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Co- and self-determination: congress staged for and by people with learning difficulties for the first time

Starting today, the Jugend am Werk Congress at the Austria Center Vienna will be sending out a special signal: and for the first time this year, it will be hosted not just for people with learning disabilities, but by them too. The new approach centres on key topics such as co- and self-determination and helping self-advocates to establish themselves and network with each other even more successfully.

“Everyone has the right to participate in society – a point which is also enshrined in the UN convention on human rights. All of us are called upon to do our bit when it comes to helping people play an active role in society,” explained Jugend am Werk Managing Director Brigitte Gottschall-Müller.

Self-advocates send out special signal through congress

Self-advocates are particularly important in each part of the process of expressing free will. They have learned not only to advocate for their own personal interests but also those of their peers – in their residential groups, workshops or other groups. “For us, these self-advocates have very clear parallels with works council representatives who have a huge responsibility to the people who appointed them and also perform the tasks entrusted to them with a very high degree of professionalism,” Gottschall-Müller said. Accordingly, she is extremely proud that a conference for self-advocates – the Jugend am Werk Congress – has been organised by people with learning difficulties for people with learning difficulties. Although Jugend am Werk provides support with basic organisation, ideation and funding, the core of the congress is down to the work of the self-advocates. They raise the topics that are important for their groups and network with self-advocates from Austria and abroad, as well as identifying opportunities for personal development. The congress not only focuses on co- and self-determination but also provides a textbook example of how people with learning disabilities can take control of their own lives.

Support with learning difficulties the key to participation in society

The path leading up to this point involved a major process of emancipation for people with learning difficulties. “This starts with the specific nomenclature, with the term ‘learning difficulties’ deliberately chosen as a very open and inclusive term that does not require a medical diagnosis and which speaks to a large group of people,” Gottschall-Müller added. In other words, it is not just people with physical and intellectual disabilities that can have learning difficulties, but many others too. As such, milder difficulties with reading qualify as a learning difficulty. Initially, it is parents or the school system that usually notice whether a child needs additional support when learning to read. Various assistance projects have been set up with minimal barriers to entry to ensure that young people with learning difficulties are not failed by the system when they reach the minimum school leaving age.

Setting clear objectives – first step towards co- and self-determination

All of these projects follow a resource-oriented approach, assessing what potential is available, where the young people are aiming to get to and how best to support them as they go



about pursuing their personal goals. Lots of young people with learning difficulties take advantage of specific offers in bespoke post-education settings to teach them methodological and cultural techniques for maths, German and reading comprehension, as well as to open the door to vocational training and help them along their individual paths. As personal objectives and life plans can vary widely from individual to individual, these are formulated for each young person and form a key step towards co- and self-determination. Some will be looking to break into the labour market, while others may be targeting a placement at a workshop that provides a structure for people with learning difficulties. Adults with learning difficulties also have access to projects that operate along similar lines with a view to helping them regain a foothold in society.

Why co- and self-determination is so important

All of these people require support if they are to claim their rightful place in society. A major part of this involves the use of plain language, the creation of an inclusive labour market and establishing self-advocacy. "Co- and self-determination is important, because even though these people require support, they have the right to make their own decisions concerning themselves and their lives. Sadly, this is something that has often been taken away from them in the past. Which makes it all the more important to place an emphasis on it today," Gottschall-Müller noted.

Self-advocates giving people with learning disabilities a voice

Self-advocates give people with learning disabilities a voice and, as a result, the opportunity to address, tackle and bring to life the subjects that are important to them. For example, living in shared accommodation has for a long time been directly tied to a job in a workshop. In Vienna, self-advocates have now made it possible for people with learning difficulties to choose to retire at 60 if they want to, without jeopardising their place in shared accommodation. The co- and self-determination congress running from today to 18 November represents a significant step towards the emancipation of people with learning disabilities and is seen as another milestone on their way to participating in society.

About IAKW-AG

Internationales Amtssitz- und Konferenzzentrum Wien, Aktiengesellschaft (IAKW-AG) is responsible for maintaining the Vienna International Centre (VIC) and operating the Austria Center Vienna. The Austria Center Vienna is Austria's largest conference centre, with 19 halls, 180 meeting rooms, and some 26,000 m² of exhibition space, and is one of the top players on the international conference circuit.

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