



Health promotion research in Austria: The status quo and development perspectives

Abstract: *Health promotion research is an important prerequisite for high-quality health promotion practice as well as for evidence-based decisions in (health) policies. In Austria, health promotion research is conducted at universities and universities of applied sciences as well as in the non-university sector and it is strongly practice oriented, as demonstrated by the wide range of topics arising from practice and its focus on implementation research. In order to strengthen the social impact of health promotion research in Austria, favourable research structures are required alongside continuous support for early career researchers and sustainable funding.*

Health promotion research as an investment in health promotion

Current challenges such as interconnected crises, demographic change, and health inequalities call for investments in health promotion that boost empowerment, inclusivity, equity, and meaningful participation (Geneva Charter for Well-Being, WHO 2021). One of the basic requirements for implementing health promotion measures effectively is the development of capacities in health promotion research (Aluttis et al. 2014; Griebler/Christ 2019). Knowledge creation and exchange between science, practical implementation, and policy are the prerequisites for making changes in determinants of health possible and finding solutions to complex health-related issues (Bryant 2002).

Over the last 20 years, health promotion research has become institutionalized on an international scale thanks to the establishment of journals, academic initial and continuing education programmes, and specialist departments in the tertiary and non-university sectors. Health promotion research has been shaped significantly and driven forward by researchers making use of their disciplinary backgrounds to investigate fundamental issues pinpointed in the Ottawa Charter (WHO 1986) (Potvin/Jourdan 2021). Their activities have resulted in inter- and transdisciplinary concepts that pick up on theories and models from other disciplines (including health education and health psychology) (Potvin/Jourdan 2021). Health promotion research pursues two goals: 1) to create an epistemological foundation for health promotion practice and 2) to contribute to social changes (Potvin/Jourdan 2021).

Mapping health promotion research

The mapping at hand represents a first step towards describing the stakeholders or organizations and projects in the field of health promotion research in Austria. The focus was placed on health promotion research explicitly designated as such in order to identify a core group of researchers working in the field who have done or are doing important development work within the framework of research projects.

As a basis for the mapping, a search was carried out in publicly accessible data on research activities and profiles using the search terms “Gesundheitsförderung” or “health promotion” and covering the period 2000 to June 2022 (e.g. research documentation at universities and universities of applied sciences, project databases from funding organizations, study portals). The research projects thus identified were clustered and characterized with reference to a range of quality criteria of health promotion (FGÖ n.d.), namely settings, target groups, and thematic focus, and according to established research approaches and questions in health promotion research (cf. Potvin/Jourdan 2021), namely implementation research/intervention research, evaluation research, policy-relevant research, and research into determinants of health. Relevant research in other fields which was not explicitly declared as health promotion research was not included in this mapping; neither were research-related activities like publications or organizing conferences.

In order to contextualize the data from the mapping process and to capture the potentials and challenges for health promotion research in Austria, six expert interviews were carried out with researchers. The data from the expert interviews were analysed and clustered, firstly deductively following the characteristics of health promotion research as a research field (cf. Potvin/Jourdan 2021) and then inductively. In addition, two workshops were held with experts working in health promotion research, education, and practice (n = 18). On the basis of these data, a first draft of this factsheet was produced that was then commented on by another eight experts in the field of health promotion (research, administration).

This factsheet provides a structured overview of the status quo of the health promotion research landscape. It should contribute to the discussion on strengthening research and education and can serve as a basis for making decisions about further developments in health promotion research in Austria. The factsheet will be made available to decision makers so that the aspect of research can be incorporated into current strategies and policies for health promotion based on sound knowledge.



Results: The status quo of health promotion research in Austria

In Austria, health promotion research established itself following and in parallel to international developments and social reform movements in the 1980s in various research (practice) contexts, for example as part of the “Modellversuch Gesundheitsbildung” (Health education pilot project) run by the Department of Health and Organizational Development at the Interdisciplinary Institute for Research and Continuing Education (Interdisziplinäres Institut für Forschung und Fortbildung, IFF) and in the course of the WHO Model Project “Gesundheit und Krankenhaus” (Health and hospital) in Vienna run by the Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for the Sociology of Health and Medicine (LBI für Medizin- und Gesundheitssoziologie). The founding of the Austrian Public Health Association (Österreichische Gesellschaft für Public Health, ÖGPH) was another important milestone (Grossmann/Scala 1996; Ruckstuhl 2011).

Orientation towards health promotion practice is cited as an important characteristic of health promotion research; this applies to the issues that are addressed and also to knowledge development and the transfer of knowledge in various settings. Other key characteristics are a focus on empowerment, the settings approach, and participation. Research work in health promotion research is almost always project based.

Research activities

A total of 57 projects were identified at **universities and universities of applied sciences** which were designated as health promotion research. Most of them were in the area of intervention and implementation research, followed by evaluation research, research into determinants of health, and policy research. Community settings and workplaces were mentioned most frequently in individual projects, followed by schools, kindergartens, and health and care facilities. The target groups named most often were the general public and children, followed by company employees, young people, and older people. Topic-wise, the projects focused on psychosocial health, exercise, nutrition, and health literacy. At universities, cooperation partners were mostly other researchers, followed by practitioners and administrators, and included both national and international partners. Research projects at universities of applied sciences cooperated primarily with practitioners, followed by administrators and the private sector, and were mostly regional or national in scope.

Explicitly designated health promotion research at **universities** was represented in research profiles and structures as (a small) part of larger, well-established research contexts. The underlying disciplines were diverse, ranging from sport and exercise science, nutritional science, and (social) medicine via nursing science and public health to sociology, psychology, business administration, and political science. Projects involving health promotion research were identified at the following universities:

- » Medizinische Universität Graz
- » Medizinische Universität Wien
- » Universität Graz
- » Universität Klagenfurt
- » Universität Linz
- » Universität Salzburg
- » Universität Wien
- » Universität für Bodenkultur
- » Universität für Weiterbildung Krems
- » UMIT – Private Universität für Gesundheitswissenschaften, Medizinische Informatik und Technik

Over the last 10 years, **universities of applied sciences** have established their own research structures like research centres or research groups. Projects involving health promotion research were identified at the following universities of applied sciences:

- » Fachhochschule Burgenland
- » Fachhochschule Joanneum
- » Fachhochschule Kärnten
- » Fachhochschule Salzburg
- » Fachhochschule St. Pölten
- » Fachhochschule Oberösterreich
- » Fachhochschule Wiener Neustadt
- » Fachhochschule MCI Innsbruck
- » Fachhochschule Campus Wien
- » Ferdinand-Porsche-Fernfachhochschule

It was not possible to record health promotion research in the **non-university sector** in more than a cursory manner. Most of the projects identified in this context were concerned with evaluation research. The Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for Health Promotion Research (LBIHPR; 2008–2016) built on longstanding research work carried out by the Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for the Sociology of Health

and Medicine (LBIHPR n.d.). Evaluation research, research into determinants of health, and policy research as well as intervention or implementation research, albeit to a lesser extent, is carried out by the Austrian National Public Health Institute (Gesundheit Österreich GmbH, GÖG) and the Competence Centre for Social Security Institutions at the Institute for Health Promotion and Prevention (Institut für Gesundheitsförderung und Prävention, IfGP). The Karl Landsteiner Institute for Health Promotion Research focuses on lifestyle-based health promotion and improving health literacy, amongst others.

There are also a number of other institutions that conduct research relevant to health promotion and which were named by the experts. The Open Innovation in Science Center at the Ludwig Boltzmann Society addresses transdisciplinary and participatory approaches in research, its current focus being on caring communities. The specialist groups at the Austrian Public Health Association are active in health promotion research. In addition, research projects funded by the Sparkling Science programme run jointly by the Agency for Education and Internationalization (OeAD) and the Federal Ministry of Education, Science, and Research (BMBWF) can certainly be compatible with health promotion research.

Challenges for health promotion research in Austria



Due to its inter- and transdisciplinary approach and dual orientation regarding generating knowledge and aiming to change social conditions and systems, it is difficult to position health promotion research in a discipline-oriented academic system. That affects the organization of research work, publication formats, and ways in which knowledge is disseminated as well as career prospects and, last but not least, funding opportunities.

At universities in particular, intervention-oriented health promotion research comes up against recognition issues and incentive systems that primarily promote quantitatively oriented monodisciplinary studies and publications in journals with a high impact factor. In fact, health promotion research also includes quantitatively oriented methods, albeit often combined with qualitative research and in interdisciplinary fields. According to the experience of individual experts, excellence in research is still associated with the individual achievements of individual researchers. They believe that it is difficult to make collective research work in teams visible enough, particularly when non-academic stakeholders are involved, as is often the case in health promotion research. At universities of applied sciences, as research activities are not well embedded structurally, health promotion research is only possible to a limited extent, although its thematic relevance in individual degree programmes or specific research structures would be given due to their greater focus on practice. In many cases, the development of theory and publishing activities have to be reconciled with limited time and personnel in practice-oriented (implementation) research projects. In addition, opportunities to publish in peer-reviewed journals are still limited for inter- and transdisciplinary research.

It is usually only possible to acquire financial support for health promotion research for relatively short projects due to the application criteria and requirements of potential funding organizations (for applied research). International calls in particular involve a considerable investment of resources in order to acquire funding. In general, the experts interviewed for this factsheet described project-based work in health promotion research as being unsustainable in terms of knowledge development and capacity building. Tasks which are relevant for research, like reviewing papers or organizing conferences, etc. cannot usually be financed via project funding.



Development perspectives for health promotion research in Austria

To strengthen health promotion research, **interdisciplinary** approaches should be pushed as well as **transdisciplinary and participatory research projects** that involve different stakeholders like citizens and self-help groups. Research projects should have a **stronger international focus** (e.g. in networks like the International Union for Health Promotion and Education [IUHPE], the European Public Health Association [EUPHA], and the Global Implementation Society) and should establish a two-way flow of information with other inter- and transdisciplinary research fields.

To facilitate such developments in the different research contexts (universities, universities of applied sciences, research in the non-university sector), pertinent **research priorities** should be established and provided with sufficient **resources** for **professorships** and for **supporting early career researchers**. The **experiences of interdisciplinary research institutes** can be used as models for the development of such research priorities. The experts believe that it would be important to develop an **institutional framework** and a **strategy** for health promotion research that supports cooperation between research institutions which is then implemented within the framework of research alliances, for example. An organization like Gesundheit Österreich GmbH could provide a platform to support joint applications in response to EU calls by several institutions.

Content-wise, health promotion research should encourage cooperation with related research areas and topics that also work in an inter- and transdisciplinary manner: The contribution that health promotion research could make to fulfilling **Sustainable Development Goals** (United Nations Foundation n.d.) would be strategically important in this context.

Greater importance should be attached to the **transfer of knowledge** between stakeholders and the **interconnections** between **research, practice, and policy**; both should be developed systematically. The results and findings of research work should be easily accessible and free of charge.

At the **University of Galway** (Ireland), health promotion is part of the School of Health Sciences. The **Health Promotion Research Centre** is home to an interdisciplinary team of scientists – 12 principle investigators (including 4 professors), 5 senior researchers, and 8 research assistants – who are carrying out research on topics such as mental health, child and adolescent health, health literacy, and evidence in health promotion. The Centre is managed by an internal steering committee and has an international advisory board. The scientists are part of a broad national and international network. The transfer of knowledge is facilitated by an annual conference and health promotion policy and practice briefs. It is also a **WHO Collaborating Centre for Health Promotion Research** and supports the development of health promotion practice and policy (University of Galway n.d.). Other research establishments in Europe dedicated explicitly to health promotion research are to be found at the University of Southern Denmark, the University of Bergen in Norway, and the University of Jyväskylä in Finland, for example.



Medium- and long-term forms of funding for research organizations can support capacity development through staff continuity and stable working environment for early career researchers, boost the establishment of networks, and enable the (further) development of innovative research ideas and approaches, theory formation, and the acquisition of additional resources.

At the level of research funding, thematic **calls for health promotion research** should be put out for tender with sufficient financial resources, a longer duration (5–6 years), or as part of a series of programmes.

One example of an innovative funding concept is that established by ZonMw, the Netherlands Organisation for Health Research and Innovation in Health Care, which has set itself the goal of promoting the health of vulnerable groups in particular. That happens via funding, transfer of knowledge, and the identification of knowledge gaps. ZonMw works together closely with partners from science, practice, and policy (ZonMW 2022).



Fostering **health promotion research as capacity development** for health promotion practice could be anchored in strategies such as the **Austrian health targets** (Zielsteuerung-Gesundheit) to ensure sustainable development. Further development and expansion of health promotion research in Austria should be backed by an organization like Gesundheit Österreich GmbH in the form of a **forum or network for health promotion research** and driven forward together with interested research organizations. In this forum, research ideas could be generated, networking could be promoted with partners from practice and policy as well as on an international scale, and exchange with funding organizations could also be supported.

Conclusion

Health promotion research is orientated towards current social problems and often finds itself operating between the competing priorities of the aims and incentive structures of academia and implementation practices. In Austria, health promotion research has developed dynamically over the last few years, albeit on a small scale in the form of projects. Stable research structures, continuous support for early career researchers, and sustainable funding can contribute to the development of health promotion research in Austria. Currently – due to the multiple crises and social challenges such as demographic change and changing lifestyles – there may be a window of opportunity for health promotion research in the next few years to position itself and (co-)develop solutions at an individual and social level.

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Suggested citation: Plunger, Petra; Wahl, Anna (2023): Health promotion research in Austria: The status quo and development perspectives. Factsheet. Gesundheit Österreich, Wien
