

## **Whitepaper: *Discussion on the Topic of Education***

### **“Educated, Yet Incapable of Seeing the Whole**

#### ***Nikolaus Harnoncourt and the Creative Primordial Force of Undisciplined, Unchained Thinking***

**Event:** Sixth Discussion of the Nikolaus Harnoncourt Zentrum, State Music School St. Georgen im Attergau, 9 May 2026, 11:00 a.m.

#### **Panel Guests:**

- **Dr. Edda Polz**, Vice-Rector of the University of Education Lower Austria (areas of focus: gifted education, AI, lifelong learning)
- **Prof. Ernst Smole**, Chairman of the International Nikolaus Harnoncourt Forum and Education Strategist
- **Georg Kapsch**, Entrepreneur and former President of the Federation of Austrian Industries

#### **Guiding Theme and Opening Question**

The starting point was a core concern of Nikolaus Harnoncourt: young people have a right to education (Bildung), not merely training (Ausbildung). Harnoncourt was troubled by specialism because it narrows one’s perspective. The discussion centred on whether today’s education system is too strongly oriented towards functionality and economic utility – at the expense of judgement, imagination, responsibility, and interconnected thinking.

#### **Central Themes and Positions**

##### **Education vs. Training**

Polz emphasised that one can only educate oneself – training is delivered by institutions, whereas education is an inner process. Smole drew a distinction: training is not inherently negative; reading, writing, and arithmetic are indispensable foundations. Kapsch argued that in a world full of digital tools, holistic thinking and the capacity for reflection become more important than mere specialisation.

##### **Personal Responsibility and a Culture of Mistakes**

Polz advocated for spaces of possibility in which children are allowed, within a protected environment, to test limits and learn from mistakes. Smole explained how political decisions since the 1970s have gradually eroded parental co-responsibility. Kapsch admitted that, despite living a culture of mistakes in his own company, he observes that employees rarely acknowledge errors – and reported how an attempt to abolish bonuses met with internal resistance.

##### **Grading**

Smole spoke in favour of clear performance transparency for core competencies, but advocated a different approach to grades in artistic subjects – illustrated by the example of

Beethoven's Fifth and "Silent Night", both of which break classical conventions. Polz proposed moving away from the assessment of products towards the accompaniment of processes.

### **Interdisciplinarity**

All three discussants viewed interdisciplinarity not as an optional extra but as a necessity. Kapsch explained how silo thinking damages companies and how servant leadership and diversity can provide a remedy. Polz described how the University of Education Lower Austria has moved away from subject-based teaching. Smole reported how clinging to narrow disciplinary boundaries – for instance, constitutional lawyers who refuse to engage with historians or sociologists – creates real obstacles to reform. As a case study he cited the COVID crisis, in which the social consequences of lockdown were barely considered in an interdisciplinary way.

### **Artistic and Musical Education**

Polz cautioned against justifying music and the arts through utilitarian arguments. Education need not always be immediately applicable – it may also bring joy and broaden one's horizons. Smole stressed that the decisive professional inspirations usually arise in early childhood, long before any formal vocational guidance.

### **Artificial Intelligence**

Kapsch expressed technological fascination but socio-political concern – AI can already compose symphonies today and could in future even feel. Polz identified judgement, assumption of responsibility, and human encounter as core competencies that gain in significance because of AI. Smole situated AI within the context of the curriculum: the stronger the natural human intelligence, the more successfully one can engage constructively with AI.

### **Teachers**

Smole highlighted that, according to Hattie, it is not the teacher's personality but their concrete actions in the classroom that constitute the most important success factor in schooling. He emphasised the importance of feedback – learning to receive feedback is harder and more valuable than giving it. Kapsch called for teachers to be given greater legal authority.

### **Closing Statements**

**Kapsch** expressed a wish for an education system that, instead of competition, fosters the capacity for cooperation and restores the ability to engage in discourse – the ability to respect other opinions without demonising them.

**Smole** appealed for optimism: there are already many excellent schools and teachers. The ability to gain an overview – in the sense of Peter Sloterdijk – is the most important future competency.

**Polz** advocated a **focus on potential** rather than a deficit orientation, and for the right of all people to 15 to 20 years of genuine education – in the sense of broadening one's horizons, not merely training.

*The moderator closed with the observation: in a world in which knowledge is increasingly reproducible by AI, that which is genuinely human – imagination, creativity, judgement, humanity – must not become a secondary concern. That is Harnoncourt's enduring legacy.*