute to deepening the international perspective on youth strategies further. Exchanging successful models and best practices from other regions or countries provides valuable inspiration and enables reflection on own approaches. The ultimate goal is to provide young people with the optimal conditions for their personal and social development, even in the face of the changing conditions of the 21st century.

Ethical Statement

The Research Management Office and the university administration at the University of Graz reviewed the research project to ensure its appropriateness

in terms of content, ethics, and costs. Consent forms for participation were obtained for the interviews. All interviews and workshops were conducted with the utmost care and respect. The workshops were externally moderated. The University of Graz's data protection guidelines were observed.

Data Availability Statement

The datasets generated and analysed during the current study, as well as the instruments used, are not publicly available due to government restrictions. However, they are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Disclosure Statement

This study was conducted in collaboration with the University of Graz, the University College of Teacher Education Styria and the research organisation x-sample. The empirical implementation of the study was commissioned and financed by the Province of Styria. The authors declare that they have no other personal commitments, economic interests or conflicts of interest that could compromise the independence of this publication.

When preparing this article, the authors used the recent browser-based version of DeepL for the purpose of proofreading. The authors subsequently reviewed and edited the output as necessary and accept full responsibility for the content and integrity of the publication.

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