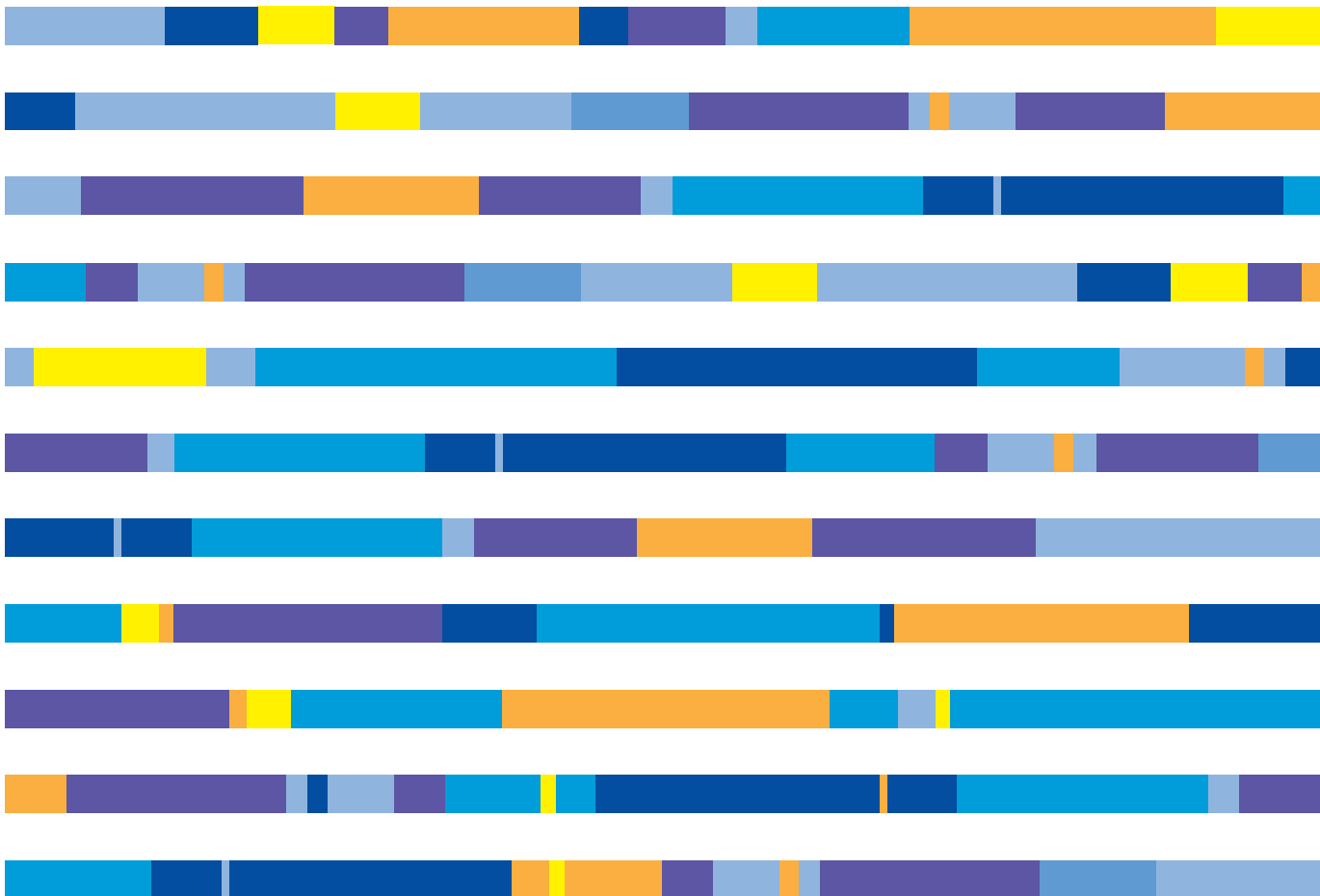# European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2023 update

COUNTRY REPORT:
AUSTRIA

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Contents

1 Abstract

In Austria, the focus has long been predominantly on formal qualifications acquired through traditional routes. However, recognition of prior learning and validation of professional experience in particular is becoming increasingly important, as is improving permeability in education. Overall, Austria is making progress in underlining the importance of validation. This is reflected by the emphasis on validation in many policy documents, including the 2017 validation strategy. A number of regulations in the formal system allow for the recognition of prior experience and thus access to education pathways or examinations on the basis of validation, as well as faster completion of programmes. In addition, there are many validation initiatives in adult education or in the labour market that are closely linked to the formal education system or even take place outside it, as well as in the third sector (youth, volunteering). While the existence of a diverse validation landscape and the numerous innovative bottom-up approaches that can be tailored to regional or local needs can clearly be seen as strengths of the Austrian approach (and some of the Austrian initiatives are even considered as lighthouse projects), there are still challenges. Discussions in this regard focus, for example, on the lack of central governance structures for validation, which is due, among other things, to the distributed responsibilities and, in particular, the logic of federalism in Austria. Other points of discussion relate to an insufficient overview of the validation offers accessible to different target groups, to questions of funding or the legal entitlement to validation.

2 Introduction

Approaches to and definition of validation in Austria

In Austria, the focus has historically been strongly on formal qualifications acquired in a traditional way and validation is largely based on a bottom-up approach with specific projects or dedicated measures. However, the recognition of work experience in particular has been an issue in various fields for many years and is becoming increasingly important, as is improving permeability. Hence, there are a number of regulations in the formal system that allow recognition of prior learning experiences and thus access to programmes or examinations on the basis of validation as well as to complete programmes or acquire qualifications more quickly. There are also many validation initiatives outside the formal education system, e.g., as part of up- and reskilling initiatives or to support career guidance processes, as well as in the third sector (youth, volunteering). Many of the validation offers are designed and implemented on a sectoral, regional or even institutional or project-based basis, some of them are implemented at national level. While there are a number of forms of validation in the formal education system, the importance and benefits of validation are often more strongly seen in the labour market. The validation initiatives embedded there are seen as complementing and sometimes even correcting the education system. Thus, the topic of validation in Austria can to a certain extent be located in an area of tension between education policy and labour market policy.

With the national validation strategy, a common, cross-sectoral reference document for the various validation initiatives and approaches that exist at institutional and regional levels was issued in 2017 (BMB & BMWFW, 2017). This strategy defines validation as a procedure by means of which a person's already acquired learning outcomes are made visible; a validation process can include all steps from identification, documentation, assessment to certification. Although this definition is

not used in all areas (and the intention of the strategy was not to build a uniform validation system), it (as well as other concepts included in the strategy) is commonly referred to in current discussions and design activities of new validation measures.

Main changes since 2018

The increasing importance of validation of non-formal and informal learning in Austria is underlined not least by the emphasis on this topic in several places in the current government programme 2020-2024 (Republik Austria, 2020) (both in relation to higher and adult education as well as youth and volunteering). Many of the activities presented in the 2018 Inventory country report for Austria have been continued and new practices and methods have been developed and implemented. There are also new national level developments to report that can be considered significant milestones, including:

- NQF service points were implemented and in 2020 non-formal qualifications could be mapped to the NQF for the first time (for more information on the NQF and its link to validation see Chapter 4). Several of these qualifications are acquired at least partly on the basis of validation procedures (OeAD NKS, n.d.a).
- From March 2021 to September 2023, the Austrian Coordination Point for the NQF at Austria's Agency for Education and Internationalisation (OeAD) coordinated – on behalf of the Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research – the Erasmus+ funded policy experimentation project TRANSVAL-EU. The project focussed on the validation of transversal competences and prepared a toolkit of good practices for this purpose, developed standardised competence profiles and training programmes for validation/guidance practitioners with a specific focus on transversal skills and tested the approaches in field trials in five countries, including Austria. Thus, the aims of the project coincide with the relevant measures foreseen in the Austrian validation strategy (for more information on TRANSVAL-EU see e.g., Chapters 3.1 and 8.2).
- The amendments to the higher education acts in 2021 provide clear regulations for the recognition of prior learning in higher education institutions (BMBWF, 2021) (for more information see Chapter 3.2).
- In 2022, work began on a legal basis for establishing Higher VET as a new education segment (BMBWF & BMDW, 2022); validation (especially of work experience) is to play an important role in the acquisition of Higher VET qualifications. The draft law on Higher VET was released for consultation at the beginning of September 2023 (see Chapter 3.3).
- The development of a competence-based qualification profile for validation practitioners (finalised in 2022) provides the basis for – starting in 2023 – developing a qualification that is compatible with the NQF and a certification procedure for validation practitioners (see Chapter 8.1).
- The Volunteering Act 2023, that came into force in September 2023, introduces, among other things, the following new feature: The Austrian Volunteer Passport will in future serve as a central Austrian proof of voluntary engagement (see Chapter 3.4).

Advantages and disadvantages of the current approach[1]

A variety of validation initiatives exist in Austria, some of these are bottom-up and project-based measures, others have been established for years and have also already been revised and further developed, so that progress has been made in these areas. There are several successful flagship initiatives in Austria in both formative, development-oriented and summative, qualification-oriented validation approaches, some of these initiatives are even considered as lighthouse projects and are well known outside Austria (such as the the initiative 'Du kannst was!' or the 'Weiterbildungsakademie, wba'– see Chapter 3.2). The development of a national validation strategy (BMB & BMWFW, 2017) in cooperation with a wide range of stakeholders can be considered as an important attempt to strengthen the topic of validation in Austria (see Chapter 3.1). It can also be noted that the fact that validation is emphasised in several current policies (see Chapter 3.1) and the opportunities to develop and test approaches in different sectors (and to adapt them to specific e.g., regional needs) has led to many innovative and promising practices. The range of validation initiatives presented in Chapters 3.2-3.4 as well as related measures described in other parts of this report and the new initiatives (changes since 2018) presented above clearly indicate that validation is considered an important aspect in Austria. These initiatives are evidence of interesting and successful developments as well as committed practitioners. Moreover, several projects related to validation that have been conducted in recent years have received strong support or were in some cases even initiated by national or regional authorities and were used to take the validation approach forward. For example, the TRANSVAL-EU project aimed to increase the knowledge and awareness of validation assessors, counsellors and career guidance practitioners on transversal competences through capacity building and to strengthen cross-sector cooperation between practitioners, policymakers and other stakeholders in order to build coherent VNFIL systems (for more information on the project's results see Chapter 8.2). The project also created the 'Austrian Forum' as a platform to inform relevant stakeholders (including representatives of ministries, social partners, public employment service, provider of adult education) about the project's progress and outputs and to discuss synergy effects on national level. The participating stakeholders agreed that such a forum is of high relevance as it provides opportunities for information exchange and networking. Moreover, the participation of Austrian organisations in EU-funded transnational projects enables discussion and exchange with partners from other countries and learning from their validation practices. This is also very much appreciated by those participating in their dissemination events[2].

There are, however, also disadvantages of the current approach to validation (current and further challenges at the systemic level are, for example, summarised by Schildberger, 2022a, p. 7). While the development of the national validation strategy was an important milestone, the fact that some of the measures described in the strategy were not implemented and the related results not developed (and so far, there is no dedicated follow-up of the validation strategy) also suggests that not all of the formulated strategic goals were pursued or achieved as planned either. Although the strategy was developed in collaboration with a wide range of stakeholders, the still fragmented structures and responsibilities for validation in Austria (see Chapter 6)

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[1] Please note: Views on advantages and disadvantages of the Austrian approach to validation naturally differ. The comments in this section reflect to a large extent the discussions among validation practitioners and in research on the topic, compiled and summarised by the author of this report; these views do not necessarily coincide with those of the responsible authorities.

[2] See, for example, events organised in the context of the following projects: TRANSVAL-EU, n.d.; PROVE, 2021; DEValAT, 2023.

have not facilitated the implementation of the strategy (see also Schlögl, 2022c, d) or gaining evidence-based information on the impact of participating in validation offers and left financial issues unresolved (see also Schlögl, 2017). Many of the existing validation offers (including the above-mentioned lighthouse projects) need to rely on project-based funding and the financial contribution of validation candidates differs across sectors and validation offers. Moreover, another disadvantage for individuals is that the terminology, concepts and methods used in the different validation offers – as well as their educational theoretical foundations – are often not aligned (see e.g., Schlögl, 2022d) (and this might therefore hinder transferability across sectors) and that there is no overview over validation services offered. There is also repeated criticism that there is not a general individual right to validation of existing competences[3], that validation is insufficiently integrated into the formal education system (see e.g., Eichbauer, 2023). Furthermore, many of the validation procedures related to the formal system refer to alternative approaches to final examinations. Other forms that enable qualification without a final examination, such as portfolio procedures for the validation of informally and non-formally acquired competences or forms that focus on supporting learning instead of summative assessment, are hardly present (see e.g., Lassnigg, 2019; Schmid, 2020, p. 13)[4].

3 National perspective

3.1 Overarching approach to validation

The Austrian validation strategy – development process, content and implementation

This section briefly introduces the overall policy context in which validation policies are being taken forward in Austria and how has this changed since 2018. It specifically refers to the lifelong learning and the validation strategy.

In Austria, validation played an important role in the strategy for Lifelong Learning 2020 (Republik Österreich, 2011) which was jointly developed as inter-ministerial strategy and supported by the social partners and all key stakeholders[5]. The development of a coherent approach towards visualisation and recognition of competences acquired in non-formal and informal learning contexts was a central element of this strategy. Among the measures recommended in the strategy and also implemented was the development of a national validation strategy with the participation of the relevant federal ministries, the *Länder* and the social partners.[6] This was the task of a working group established in 2013, which was comprised of representatives of various ministries and stakeholder organisations. The development

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[3] In several current laws there are only 'may provisions' regarding validation.

[4] For the importance of formative or transformative validation procedures see, for example, Schlögl, 2022a, b; Schlögl & Kastner, 2022. Vater (2023), for example, critically reflects on discourses that see the benefits of validation as being closely linked to the needs of the labour market and the economy instead of emphasising 'education in the interest of the people'.

[5] In Austria, there are no plans to develop a National Skills Strategy (as they are called for in the European Skills Agenda and the Osnabrück Declaration, delivered through a whole-of-government approach, aligning initiatives across different policy fields and usually including validation as an important element). Around ten years ago, Austria has received support from the OECD related to the skills systems: The OECD provided a diagnostic report identifying 14 skills challenges for Austria; however, validation was not explicitly addressed there (OECD, 2014).

[6] See also Hefler at al. 2018. The current government programme announces the plan to further develop the strategy for lifelong learning in Austria in a participatory process (Republik Austria, 2020, 210). The Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research is currently working on this.

activities included a consultation process and was backed up by scientific support.[7] The national validation strategy was finally published in 2017 (BMB & BMWFW, 2017) and intended to provide a common, cross-sectoral reference document for the various validation initiatives and approaches without developing a national validation system. The Austrian validation strategy lists the following strategic goals: (1) valorisation of non-formally and informally acquired competences, (2) access to validation, (3) improvement of opportunities for education and work, (4) improvement of permeability of the education system, (5) validation should become an integral part of the education system, (6) promotion of learning outcomes orientation and quality assurance (BMB & BMWFW, 2017, p. 10). Moreover, its explicit aim was to improve steering, coordination and quality assurance of current and future activities, while retaining existing responsibilities (BMB & BMWFW, 2017, p. 16). The strategy also introduced four thematic working groups for the first implementation phase from 2017 to 2019 with a focus on the following topics (BMB & BMWFW, 2017, pp. 18-21): quality of validation procedures, professionalisation of validation practitioners, communication and system synergies. Results of these working groups were expected to be available by 2018 and to be implemented in a second implementation period starting in 2019. The thematic working group on 'quality' developed a catalogue of quality criteria for validation initiatives in VET and adult education (BMBWF, 2018). In higher education, separate activities were carried out regarding quality assurance: Recommendations for the implementation of procedures and instruments for the recognition and crediting of competences acquired in non-formal and informal learning contexts were developed within the framework of a project by AQ Austria (Agency for Quality Assurance and Accreditation Austria) – based on feedback from higher education institutions (AQ Austria, n.d.a). The other working groups only had initial discussions or were not even set up at all. 'Currently, there are no concerted efforts in the implementation of the national validation strategy on a political level' (Müllner & Waldner, 2023, p. 2). However, activities related to the professionalisation of validation practitioners have been launched and results are available (also supported by the Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research – see Chapter 8), many existing validation practices continued to be offered and new ones were developed (e.g., in response to current crises and challenges such as support for war refugees from Ukraine (see Chapter 9.2.3).

Moreover, it can be observed that the strategy document and the concepts and definitions it contains play an important role in the discussion on validation in the national context and in the development of new or further development of existing initiatives. The Erasmus+ project TRANSVAL-EU (n.d.), for example, that was coordinated by the National Coordination Point for the NQF in Austria (OeAD, Agency for Education and Internationalisation) on behalf of the Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research (Section I, General Education and VET), is seen as a contribution to the validation strategy. Among other things, it aimed to improve awareness and capacity for validation of transversal skills and competences and to strengthen cross-sectoral collaboration between practitioners, policy makers and other stakeholders.[8] The TRANSVAL-EU policy coherence report for Austria, published at the end of the project, includes the following recommendations (Müllner & Waldner, 2023, pp. 6-7): make transversal competences more visible in education, training and the labour market; conduct sector-specific piloting (encouraging stronger linkages to existing initiatives to leverage synergies and build on lessons learned);

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[7] Scientific support included an in-depth analysis of existing validation arrangements in three areas – low-qualified people (Rath, 2014), VET (Luomi-Messerer, 2014), and higher education (AQ Austria, 2014), analysing results of the consultation process (Pfeffer & Skrivanek, 2016) and providing expertise for finalising the strategy.

[8] For more information on the TRANSVAL-EU project, see Chapter 8.2!

continue professionalisation activities (further development of a cross-occupational qualification profile for validation practitioners); create a national coordination centre or a common point of reference for coordinating the efforts with regards to validation initiatives (which could be located at the National Coordination Point for the NQF in Austria) and continue the Austrian Forum, created as a platform to inform relevant stakeholders about the project's progress and outputs and to discuss synergy effects on national level, in the bi-annual setting, widening the scope and also encompass initiatives and stakeholders from the higher education sector.

Reference to validation in other national policy documents

The Government Programme 2020-2024 (Republik Austria, 2020) stresses the implementation of the validation strategy in the section on 'Education' (to facilitate lifelong learning and good educational opportunities for adults) and calls for more recognition of study-specific practical vocational qualifications and prior learning from non-academic educational pathways in higher education as well as for the further development of the nostrification procedure for immigrant professionals, including the assessment of competences (in the subsection on 'Science & Research'). The section on 'Social protection, new justice & poverty reduction' calls for the creation of a seal of quality for voluntary work in order to document and certify competences gained through voluntary and civic work and the qualifications acquired through it (especially among young people) and, if applicable, to take them into account in job applications.[9]

Recognition of prior learning and validation are also emphasised in current higher education policy documents, such as the General Austrian University Development Plan 2025-2030 (published in December 2022) or the Development and Financing Plan for Universities of Applied Sciences which (published in March 2023) (see 'Examples from higher education' in Chapter 3.2).

Moreover, there are some measures in the in the Austrian National Implementation Plan (NIP) for the 2020 Council Recommendation on VET and Osnabrück Declaration (BMBWF & BMDW, 2022) that relate to validation: One measure relates to dual VET (initiatives for validation of non-formally and informally acquired competences – focus on summative procedures) and two are located in CVET: The activities related to the measure 'formative validation for individual competence development and promotion of motivation for CVET' include the continuation of the cross-institutional initiative 'Competence+Counselling' (*Kompetenz+Beratung* – s. Chapter 6) as well as of the competence portfolio for volunteers (*Kompetenzportfolio für Freiwillige*) and the certificate of voluntary activities (*Nachweis über freiwillige Tätigkeiten* (s. Chapter 3.4). The measure 'validation of transversal competences – TRANSVAL-EU project'[10] involves, on the one hand, an assessment of the state of play on the topic in the five partner countries of the project, the development of a common competence framework for transversal competences as well as a toolkit and a training curriculum for guidance and validation practitioners and, on the other hand, the piloting of these results and an ongoing strategic exchange on validation at national and transnational level. With regard to school-based VET, validation is to be taken into account in the design of the planned 'digitalisation passport' to strengthen and standardise basic competences in the field of digitalisation. In the chapter on CVET, the establishment of Higher VET as a separate education segment is also mentioned as a goal, and validation for the acquisition of the *Ingenieur* (engineering) qualification (NQF/EQF

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[9] It should be noted, however, that the Covid-19 pandemic changed many of the government's plans and set new priorities.

[10] See TRANSVAL-EU, n.d. - for more information on the TRANSVAL-EU project, see Chapter 8.2.!

level 6), which would be assigned to this segment, is also stated as an important activity. In addition, there are further references in the NIP to qualifications, especially from outside the formal sector, in which validation plays a major role and which are also mapped ton the NQF.

Validation is also emphasised in the current Austrian Youth Strategy (2021) (Bundeskanzleramt, n.d): In the 'Field of action: participation and engagement', the objective is included that young people should be enabled to make their voluntary work and the knowledge and competences acquired in the course of these activities visible, to have them recognized and to use them as part of their qualification, both for vocational training and for job applications in the public service. In addition, the Volunteer Strategy 2023 (Bundesministerium für Soziales, Gesundheit, Pflege und Konsumentenschutz, 2022) refers to the documentation and recognition of competences acquired in the different areas of volunteering (see Chapter 3.4).

Emphasise on validation in regional labour market policies

At regional level (Austrian provinces), validation is emphasised in recent labour market strategies, as the following examples show:

- Strategy for Securing Skilled Workers for the Upper Austrian Location – Workplace Upper Austria 2030 (Business Upper Austria – OÖ Wirtschaftsagentur GmbH & Amt der OÖ. Landesregierung, Abteilung Wirtschaft, 2019): One strategic goal relates to the activation of the existing labour force potential, for which, among other things, the recognition and certification of competences and foreign qualifications are to be fostered.
- Lower Austrian Labour Market Strategy (2021-2027; Land NÖ, 2020): Field of action 2 of the strategy is dedicated to the topic 'Establishing competence orientation, assessment and recognition' and the following are mentioned as strategic goals: Raising awareness on the labour market for competence issues, orientation and assessment; increasing labour market opportunities through competence recognition; establishing competence development counselling.
- Labour Market Policy Strategy Styria 2030 (Amt der Steiermärkischen Landesregierung, 2022): The strategic goal of 'Securing skilled workers for the future' is to be achieved, among other things, through targeted offers for immigrants to support them in finding their way around the Styrian education and employment opportunities and in the recognition and utilisation of formal and non-formal competences and qualifications.
- Labour Market Tyrol 2030 (Amt der Tiroler Landesregierung, 2022): In the strategic field 'Supporting education and training, expanding competence development', one strategic goal is to expand the recognition of non-formally and informally acquired professional competences.

Individual Learning Accounts (ILAs) and validation[11]

The term 'ILA' is usually not used in Austria but some stakeholders (e.g., some representatives of the Chamber of Labour) use it synonymously with *'Bildungskonto'* (education account) (see e.g., Eichbauer, 2023).

Some regional-level schemes could be seen as fulfilling some of the core functions of ILAS as defined in the EU Council Recommendation on Individual Learning

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[11] The Council Recommendation on Individual Learning Accounts includes career guidance and validation opportunities as part of the 'enabling framework' for supporting the take-up of individual training entitlements.

Accounts[12]. At the national level, the Skilled Workers Grant (*Fachkräftestipendium*), a support structure for adult learning funded by the Public Employment Services, can also be seen as complying with some ILA functions: Individuals (except higher education graduates[13]) can access extended programmes without any requirements to pay fees. Alternatively, incurred fees are covered to 100% by the schemes. Adults also receive a wage replacement payment equal to their unemployment benefits entitlement.

There is no general direct link between these schemes and the validation initiatives; to what extent there is a link depends on the specific instrument. For example, some of the schemes support the preparation for the 'Exceptional admission to the apprenticeship examination' (*Außerordentlicher Zugang zur Lehrabschlussprüfung*)[14].

As per the Austrian government programme 2020-2024 (Republik Austria, 2020, p. 181), the introduction of an education account (*Bildungskonto*) for vocational reorientation and socially secured education and training is planned on the basis of a social partner agreement. According to the Austrian Social Partners, their activities for 2022/2023 included conducting ongoing social partner discussions and bringing forward issues such as education accounts (*Bildungskonto*) (Die Sozialpartner Österreich, n.d.). However, there are no public updates available at present. As a current study on ILAs shows[15], the Austrian Social Partners are in principle in favour of introducing education accounts that would improve access to CVET for all, but only as a complement to the existing funding modalities. However, they do not have a shared vision for the sources of funding for the scheme. Suggestions have been made for an employer levy or tax-based funding[16].

Current legal and institutional basis for validation

In Austria, there are some legal regulations built into the formal system allowing for some recognition possibilities and validation initiatives in different sectors which have developed their own understanding of validation.

In Austria, almost all formal qualifications (from the school system and dual system, but not higher education degrees) may be obtained by taking external exams based on legally binding procedures. Usually, these exams are taken at the responsible institution within the formal sector of education and training by using the same standards and methods as in the formal programmes. Sometimes, these institutions or adult education providers also offer preparatory courses but attendance is not mandatory.

There are also legal regulations for gaining access to formal education and training programmes (including those offered at higher education institutions) based on validation. In higher education, these procedures are delegated to the higher

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[12] Such as the 'Learning Accounts' in Upper Austria (*Oberösterreichisches Bildungskonto;* Lassnigg and Baumegger, 2019) or in Vienna (*waff Bildungskonto;* Hefler et al., 2013).

[13] By the introduction of the scheme, Austrian policy makers have reacted to the fact that the also existing paid educational leave scheme, providing support for 12 months equal to the unemployment benefits entitlements, is used mainly by already well-educated adults.

[14] Examples of links between validation and such regional schemes at regional level can be found in Chapter 3.2.

[15] Research conducted as part of the project 'Individual learning accounts (ILAs) and the potential for integrated support policies and systems for CVET and adult learning' - https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/about-cedefop/public-procurement/individual-learning-accounts-ilas-and-potential-integrated-support-policies-and-systems-cvet

[16] According to Eichbauer (2023), the education account should also be able to be used to finance participation in validation processes and generally harmonise the financing of CVET and validation throughout Austria to a certain extent.

education institution, which decides on the specific methods and procedures. However, the amendments to the higher education acts in 2021 provide clear regulations for the recognition of prior learning (vocational and non-vocational qualifications) (BMBWF, 2021).

In CVET/adult education and approaches linked to the labour market, there are legally regulated (such as the *Ingenieur* qualification) as well as non-legally regulated qualifications offered; thus, some validation arrangements are legally binding and others are not, and the procedures used differ between providers. The Act on Higher VET will provide a legal basis for existing as well as new qualifications linked to this type.

The 2016 *Anerkennungs- und Bewertungsgesetz* (Recognition and Assessment Act, AuBG) enables persons entitled to asylum and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection who have lost certificates or training certificates through no fault of their own during their flight to have their qualifications established by means of alternative procedures (e.g., practical or theoretical examinations, sample tests, technical discussions, work samples) (ÖIF, n.d.a).[17]

Validation initiatives with rather loose links to the formal system or without any links at all are usually not based on legal regulations, except for those providing access to the labour market by virtue of trade or other professional authorisation.

Thus, there is no uniform legal framework to regulate validation and recognition of non-formal and informal learning in Austria. There is also no general individual right for individuals to access validation initiatives[18] and the access requirements are defined for each initiative or in each sector separately.

Qualifications that can be obtained through validation

There are several qualifications in Austria (from the formal as well as from the non-formal learning context) that can be obtained through validation. This is regulated by the responsible bodies for the respective qualification and information is usually available where information on the qualification is presented to potential users. However, potential users do not have a central access point for information on what qualifications can be obtained through validation and there is no database of qualifications that can be obtained through validation[19]. Although the development of an online portal for transparent presentation of validation and accompanying services (in order to increase awareness and accessibility of validation offers) as well as of a target group-oriented communication concept was envisaged in the national validation strategy, this has not been realised so far.

The four stages of validation

The Austrian validation strategy assigns validation measures to one of two independent but corresponding pillars that are linked to the four stages of validation (BMB & BMWFW, 2017, pp. 13-15)[20]:

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[17] However, participation in validation initiatives is largely regional and validation and recognition practices are not without hurdles (Panek, 2019).

[18] A legal right to validation or the development of a legal basis is repeatedly demanded by representatives of the Chamber of Labor, for example, in order to improve fairness and equality (e.g., Eichbauer, 2023).

[19] The qualifications register displaying qualifications mapped to the NQR includes several qualifications that can be obtained based on validation. This aspect is somewhat hidden as it is not included in the search categories provided (see: www.qualifikationsregister.at).

[20] Since formative validation can include developing or even transformative aspects, a third validation approach is sometimes distinguished: Schlögl (2022), for example, speaks of when validation is about gaining a broader or

- **Pillar 1:** Approaches to formative validation are development-oriented and include a process of reflection on a person's competences with the primary goal of increasing their motivation to engage in learning. The focus is on identifying and documenting competences to empower individuals.[21]
- **Pillar 2:** Summative validation approaches are based on requirements and standards of the qualifications system. They include, in particular, steps to assess and certify acquired competences on the basis of the standards defined for a formal or non-formal qualification (in line with the existing regulations).[22]

All four stages of validation are used by some of the main validation initiatives in the country. However, depending on the initiative and in particular on the purpose of validation, certain phases are emphasised. Critical voices also see an overemphasis on the dimension of assessing learning outcomes, while approaches that place more emphasis on formative processes (relatively) fall behind (Lassnigg, 2019). There is also no coherent connection of these stages across sectors or even across initiatives. Thus, it depends on the specific initiative whether an individual who has participated in one validation process can subsequently use the outcomes of this process as input to another.

Skills audits[23]

In Austria, there are several initiatives that can be linked to the concept of skills audits as defined in the 2012 Council Recommendation on Validation of informal and non-formal learning. However, instead of the term 'skills audit'[24] other terms are usually used, for example: competence balance, competence profiling, competence audit, competence check.

It is not possible to provide a comprehensive picture of skills audit initiatives in Austria but it seems that the main types of beneficiaries of skills audits include low-qualified people, people in the process of changing their careers or who want to gain a clearer picture about their competences to plan further education and training, (young) people in transition to the labour market, migrants and people admitted as asylum seekers. Thus, skills audits seem to be most prevalent in measures offered by PES, in the context of career planning/guidance, in adult education and services offered to migrants and people admitted as asylum seekers. Furthermore, in many cases initiatives are offered in cooperation between partners (e.g., coordinated or financed by PES but implemented by adult education centres or further education and training providers – private organisations or training providers of the social partners). Skills audits are not offered systematically and individuals might have to pay for these procedures (however, in some cases funding is available). The outcomes of skills audits are usually not linked to any entitlements. In most cases they are used for

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different perspective on prior knowledge and learning and is associated with an increase in self-confidence, self-esteem and motivation.

[21] The existing offers in Austria include, for example, *Kompetenz+Beratung* (Competence+Conselling) as well as other career guidance offers or the CH-Q competence management, which is used throughout Austria in various institutions (e.g., VHS Linz competence profile, CH-Q Volkshilfe Upper Austria or ZAM Styria). CH-Q competence management is a quality-assured, internationally recognised system in which individuals work out, name and document their skills and competences in a guided process. BILL-Institut für Bildungsentwicklung Linz is the sole holder of the licence for CH-Q Competence Management in Austria (see CHQ Österreich, n.d.). The Competence Kaleidoscope of the migrare association is another example of a formative validation approach. It is a competence assessment procedure for the labour market integration of migrants (Hinterberger, 2019).

[22] For examples see Chapters 3.2 and 3.3.

[23] For examples of initiatives linked to skills audit please consult the 2018 update of the Austrian validation report!

[24] This term is not systematically used and there are no general rules or legislations relating to skills audits.

providing orientation on future career or learning pathways; in some cases, the documentation can be used in job applications.

A new initiative of the Chamber of Commerce Austria aims at developing competence checks of all individual skill for visualising informal and non-formally acquired competences and ensuring appropriate recognition (WKO, 2023a):

Box 3.1   Competence Checks – a project of the Chamber of Commerce Austria

The competence check should include both non-legally regulated evidence (non-formal qualifications) and legally recognised educational qualifications (formal qualifications such as master craftsman and qualifying examinations). In the long term, all acquired competences (informally and non-formally acquired knowledge and skills) of skilled workers are to be made visible.

In the first step, new digital checks will be developed on a pilot basis and existing successful models (such as an initiative offered by the Chamber of Commerce Carinthia) will be rolled out in the best possible way.

The instrument is intended to facilitate companies in better recording and classifying the competences of (future) employees as well as in evaluating the effectiveness of previous qualification measures. This is intended to provide well-founded support for human resource development in companies.

The project is carried out (since 2022) within the framework of the education offensive of the Austrian Economic Chambers in the field of action 'Continuous education paths & lifelong career perspectives'.

Data collection and quality assurance

As validation arrangements exist in various sectors and areas in Austria, are more or less regulated and formalised and focus on different stages of the validation process, different target groups and purposes, no overall participation data are collected. There is also no mandatory quality framework for validation covering all sectors and there are no generally prescribed quality standards for the validation of non-formal and informal learning in place. Offering validation services of high quality is, however, considered as crucial in the validation context for ensuring trust in the results of validation. In general, the extent and way validation initiatives are underpinned by quality assurance measures, are based on the catalogue of quality criteria for validation initiatives in VET and adult education (BMBWF, 2018) or on the recommendations for recognition of prior learning in higher education (AQ Austria, n.d.a) depends on the respective measure and context (see Chapter 11.1).

3.2   Validation in education and training

Introduction

In the formal education and training system, different Acts and Regulations include mechanisms and arrangements that enable education and training institutions to recognise learning outcomes acquired in non-formal and informal settings. Various ministries and institutions have developed measures and initiatives for identifying and formally recognising competences acquired in non-formal and informal learning contexts. Thus, validation exists in the different sectors of education and training but lacks coherence.

Although the Austrian validation strategy did not aim to develop a national validation system either, it was intended to improve the steering, coordination, coherence and

quality assurance of ongoing and future validation activities. The strategy is still frequently used as a reference in the context of validation in Austria.

No sector-specific priorities

The Government Programme 2020-2024 (Republik Austria, 2020) refers to validation and related aspects particularly in relation to the following policy areas: 'Education' (to foster lifelong learning for adults; to enhance recognition of prior learning from non-academic educational pathways in higher education) and 'Social protection, new justice & poverty reduction' ('Non-profit, voluntary work, volunteering and civil society').

The majority of the validation initiatives and arrangements (in particular those which are accompanied by counselling processes) are linked to the adult education sector or to 'second chance' initiatives (mostly for people with work experience without a qualification), often with close links to the labour market. However, relevant arrangements can also be identified in initial VET, higher education or in other fields (such as the labour market and the third sector, particularly in the youth area and for volunteers).

The national validation strategy of 2017 does not prioritise any policy area or sector; it was originally intended to provide a framework for developing validation measures from a demand-led perspective, enabling a rapid response to emerging issues.

The four stages of validation in the education and training sector

As the validation arrangements in the education and training sector in Austria are each regulated by the responsible authority for the respective sub-sector, there is no uniform approach to validation. Depending on the initiative and in particular on the purpose of validation, certain stages or phases of validation (identification, documentation, assessment, and certification) are emphasised. The validation arrangements and initiatives also do not always clearly and explicitly address the four phases but it can be observed that they are increasingly referring to it. Some examples of validation arrangements in the education and training context are listed below.

Examples related to general education and school-based VET

■ Exams for external candidates in school-based education (*ExternistInnenprüfungen*):

These are examinations that can be taken without having completed the traditional education pathway; thus, the focus is on the stages of assessment and certification. External candidates can sit exams covering single subjects or whole grades in general education as well as in VET schools and colleges. The number of users of this opportunity is not recorded centrally but is considered to be very low. External candidates can also sit for the *Reifeprüfung* exam (upper secondary school leaving exam providing direct access to higher education) or the *Reifeprüfung* and Diploma examination (College for Higher Vocational Education qualification). Also here, the number of users is very low: According to Statistik Austria, in the 2019/20 school year, a total of 431 students took the *ExternistInnenreifeprüfung* (Statistik Austria, 2019).

Examples related to dual VET (apprenticeship qualification, NQF/EQF level 4)

■ Exceptional admission to the apprenticeship examination (*Außerordentlicher Zugang zur Lehrabschlussprüfung*; dual VET)[25]:

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[25] These initiatives are also highlighted in the Austrian National Implementation Plan for the 2020 Council Recommendation on VET and Osnabrück Declaration (BMBWF & BMDW, 2022).

In addition to those who have completed an entire apprenticeship, people without formal training can take the final apprenticeship examination. The only requirement is that they are over 18 years old and have evidence of having acquired the corresponding vocational skills and knowledge in another form; for example, in practice (work experience) or in courses. Adult education institutions offer preparation courses for candidates without formal training. In 2021, a total of 9,499 apprenticeship-leave examinations were taken as part of an exceptional admission and 6,728 of them were passed; this is around 17% of all successful apprenticeship-leave examinations in Austria (Dornmayer, 2022, p. 106).

The revised Vocational Training Act of 2011[26] offers the possibility to grant exemption of parts of the practical part of the final apprenticeship examination for candidates in second-chance education who can provide evidence of relevant professional experience. This is of particular relevance for the initiative 'Du kannst was!' ('Yes, you can!' or 'You can do it!' or 'You have skills!'), which is considered a 'flagship project' in Austria and is continuously further developed (see also Case Study report). While the exceptional admission to the apprenticeship examination generally focuses on assessment and certification, initiatives like this often also include the identification and documentation stages.

> ### Box 3.2   'Du kannst was'[27]
>
> The initiative 'Du kannst was!' is a project initiated by the Austrian social partners, which validates competences acquired in informal and non-formal learning contexts. It leads to the award of an apprenticeship certificate / diploma, the certificate of successful completion of the final apprenticeship examination, in a two-step examination process.
>
> After an initial counselling session[28], beneficiaries participate in three workshops, during which - guided by qualified trainers - they create competence portfolios with evidence files. In a first 'Competence Check'[29] the existing competences are evaluated, and the missing competences can be further acquired in internships or specialised courses. After that, a second and final 'Competence Check' takes place, which constitutes the second part of the final apprenticeship examination, which focusses mainly on the competences which were lacking during the first 'check'. Both examinations are taken at the Apprenticeship Office of the Economic Chamber, the awarding body for apprenticeship diplomas in Austria.
>
> The initiative was first implemented in 2012 and was transferred from the successful pilot project in Upper Austria to other regional provinces in Austria (Burgenland, Lower Austria, Salzburg, Vorarlberg)[30].
>
> In each province, different apprenticeship profiles are offered in the 'Du kannst was!'-scheme, depending on the specific needs in the region and in some cases, candidates have to wait for quite some time until there are enough participants to organise this scheme for a specific profile[31]. The costs of the procedure are usually borne by the regional

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[26] BGBI. I - Ausgegeben am 29. Dezember 2011 - Nr. 148

[27] FAV Oberösterreich, n.d.; Eichbauer, 2016 & 2017.

[28] Recently, a new element was introduced for technical professions following the compulsory counselling session: a screening activity is carried out and a language test (up to 1 day) (Eichbauer, 2018). This counselling session is considered crucial for the success of the participants.

[29] Other terms used include 'performance assessment', 'performance check' or 'quality check'.

[30] AK NÖ, 2022; AK Salzburg, 2022; AK Vorarlberg, 2022; AK Burgenland, 2022.

[31] The provision for taking the apprenticeship-leave exam according to the 'Du kannst was' model with crediting options for individual parts of the exam was, however, expanded with the 2020 amendment of the VET Act by making it possible to take the exam across federal provinces if required.

government[32], the Chamber of Labour and also from ESF funds. The participants also contribute in the form of a small deductible.

In Salzburg, for example, the 'Du kannst was!' approach was also recently implemented in a pilot project with employees of the company Interspar who wanted to obtain the apprenticeship qualification 'retail salesperson'. In this case, the costs of the entire project were borne by Interspar and the company submitted the costs for the project to the PES for funding ('Qualification funding for employees').[33]

Several other national or regional initiatives are also closely linked to supporting the acquisition of the apprenticeship diploma (NQF/EQF level 4) by making use of validation of non-formal and informal learning:

– '*Kompetenz mit System'* ('Competence with System')[34]: This initiative to catch up on the apprenticeship diploma (offered by PES all over Austria) is aimed at jobseekers who are over 18 years old and have at most completed compulsory schooling. It is particularly suitable for people who have already gained work experience in the desired occupation or have started an apprenticeship but have not completed it. The training up to the exceptional admission to the apprenticeship examination takes place in stages: The basic course prepares learners for entry into the profession if they have little or no work experience. People with relevant work experience can join the advanced course to deepen their knowledge or directly join the final course. In this course they are specifically prepared for the extraordinary apprenticeship-leave exam[35].

– *Wiener Anerkennungssystem 'Meine Chance - Ich kann das'* (Viennese recognition system 'My chance – I can do it') (AMS Wien, 2022): This initiative makes it possible for unemployed or employed persons from 22 years of age or older with appropriate competences to complete the final apprenticeship examination in a shortened period of time The Viennese vocational schools assess the knowledge required for the final apprenticeship examination in a competence assessment procedure. In case of knowledge gaps, these are retrained at accredited educational institutions. The theoretical part of the apprenticeship examination is waived for successful candidates. The PES Vienna and the waff (Vienna Employment Promotion Fund) offer information and support in this regard: During employment, for the required CVET, funding is made available by the waff, as part of its regional framework of an individual learning account, with preferential treatment provided for adults with a low level of educational attainment, among others. During unemployment spells, course work related to the *Wiener Anerkennungssystem* is funded by the PES.

– *Qualifikationspass Wien* (Qualification Passport Vienna) (Stadt Wien, n.d.a): This initiative is linked to alternative pathways for obtaining apprenticeship qualifications (as part of the 'Vienna Qualification Plan' which is a comprehensive, joint strategy – implemented in 2013 – for reducing the percentage of people with a low formal education in Vienna and which was extended until 2030 in March 2018 - Stadt Wien, n.d.b). Since its introduction in November 2015, 2,500 holders of a Qualification Passport have obtained an apprenticeship qualification (as of July 2022) (Stadt Wien (n.d.c). The Qualification Passport Vienna is a voluntary offer and is created as a personal

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[32] A representative of the province of Salzburg emphasised that the subsidy of € 2000 per apprenticeship graduation is indeed a cost-effective model for the province for this highly effective project. (Tischler, 2023).

[33] Moser and Fuchs-Weikl, 2022.

[34] Mayerl & Schlögel, 2015; Weber et al., 2011; AMS Österreich, 2020.

[35] The validation of informally acquired competences only plays a role at the beginning in the recording of professional competences (Schmid, 2023, p. 503).

document for unemployed persons by the career information centres of PES Vienna and for employed persons by the waff (Vienna Employment Promotion Fund) counselling centre for career and further education. Working Viennese can catch up on their apprenticeship qualifications free of charge. With the initiative *Chancen-Scheck* (Opportunity Cheque) as part of its regional framework of an individual learning account, waff funds all necessary CVET measures at 90% (maximum 5,000 euros) including the entire examination fees. All those who pass the examination also receive the remaining 10% of the costs back.

– *Implacement – Zielgruppenstiftung für junge Erwachsene von 20 bis 30 Jahre*n (JUST 2 JOB target group implacement foundation for young adults aged 20 to 30) (Aufleb, n.d.a): JUST 2 JOB supports and accompanies young adults with no or no longer usable vocational training. The goal is a vocational (higher) qualification with an apprenticeship certificate and subsequent employment. Specific support packages for re-entrants as well as unemployed young adults with the desire for supraregional training are also available. Persons with prior vocational knowledge who have been assessed can be specifically prepared to take an apprenticeship-leave exam and thus acquire the apprenticeship-leave certificate in a shorter time.

– *JUST INTEGRATION Implacementstiftung* (implacement foundation) for unemployed persons in Austria entitled to asylum and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection. This initiative aims at shortening apprenticeship training by taking into account prior vocational experience (Aufleb, 2017).

Example from the healthcare and nursing professions

The 2016 reform in the professional field of health care and nursing provides for the first time qualifications for three occupational groups: the diploma for health care and nursing (*gehobener Dienst für Gesundheits- und Krankenpflege*; academic degree, NQF/EQF level 6 - OeAD NKS, n.d.b), nursing assistance level 2 (*Pflegefachassistenz, PFA;* NQF/EQF level 5 - OeAD NKS, n.d.c) and nursing assistance level 1 (*Pflegeassistenz, PA;* NQF/EQF level 4 - OeAD NKS, n.d.d). The competences of former nursing aids (now nursing assistance level 1, *PA*) were expanded and the requirements' profile for nursing assistance level 2 (*PFA*) was newly developed (two-year training).

For *PA*s (former nursing aids) who want to further qualify as a *PFA* and have already acquired knowledge, skills, abilities and competences through professional experience and want to have these credited, a validation procedure will be offered:

> **Box 3.3   Validation in the Nursing Assistant Professions Training Ordinance**
>
> According to the current Nursing Assistant Professions Training Ordinance[36], the head of a health and nursing school or the head of a *PA* course shall credit non-formally or informally acquired competences of trainees in *PA* or *PFA* training, provided that:
>
> ■ these competences have been verified within the framework of a validation procedure recommended by the Federal Minister for Health and Women, and
>
> ■ their equivalence with the competences to be taught in *PA* or *PFA* training has been established.

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[36] Pflegeassistenzberufe-Ausbildungsverordnung – PA-PFA-AV, StF: BGBl. II Nr. 301/2016

On behalf of the responsible ministry, the development of a standardised validation procedure throughout Austria started in 2018 with the involvement of experts, which includes in particular information and counselling, identification, documentation and assessment of competences and crediting the results of the assessment (GÖG, n.d).

In 2020, the GÖG (Gesundheit Österreich GmbH) started a project to pilot the validation procedure (Arbeiterkammer Salzburg, 2019), which, however, was interrupted due to the pandemic and resumed in 2023. During the last years, the GÖG, together with the participating organisations Berufsförderungsinstitut (bfi; adult education centre) Salzburg and Upper Austria) and the Aus- und Weiterbildungszentrum Soziales Wien (Training and Further Education Centre Social Vienna), was working on the development of the validation instruments. The validation procedure will be piloted this year at the bfi Salzburg (full-time, starts December 2023) and at the bfi Upper Astria (part-time, starts November 2023) (Schneider, 2023; bfi, 2023). It is planned that the validation procedure will be recommended in autumn of this year in accordance with § 13 para. 2 PA-PFA-AV (Nursing Assistant Professions Training Ordinance).[37]

Examples from adult education[38]

■ Basic education measures (*Basisbildung*) for young people and adults (Initiative Erwachsenenbildung, n.d.a):

The target group of the programme area of basic education – as part of the Austrian Initiative for Adult Education (*Initiative Erwachsenenbildung*) – includes young people aged 15 and over residing in Austria as well as adults with basic education needs, irrespective of their origin, their first language and any school-leaving qualifications they may have. The area of basic education includes the acquisition or further development of the following competences: Learning competences, competences in the German language, basic competences in another language, mathematical competences, digital competences. In addition to the certificate, each participant receives a portfolio that contains a comprehensive overview of the learning outcomes achieved as well as a description of additional competences that go beyond this. The portfolio contains a starting profile (including learning objectives) and a final competence profile and is created by the participants themselves – with the support of the trainers.

■ Acquisition of the compulsory school leaving certificate (*Pflichtschulabschluss*) by young people and adults (Initiative Erwachsenenbildung, n.d.b):

The Austrian Initiative for Adult Education (*Initiative Erwachsenenbildung*) aims to enable young people and adults who lack basic skills or who do not have a compulsory school leaving certificate to continue and finish their education. With the Compulsory School Leaving Certificate Examination Act (2012), an 'adult-appropriate compulsory school leaving certificate', a procedure was established that validated vocational and other experiences with regard to school knowledge and thus made them subject to recognition (Bisovsky, 2022). In 2021, 1,488 participations in

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[37] Within the framework of the project 'ZEP - Access to Higher Education and Development of Perspectives' a portfolio for the occupational field of nursing assistance (and one for home helper) was developed as an instrument for self-assessment of occupation-relevant skills, knowledge and competences (Schildberger, 2022b).

[38] In Austria, there is no clear distinction between some qualifications acquired in adult education and other educational sectors. Several preparatory courses are offered in adult education institutions ('Second Chance Education') for the purpose of obtaining formal qualifications e.g., for completion of compulsory schooling or for completion of the Higher Education Entrance Examination in an alternative way. Non-formal qualifications that could be considered as part of CVET are also sometimes offered by adult education institutions. Furthermore, there are various validation processes offered in this area that do not lead to a qualification at all (as defined by the NQF).

compulsory school-leaving courses were successfully completed. 1,159 of the participants were able to obtain an overall qualification (Initiative Erwachsenenbildung, 2021).

■ Recognition of competences acquired in non-formal and informal learning contexts in VET Schools for Adults (legally binding procedure)

Individuals who have already entered the labour market or have completed a course of technical or vocational education have the opportunity to attend evening courses in order to obtain a higher-level VET qualification (same as from Colleges of Higher Vocational Education, NQF/EQF level 5). Since 2010, the school subjects are implemented in a modular format. This facilitates the recognition of competences acquired in non-formal and informal learning contexts. Candidates have the right to apply for the assessment of modules instead of attending courses.[39]

■ Academy of Continuing Education (*Weiterbildungsakademie*, *wba*) (wba, n.d.a, b):

The wba in the sector of adult education is considered a best-practice approach to enhance the professionalisation of adult learning and for recognising formal, non-formal and informal learning of adult educators in Austria. The wba celebrated its 15th anniversary in 2022 (wba, n.d.c) and has continued to maintain and further develop its successful approach over the years:

> ### Box 3.4   Academy of Continuing Education (*Weiterbildungsakademie*, *wba*)
>
> The wba certifies and issues degrees to adult educators according to defined standards. A framework curriculum has been developed and people active in adult education can have credits awarded for their acquired competences, skills, and practice periods. Practical experience in adult education and a completed vocational education or a school qualification beyond compulsory schooling is a prerequisite for participating in this initiative. The acquired competences are documented in an e-portfolio. Missing competences can be acquired at different educational establishments for adults. The wba team offers guidance and counselling as far as the acquisition of missing competences is concerned.
>
> Certificates are offered on two levels: wba-certificate - certified adult educator (rated at 60 ECTS [wba][40]) and wba-diploma - graduate adult educator (rated at 60 ECTS [wba], with specialisation in one of four fields of adult education: teachers/trainers, education managers, counsellors, and librarians).
>
> In addition to practical experience and to the evidence of the acquisition of the learning outcomes specified in the curricula, the following requirements are set for the award of the qualifications: For receiving the wba-certificate, successful participation in a certification workshop is compulsory (it is a three-day assessment during which candidates prove themselves as competent adult educators) and the wba-diploma is awarded based on a written thesis and an oral exam.
>
> As of January 2015, a new learning outcome-oriented wba-curricula, now called 'qualification-profiles' was introduced. They provide detailed insights on required competences for adult educators and put particular emphasis on vocation specific competences. The revision of the curricula also aimed at making the wba-certificates

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[39] §23a des SchUG-B - Schulunterrichtsgesetz für Berufstätige

[40] Until 2013: 30 ECTS (wba). 25 hours of workload result in 1 ECTS (wba). The wba converts the workload into ECTS in the sense of a possible connection to higher education but the ECTS awarded by the wba are not automatically recognised by higher education institutions.

suitable for inclusion in the NQF (Reisinger & Wagner, 2011; Reisinger & Steiner, 2014)[41]. On the 25th of June 2020 the wba-certificate 'Certified Adult Educator' was mapped to NQF level 5 and on 30th November 2021 the wba-diploma 'Graduated Adult Educator' was mapped to NQF level 6 (wba, 2020).

Between 2007 and 2022, 1,601 wba-certificates were issued and 280 wba-diplomas (wba, 2022a).

Since 2022, an additional module 'Basic Education' has been offered for holders of the wba-certificate 'Certified Adult Educator (with the selected area 'Teaching/Group Leadership/Training' at the certification workshop)' (wba, 2022b). The following requirements are set for the completion of this module: proof of all the areas of competence required in the qualification profile for the certificate module 'Certified Basic Educator', proof of at least 100 hours of practice as a trainer in basic education, positive completion of the multiple-choice test on specialised texts from the field of basic education. The qualification 'Certified Basic Educator' entitles holders to work as a trainer in basic education courses that are funded within the framework of the Adult Education Initiative (Initiative Erwachsenenbildung (n.d.c).

Another innovation of the wba concerns digitalisation: Since March 2021, all wba candidates and graduates have a completely new login area at their disposal. This supports the assignment of evidence to the individual areas of the curricula and the progress in the certification process is visible to candidates in the login area through a progress bar (wba, n.d.d).

Examples from higher education

In the Austria higher education sector, development of quality-assured procedures for the validation of non-formal and informal learning has been called for several years in order to provide better clarity and opportunities in this area. Developments in this regard started in the context of the Austrian validation strategy: Since 2014, AQ Austria (Agency for Quality Assurance and Accreditation Austria) has been working in several projects and together with several Austrian higher education institutions on the question of how procedures for the recognition and crediting of non-formally and informally acquired competences (recognition of prior learning, RPL) can be designed in a quality-assured manner (AQ Austria, n.d.b). In 2016, for example, AQ Austria published recommendations for recognition and crediting procedures (Birke & Hanft, 2016).

In 2021, the legal basis that enables RPL in all higher education sectors was finally created (see box below) and AQ Austria has been legally mandated as a contact point for information and counselling on the recognition of non-formally and informally acquired competences[42]. Furthermore, in spring 2022 – building on the cooperation in several pilot projects – a long-term Austrian network was founded. The RPL Network Austria (AQ Austria, n.d.c) sees itself as a professional network of practitioners and experts with the aim of promoting the quality-assured implementation of procedures for the recognition of non-formally and informally acquired competences and to share both experiences and examples of good practice between representatives of all higher education sectors. In addition to the national RPL network, a European network was also initiated from Austria (AQ Austria, n.d.d): AQ Austria is currently coordinating the formation of a European association of national networks on RPL as part of the ongoing Erasmus+ project

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[41] The wba certificates can be considered as non-formal qualifications; the procedure for including non-formal qualifications into the NQF is currently being developed.

[42] Act on Quality Assurance in Higher Education - HS-QSG § 3 para. 3 line 12

'INterconnection/INnovation/INclusion: Austrian contributions to the EHEA 2030 (3-IN-AT-PLUS)'. The envisaged European RPL network will focus on the exchange of experiences and mutual learning on recognition issues.

Box 3.5   Legal basis for RPL in higher education

With the 2021 amendments, the recognition of competences already acquired in non-higher education contexts, i.e., in school, vocational and non-vocational contexts, is regulated in the material laws of the four higher education sectors (public universities, private universities, universities of applied sciences, and teacher training colleges). Although there are deviations in details due to the different nature of the individual laws, all amendments are based on the same idea: The recognition of competences already acquired should be made possible. For the first time, the possibility was created to recognise non-formally and informally acquired competences of any kind. (the law speaks of 'vocational and non-vocational qualifications'), provided that these correspond to the competences to be to be acquired in the course of study.

As an optional provision new and also identical regulations for RPL are formulated for all four higher education sectors: These provide that a higher education institution may recognise completed examinations up to a maximum of 60 ECTS credits as well as vocational or non-vocational qualifications up to a maximum of 60 ECTS credits or a total of up to a maximum of 90 ECTS credits.[43] To this end, corresponding regulations and standards for quality-assured procedures of validation are to be included in the statutes of the higher education institutions. Most higher education institutions already have arrangements for the process of validation of learning outcomes according to the standards set in the statutes.

Recognition is granted upon application by the student, who must submit the relevant documents, and by decision of the university body responsible for study matters. Previously, students had to prove the equivalence of study achievements, now there is a reversal of the burden of proof: it is now up to the higher education institutions to prove that study achievements obtained elsewhere CANNOT be recognised.

New in the legal basis is the term validation, which is described as a procedure which in any case includes the procedural steps of identification, documentation and assessment of learning outcomes already acquired for the purpose of recognition as examinations or other study achievements. However, the step of certification is not mentioned (Birke, 2022).

In addition, the 2021 reform package for continuing education in higher education (BMBWF, n.d.f.) created a new framework for continuing education programmes in Austria: The programmes were adapted to the Bologna structure and the suffix 'CE' (short for Continuing Education) was added to the degree titles. CVET programmes offered in cooperation with educational institutions outside of higher education are completed with a 'Bachelor Professional' or a 'Master Professional' degree. Admission to the 'Bachelor Professional' degree programmes requires a relevant professional qualification or several years of professional experience in a relevant field (a general university entrance qualification is not mandatory in this case). Thus, access is possible based on the recognition of prior non-formal and/or informal learning. Some of these programmes will start as early as the 2023/24 academic year. A relevant professional qualification is also required to start an Executive Master of Business Administration (EMBA), but not a general higher education entrance qualification. Admission to a continuing education Master's or Master's Professional

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[43] These mentioned maximum limits are sometimes also viewed critically: Although the new regulations are seen as an important step in this area, they contradict a basic principle of the recognition of competences and the vision of the equivalence of all places of learning.

programme requires a completed Bachelor's degree in a relevant subject area and several years of professional experience.

Universities are autonomous institutions but have an important role for acceptance of validation of non-formal and informal competences for a curriculum and for the access to higher education. The competent ministry (Ministry of Education, Science and Research, BMBWF) has some strategic instruments to support this topic in the higher education sector[44]:

■ The ministry concludes 'performance agreements' with all 22 public universities for a period of three years. For the previous period (2019-2021), it was foreseen that some universities would propose concrete projects on validation. This was not mandatory, but ten universities have carried out concrete projects in this area. In the current period 2022-2024, 18 out of 22 universities will carry out concrete projects on this topic. The box below presents an example of such projects[45].

■ The General Austrian University Development Plan (*GUEP*) (BMBWF, n.d.g) is a technical-strategic planning instrument of the competent ministry that serves the overall design of the Austrian university landscape. It serves as the basis for the development plans and for the performance agreements of the public universities. One of the objectives of the GUEP 2025-2030 is to promote the validation of informal and non-formal learning.

■ In the area of universities of applied sciences (UAS), the UAS Development and Financing Plan is the relevant steering instrument. The current plan (BMWFW, 2019), for example, refers to the promotion of non-traditional access to UAS degree programmes. The new plan 2023/2024-2025/26 was published by the ministry in 2023and also focuses on the validation of non-formally and informally gained competences.

Box 3.6   VNFIL at the University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences Vienna

The Department of Lifelong Learning at the University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences Vienna (BOKU, n.d.) is developing an online process for validation of non-formal and informal learning (VNFIL) for the university context. The validation process will be trailed with a university continuing education program to create insights for a possible use in other study programs. The main focus will be on green skills and competences.

The VNFIL Project at the department of lifelong learning has been running since 2019 following an agreement with the Austrian Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research. A result of the project is a 'Handbook on Validation'. This handbook is focused on each of the four stages of validation exploring how they can be implemented in the Austrian university context. It documents current developments and best practice examples.

Following the handbook, an online tool is developed to support the validation process using the Moodle platform. The online tool follows the four stages of validation guiding candidates through each step, creating a detailed portfolio of the candidate's general and specific competences focusing on the specific documentation needs of the candidate. The assessment of these competences is supported by the online tool to keep communication overhead to a minimum. Submissions are assigned to the experts relevant to each

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competence, as well as a jury. Finally, a complete portfolio is compiled for the final certification process, helping the university administration. The online tool handles most communication needs between university, candidates, jury, and administration. During each stage, the tool is designed with internal and external transparency in mind to ensure a valid, fair, reliable and useful process.

The Handbook as well as the use of a widespread open-source software (Moodle) already used by most universities in Austria will ensure that project results can be replicated by other institutions.

During the trail scheduled for 2023/24, the project will explore practical aspects of the validation process in the university context. This includes guidance and support for the candidates during the four stages, communication workflows and university staff interaction. Furthermore, the evaluation of the specific needs of the jury of experts during the assessment phase is key.

All these aspects of the project will deliver valuable insights reflecting the latest legal situation that changes the conditions for recognition and validation in the Austrian higher education sector.

There are also some arrangements and regulations that have been in place for a long time and offer alternative access routes to higher education programmes:

■ Non-traditional access to higher education programmes (without completion of the school-based upper secondary certificate):

Traditionally, access to higher education in Austria is granted based on the completion of the school-based upper secondary certificate called *Matura* or *Reifeprüfung* (school-leaving certificates of Higher Vocational Colleges or Secondary Academic Schools). Non-traditional access is granted based on specific exams as described below.

– Limited Higher Education Entrance Examination (*Studienberechtigungsprüfung, SBP*) (BMBWF, n.d.a)[46]: This exam provides restricted access to post-secondary and tertiary educational institutions. It enables those who have not taken the *Reifeprüfung* exam to study specific subjects or subject areas at these institutions. Admission to the *SBP* requires a minimum age of 20 years, citizenship of an EEA member state as well as proof of previous vocational or non-vocational education beyond compulsory schooling. The higher education entrance qualification examination consists of 5 examinations, which are determined by the respective rectorate of the chosen educational institution. The preparation for the examination takes place in self-study or within the framework of preparatory courses; at least one examination must be taken at the targeted educational institution. Adult education institutions and higher education institutions offer non-compulsory bridge courses for the preparation of the exam.

– General Higher Education Entrance Examination for graduates of apprenticeship training and VET schools (*Berufsreifeprüfung*, *BRP*) (BMBWF, n.d.b): Completion of a *Berufsreifeprüfung* allows unrestricted access to attending higher education studies. A change of study is possible at any time. The prerequisite for taking the *Berufsreifeprüfung* is the completion of initial vocational training. Before examinations can be taken, an application for admission to a public secondary school must be submitted. The *Berufsreifeprüfung* consists of four partial examinations (German,

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[46] According to the General Austrian University Development Plan (GUEP) 2025-2030, a new basis for the *SPB* is to be created.

mathematics, living foreign language, subject area). The examination in the subject area always relates to initial vocational training. Exam preparation can be done in self-study, distance learning or in preparatory courses. If preparatory courses are attended at recognised adult education institutions, up to three examinations may be taken there. In any case, one examination must be taken at a public secondary school. Since April 2017, the standardised maturity and diploma examination has applied in the area of *Berufsreifeprüfung*.

– Admission to higher education programmes without *Reifeprüfung* or specific higher education entrance exam: Via the so-called 'third educational pathway', competences that have been acquired in the course of vocational qualification or acquired through self-study can lead to admission to higher education institutions[47].

At universities, in the artistic-musical or sports fields, portfolios or exemplary illustrations usually serve as proof. Since the UG Amendment 2021, universities have been able for the first time to conduct aptitude tests for individual or all Bachelor's or diploma degree programmes for which there are no special admission regulations, subject to a decree by the rectorate (Fellner, 2022, p. 30).

Universities of applied sciences can admit applicants who have not taken the *Reifeprüfung* examination or any of the specific exams mentioned above but have a subject-relevant vocational qualification: Persons who have a relevant apprenticeship diploma (NQF/EQF level 4) or a diploma from a School for Intermediate Vocational Education (*Berufsbildende Mittlere Schule, BMS*; NQF/EQF level 4) can acquire the admission requirements for an Bachelor's degree programme at a universities of applied sciences after taking prescribed additional examinations. Which apprenticeship diploma or *BMS* diploma counts as an admission requirement and which additional examinations have to be taken varies depending on the subject orientation of the Bachelor programme.

3.3 Validation and the labour market

Introduction and overview

Several types of validation arrangements offered in Austria are closely linked to the labour market (some of them are also closely linked to CVET).[48] A few of these arrangements have a legal basis and are offered nationally, others aim at obtaining non-formal qualifications, certificates, or titles, or are linked to various other aims (such as defining salary structures or supporting personnel development in companies). Some of them are bottom-up and demand driven initiatives and are organised in a decentralised way. They also differ in the extent to which they include all four stages of the validation procedures or only individual ones.

The following list presents examples of different types of validation arrangements[49]:

■ award of the engineer qualification (*Ingenieur,* NQF/EQF level 6 – see below);
■ proof of relevant occupational experience as part of entry requirements for regulated occupations; by far the most common way is to pass the master craftsman's examination (*Meisterprüfung*, for access to 'classic' trades such as

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[47] This option is, however, rarely used: The proportion of students without a *Reifeprüfung* was only 0.5% in the academic year 2018/19 (Fellner, 2022, 37).

[48] Based on Mayerl & Schlögel, 2015; and Luomi-Messerer, 2014.

[49] Some are described in more detail below; for other ones please consult the 2018 Inventory report!

hairdressing, carpentry, bakery; NQF/EQF level 6) or a qualifying examination (*Befähigungsprüfung for regulated occupations,* NQF/EQF level 6[50]; for other regulated trades such as security, insurance or forwarding) – the only legally-based requirement for entering the examination procedure is that one has reached the age of majority;

- proof of relevant occupational experience as part of collective agreements (e.g., the collective agreement for workers in the non-university-based research sector - Kollektivvertrag.at, n.d.);
- certification of competences of individuals (person certification) – see below;
- supporting company personnel development (this often includes formative validation procedures);
- supporting competence development and validation in a specific sector (such as in the timber industry – see below);
- initiatives focusing on identification and documentation as part of career guidance services (e.g., offered by Public Employment Services, adult educational centres or regional career guidance services and focussing on formative validation procedures)[51].

Another important initiative closely linked to validation and the labour market is the plan to establish a sector of Higher VET:

Higher VET – envisaged as a new education segment with close links to the labour market

In line with the Government Programme 2020-2024 (Republik Austria, 2020, p. 210), the government announced its plans for establishing Higher VET in the Council of Ministers on 23 February 2022 and the Ministry of Labour and Economy has initiated the development of a legal basis for this area. Establishing Higher VET (*Höhere Berufliche Bildung*, *HBB*) as an education segment in its own right is also highlighted in the Austrian National Implementation Plan for the 2020 Council Recommendation on VET and Osnabrück Declaration (BMBWF & BMDW, 2022). The draft law on Higher VET was released for consultation at the beginning of September 2023[52].

In a first step, a process with relevant stakeholders and education experts was launched to elaborate a concrete proposal for a legal basis and framework conditions for Higher VET. This includes, in particular, the development of criteria for the qualifications covered by Higher VET and the definition of qualification titles. Furthermore, the development and implementation of an adequate quality assurance system that meets the requirements of practical vocational qualification and the prerequisites for NQF mapping is planned.

As indicated in the draft law, the subject of Higher VET will be qualifications at higher NQF levels (NQF/EQF level 5 to 7) that are oriented towards vocational practice, are geared to the needs of the economy or the labour market and are linked in terms of content to initial vocational training and/or professional practice. They should also serve as an instrument for the formal localisation of future vocational competences (e.g., green skills) and be regarded as an addition to higher education provision. The master craftsman's examination (*Meisterprüfung*), the examination for obtaining the certificate of competences (*Befähigungsprüfung*) and the engineer qualification (*Ingenieur)*, all of them mapped to NQF/EQF level 6, should be regarded as existing

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[50] This qualification type was mapped to the NQF in September 2023 based on four examples (OeAD NKS, 2023).

[51] See also examples of Skills Audits presented in the 2018-update of the Inventory report!

[52] Ministerialentwurf betreffend Bundesgesetz über die höhere berufliche Bildung (HBB-Gesetz) - https://www.parlament.gv.at/gegenstand/XXVII/ME/293

statutory reference qualifications for new qualifications to be developed. Once new Higher VET qualifications have been developed, the next step is to apply for mapping to the NQF.

The following titles (German and English) for these qualification types are envisaged:

- NQF/EQF level 5: *Höhere Berufsqualifikation (HBQ)* - Extended Professional Qualification
- NQF/EQF level 6: *Fachdiplom (FD)* – Professional Diploma
- NQF/EQF level 7: *Höheres Fachdiplom (HFD)* – Advanced Professional Diploma.

Validation (with summative approaches, using the competence-based qualification standards to be developed) is intended to play an important role in this context: The company is intended as the primary place of learning; it is about personal and professional development through and for practice and the certification of the competences gained in this way, supplemented by non-formal learning opportunities. The subject of Higher VET will therefore be qualifications (examinations, validations of other kinds, such as expert discussions, project work) and not courses of instruction or study. The aim is to develop a system of professional certification along the lines of the engineer qualification (*Ingenieur* – see below).

It is planned that the Higher VET Act will be approved in 2023 and that corresponding qualifications can be developed from 2024 (Hölbl, 2022).

Award of the engineer qualification (*Ingenieur;* NQF/EQF level 6)[53]

Based on the Engineering Act of 2017 (IngG 2017), graduates of Higher VET Colleges of engineering (*HTL*) or of Higher VET Colleges in the agricultural and forestry/environmental sector (*HBLA*) (NQF/EQF level 5) who have a minimum of three years of professional experience – in activities typically carried out by such graduates – can apply for certification in order to obtain the formal qualification *Ingenieur* (i.e., in a summative validation procedure).[54] This qualification is allocated to NQF level 6 (OeAD NKS, n.d.e). The applicant is required to submit an application with the necessary documents to the competent certification body. The certification body examines the documents and submits them for a positive assessment to two experts. The certification body then organises an expert discussion of up to 45 minutes duration, during which the applicant has to specify the additional knowledge, skills and competences acquired in practice. The experts assess whether this meets the criteria of the engineer qualification standard.

Certification of competences of individuals (person certification according to EN ISO/IEC 17024)

Depending on the standard of the specific personal certification, written and oral examination modules, on-site tasks and work samples must be submitted. The person certification is thus a classic summative validation procedure (Hassek-Eder, 2022, p. 219). The completion of certain training courses or the acquisition of certain qualifications, which are usually mentioned as entry requirements for the certificate examination, can sometimes be replaced by evidence of informally acquired competences (i.e., plausible evidence of informally acquired competences must be presented). This is the case with the following certificates related to the green economy (sustainability): Certified Manager for Sustainable Innovation (wifi Zertifizierungsstelle, 2023a) or the Certified Green Consultant Medien/Kultur (wifi

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[53] BMAW, n.d.a; Pfeffer, 2021

[54] A higher qualification for graduates of the Secondary College of Business Administration analogous to the Engineering Act is also under discussion. It could be developed in the context of the newly created Higher VET segment as envisaged in the draft law on Higher VET.

Zertifizierungsstelle, 2023b). In other cases, certificates assess, certify and thus provide formal recognition of competences acquired by the individual through work experience without any training, such as the Certified e-commerce and social media expert (CESE) certificate (wifi Zertifizierungsstelle, 2023b).

Supporting competence development and validation in a specific sector

Validation of competences can be seen as a starting point of longer-term personnel development and securing the workforce in a specific sector. An approach in this regard was pursued in a research and development project in Styria:

Box 3.7   Valid Holz project – validation in the timber sector in Styria[55]

The aim of the Valid Holz project was to conduct exploratory research into in-company training work in the timber industry. In the course of this, basic scientifically relevant findings on competence development were to be compiled and, building on this, an instrument for the validation of competences was to be created. The intention was to support companies in systematically planning, implementing and evaluating their educational work, so that employees can be supported in becoming aware of their own potential and needs and using these as a starting point for the individual development of professional capacity to act.

The project focused on three topics: (1.) digitalisation and its influence on competence requirements and in-company training work, (2.) the development of competences in the course of work-related learning, and (3.) the identification and validation of non-formally and informally acquired competences.

The Valid Holz project was about supporting woodworking businesses in Styria (Austria) in dealing with labour shortages and the transformation of industrial and craft work organisation and to accompany them with scientific evidence, so that they can offer their employees support services with regard to their professional development.

3.4   Validation and the third sector

Introduction

The third sector was actively involved in developing the national validation strategy as well as the procedure for including qualifications obtained in non-formal or informal learning contexts into the NQF. There are some validation initiatives in this area (e.g., youth and volunteering), offered at national or regional levels or by individual organisations. In most cases, they focus on identification and documentation of competences and they are not connected to the formal system. There is also no clear evidence to what extent validation results from the third sector are valued within the labour market.

Youth sector

In the youth sector, some measures focus on identifying and documenting competences with regard to career orientation and planning – an example is *WIK:I* – 'What I can do through informal learning' ('*Was ich kann durch informelles Lernen*'[56]): In the format developed in 2012/2013 by the Ring Österreichischer Bildungswerke (a platform of adult education organisations), young people explore their extracurricular learning in their free time, in their family, in their circle of friends, in their hobbies, in

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[55] Assinger, 2022; Ponsold, 2022. The project was funded by the Future Fund of the Province of Styria and carried out between December 2019 and March 2022 at the Adult and Continuing Education Department of the Institute of Education and Educational Science at the University of Graz.

[56] Ring Österreichischer Bildungswerke, n.d.a; Jugendportal, n.d.

sports, in their commitment, etc. in the course of a 4-6 hour workshop and gain orientation for their career and educational planning and document selected competences in a certificate for job applications. Providers are youth information centres and Ring member institutions.[57]

Some youth organisations (such as the 'Boy Scouts and Girl Guides of Austria' / PPÖ, the 'Catholic Youth Organisation Austria' or the 'Austrian Alpine Club's youth organization') have developed competence-based descriptions of their courses and some have even reformed them so that they can be mapped to the NQF[58]. The PPÖ's new training programmes, for example, are competence-oriented and modular and prior learning is recognised, i.e., if one already has acquired competences within the scope of training, in the job or also with the scouts, these will be credited to them (PPÖ, n.d.).

The current Austrian Youth Strategy (2021), which comprises 33 goals assigned to four fields of action, does not mention validation explicitly, but indirectly it is referred to with the following goal: 'In order for young people to recognise and use volunteering as a component of their qualification, the Republic of Austria Job Centre takes the skills obtained into account when applying for apprenticeships' (Bundeskanzleramt, n.d). In the Progress Report 2021 on the Austrian Youth Strategy, reference is made in this regard to the 'Austrian Record of Voluntary Activities' (Bundeskanzleramt, 2021, p. 59 – see below). Some regional initiatives in this regard include:

■ The certificate *ehren.wert.voll* (worth. to be. cherished) is issued since 2010 by the Provincial Youth Department in Styria for making competences visible that have been acquired in voluntary activities in children and youth work (Jugendreferat Steiermark, n.d.).

■ *aha plus* is a recognition system for young people who are engaged in volunteering activities (aha, n.d.). Offered by the aha-Youth Information Centre Vorarlberg 12 to 24-year-olds collect points for voluntary activities, which in turn can be redeemed for 'rewards'. Such 'rewards' include, for example, specific experiences (e.g., job shadowing in a company, training with sports professionals) or useful products (e.g., event tickets). In addition, their voluntary commitment and the experience they have gained with aha plus are documented aha plus commitment certificate.

Volunteering

The development of relevant initiatives are highlighted in the Government Programme 2020-2024 (Republik Austria, 2020): In the section on 'Social protection, new justice & poverty reduction', it calls for the creation of a seal of quality for voluntary work in order to document and certify competences gained through voluntary and civic work and the qualifications acquired through it (especially among young people) and, if applicable, to take them into account in job applications. Some initiatives ('Proof of voluntary activities' and the competence portfolio for volunteers – see below) are also highlighted in the Austrian National Implementation Plan for the 2020 Council Recommendation on VET and Osnabrück Declaration (BMBWF & BMDW, 2022). In February 2023, the Volunteer Council decided to set up a working group – led by the Ministry of Social Affairs, Health, Care and Consumer Protection – to prepare the Volunteer Strategy 2023. The strategy will be adopted in the course of 2023. In the current draft of the strategy (as of the end of 2022), the strengthening of the voluntary

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[57] The role-out of the initiative started in 2015; from 2017 to 2021, the Austrian Youth Info carried out this project on behalf of the Federal Chancellery - Family and Youth Section (Österreichische Jugendinfos, 2023).

[58] Such as the Youth leader training of the Alpine Club Youth – this qualification is mapped to NQF/EQF level 3.

sector as an educational sector (education and training & further education) is mentioned (Bundesministerium für Soziales, Gesundheit, Pflege und Konsumentenschutz, 2022, 16). This is to be achieved with the following measures:

■ Promote certification and evidence of volunteering: Completed training as well as acquired knowledge and skills are adapted to the requirements of the NQF in certificates of voluntary activities and in the (digital) volunteer passport (see below). Volunteer organisations are supported in issuing the certificates. It is also stated that the Public Employment Service should take these certificates and the competences confirmed in them into account in job placement.
■ Expand quality 'service learning' models: Training offers for organisations and volunteers will be further developed – ideally taking into account the NQF. Barriers to participation will be removed. Resources are available for volunteer organisations to resources are available for voluntary organisations to enter into sustainable cooperation with educational institutions.

Moreover, the strategy calls for increasing the understanding of the importance of learning and education for volunteering (Bundesministerium für Soziales, Gesundheit, Pflege und Konsumentenschutz, 2022, p. 25), to be achieved with the following measures:

■ Raise volunteers' awareness of the right to be issued with a volunteer certificate;
■ Further develop the volunteer passport and volunteer certificate;
■ Consideration and recognition of voluntary work in the recruitment of public sector employees;
■ Further develop documentation and recognition of non-formally and informally acquired competences;
■ Develop guided self-evaluation to raise awareness of competences acquired in volunteering.

The certificate of voluntary activities (*Nachweis über freiwillige Tätigkeiten*), already introduced in 2005 by the Ministry of Social Affairs, has also already gained in importance in recent years: Voluntary organisations have no legal entitlement to funding. However, the Volunteering Act (2012) stipulates that they can only be funded if they provide the volunteers with certificates of the competences and qualifications acquired through the voluntary engagement upon their request within six months after the end of their activity, stating the duration and type of activity as well as the competences acquired in the process. While the digital volunteer passport documents the type and duration of the activity, the digital volunteer certificate refers to the competences acquired during the activity and can be used as a supplementary document in job applications (Freiwilligenweb, 2019). The certificate of voluntary activities was further developed in recent years (in cooperation between the öibf and the Ring Österreichischer Bildungswerke) and is based on tried and tested methods of holistic competence assessment of the volunteers' knowledge, skills and attitudes.[59] With the recent amendment of the Volunteering Act, that came into force in September 2023[60], the Austrian Volunteer Passport will in future serve as a central Austrian proof of voluntary engagement. It is a standalone passport as proof of voluntary activities and contains a cover letter, instructions on how to prepare the passport and worksheets on activities carried out and competences acquired.

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[59] It now follows the principles of the 'Kompetenz+Beratung' concept of the initiative 'Education Counselling Austria' (Brandstetter and Kellner, 2014; Gugitscher and Lachmayer, 2022), but in contrast to this it is only offered in individual settings.

[60] Bundesgesetz zur Förderung von freiwilligem Engagement (Freiwilligengesetz – FreiwG) (RIS, 2023).

Other validation initiatives for volunteers – also offered by the Ring Österreichischer Bildungswerke – include the following (Ring Österreichischer Bildungswerke,n.d.a):

■ the competence portfolio for volunteers (*Kompetenzportfolio für Freiwillige*) systematically documents skills and competences acquired by volunteers; it is created in individual settings or in workshops;

■ the workshop 'Life Experience Seeks Commitment: Finding My Volunteer Activity' is aimed at people who are looking for a volunteer position and clarifies, among other things, which competences from their lives they want to bring into a volunteer position or develop in this activity.

Another initiative is linked to higher education: In the winter semester 2015/16, the Private University College of Education of the Diocese of Linz started the project 'Learning. Commitment. Responsibility' (*Lernen. Engagement. Verantwortung.*) (PHDL, n.d.). This project is based on the concept of service learning. Learning through engagement is a teaching concept that combines students' social engagement with subject knowledge involving reflection. Students who have done voluntary work, e.g., in social institutions, create documentary evidence of the competences acquired in these activities together with their teachers and receive ECTS points. The Ring Österreichischer Bildungswerke trained teachers in the preparation of this documentation.

Civilian service

The regulation for civilian service of 2013 stipulates that a 'standardised competence balance' has to be issued at the end of a completed civilian service (Zivildienstserviceagentur, n.d.). This is supported by the development of a common document and guidelines for completing it. This document is composed of three sections for recording any training programmes attended during the civilian service, practical activities carried out and knowledge, skills and competences gained. This standardised documentation should facilitate the recognition of competences gained during civilian service and the crediting within the scope of further training.

4   Links to credentials and qualifications

The link between the Austrian national qualifications framework (NQF) and validation

The Austrian NQF is structured in eight levels and referenced to the EQF. Allocating qualifications to NQF levels (this process is called 'mapping of qualifications' in the Austrian NQF context) is not compulsory; it is done on voluntary basis. The Austrian NQF distinguishes between formal qualifications (which have a legal basis) and non-formal qualifications (without a legal basis). For supporting and advising providers of non-formal qualifications in submitting requests for mapping, NQF service centres have been established in 2019 (OeAD NKS, n.d.a) and 2020, non-formal qualifications could be mapped to the NQF for the first time (OeAD, 2021).

Several qualifications that are obtained based on validation arrangements are already included in the NQF (e.g., the above mentioned *Ingenieur* qualification at NQF/EQF level 6 or the wba-certificate and -diploma at NQF/EQF levels 5 and 6). The NQF is therefore in principle open to qualifications acquired in different learning contexts, as it focuses on learning outcomes and not on how and where the learning outcomes were achieved. However, whether and to what extent learning acquired through non-formal and informal means can be used to obtain qualifications mapped to the NQF, or to what extent credentials obtained through validation can generally be combined to obtain a qualification mapped to the NQF, depends on the specific regulations for the respective sector or qualification.

Tangible outcomes that can be achieved through the validation of non-formal and informal learning

As described in Chapter 3, there are several tangible outcomes that can be achieved through the validation of non-formal and informal learning, including the award of qualifications, exemptions as well as the access to formal or non-formal learning opportunities. The Austrian qualifications system, however, does not use the term 'partial qualification'. Qualifications are in many cases structured into modules which supports the use of validation arrangements. There are, however, no general regulations on maximum number of modules for a qualification that can be obtained through validation.

The term 'microcredentials' is not widely used in the Austrian context and there is no national definition for this concept (Cedefop, 2023, p. 80). In VET, for example, it has hardly been used so far. The Austrian National Implementation Plan (NIP) for the 2020 Council Recommendation on VET and Osnabrück Declaration, however, suggests that current discussions related to the topics of validation and microcredentials should be taken into account in the design of the planned 'digitalisation passport' (BMBWF & BMDW, 2022, p. 63). Microcredentials could possibly also refer to personal certifications (where a link to validation can be observed – see Chapter 3.3) or shorter courses in the field of adult or continuing education leading to non-formal qualifications. At present, however, it is still unclear why this concept is necessary in VET or for which problem/challenge it would be a solution. 'Austrian national authorities interpret microcredentials as being related to and connected with the private education sector, over which national authorities have no competence. Steering and regulating this market is currently not under consideration, which means that microcredentials, according to this interpretation, operate only in the private space' (Cedefop, 2023, p. 91).

In the higher education sector, a monitoring group on the topic of microcredentials was set up at national level in 2021, which also produced a position paper on the subject – even before the Council Recommendation was adopted. It states that micro-credentials cannot be a substitute for 'full degrees', but that the 'cumulability' of micro-credentials should in principle be made possible. A corresponding recommendation of the national Bologna Follow-up Group was published in 2023 (BMBWF, n.d.c). The publication of the national Bologna Follow-up Group gives concrete recommendations, based on European and national developments. and national developments, guidelines and positions, concrete recommendations for the quality-assured development and awarding of micro-credentials in the Austrian higher education area. It aims to provide impulses for a considerate discussion on this topic as well as for pilot projects, while also pointing out that the present recommendations must be further developed on an ongoing basis. With regard to validation, reference is made to the above-mentioned changes in the study laws: For the recognition of microcredentials, which are offered and completed in the context of non-formal learning settings, validation can be considered according to the respective study laws. In this case, the recognised learning outcomes are to be indicated with the designation 'recognised', including the number of ECTS credits provided in the curriculum for the recognised examination (Nationale Bologna Follow-up Gruppe, 2023, p. 8).

5   Standards

For summative validation initiatives, learning outcome-based standards[61] usually play a major role, i.e., the underlying reference points for validation are formulated in a learning outcomes-oriented way. This is even a prerequisite for validation initiatives leading to the acquisition of a qualification to be mapped to the Austrian NQF.

For the acquisition of qualifications of the formal education system based on validation (such as 'exceptional admission to the final apprenticeship exam', the 'acquisition of lower secondary school qualifications by adults' or other so called 'external exams'), the same education and training standards used in formal education and training are taken into account in the assessment process (i.e., they are also used as reference points for validation). In the case of apprenticeship training, this also includes occupational standards (the occupational profile associated with a qualification). The acquired certificates do not show whether the qualification was acquired in the traditional way or based on validation.

Procedures also exist for acquiring certification without any corresponding qualification in the formal system. Some initiatives have developed their own qualification standards or reference points for obtaining formal or non-formal qualifications based on validation and some of these qualifications are even explicitly designed to incorporate validation procedures.[62] Some of these reference points are closely aligned with the NQF descriptors. If an NQF mapping is sought for these qualifications, then ensuring the validity and reliability of the (assessment) methods used is of great importance, as the following examples show[63]. Two examples are presented here below:

- The validation procedures offered by the Academy of Continuing Education (*Weiterbildungsakademie*, *wba*) (cf. Chapter 3.2; Wagner & Breyer, 2022) use the learning-outcomes-based qualification profiles as reference points. These have been revised several times in the spirit of a continuing process of quality improvement. In view of the holistic and action-oriented understanding of competences on which the procedure is based, different forms of evidence of already acquired competences are used, which is important for the reliability of the procedure (Gruber et al., 2021). In order to carry out the validation process in a quality-assured way, several measures are taken: for example, 'guiding principles and criteria for the recognition work' have been developed. Together with the qualification profile and transparently presented assessment criteria, these should also ensure reliability. Objectivity is sought, for example, through the separation of roles between counsellors and assessors. Fundamental decisions are usually not made by one person alone.
- The certification process of the engineer qualification (*Ingenieur,* NQF/EQF level 6) (cf. Chapter 3.3) is based on specifically developed occupational standards: these are specifications of activities which are described in the form of sector-neutral learning outcomes, which express both technical knowledge and skills as well as competences (autonomy and responsibility) related to these activities (BMDW, 2018). Certification commissions are set up at each certification body.

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[61] The term 'standard' here refers to occupational or qualification standards or even job profiles that serve as reference points for the validation of learning outcomes acquired in non-formal and informal learning contexts.

[62] Formative validation approaches, such as competence identification procedures offered by adult education providers or other organisations and services, have also often developed their own standards. In general, they vary in their degree of standardisation of the description and identification of competences.

[63] However, interviewees also pointed out that the scalability of a validation approach that ensures high reliability and validity is often a challenge due to the high resource requirements.

These are composed of two persons each who are experts in the technical and industrial disciplines defined in the Ordinance on Specialisations. These technical experts determine on the basis of specified criteria whether the technical requirements for the acquisition of the engineering qualification are met. The standard and the criteria together with the given procedure steps should ensure validity and reliability (BMDW, 2020)[64].

6 Institutions involved in validation arrangements and its coordination

The currently existing validation procedures or measures in Austria involve different (public and private) institutions and actors with different roles and responsibilities; this is regulated for each sector or type of qualification or validation arrangement separately. In general, this has not changed in recent years, except in cases where new validation procedures have been introduced. For example, certification bodies have been set up in each federal state to award the 'engineer' qualification (*Ingenieur*).

Validation activities are mainly carried out independently of each other in the different sectors or offers. In practice, there is not much coordination across and little cooperation between sectors in this regard. Stakeholders cooperate, however, in the development and design of validation initiatives for a specific sector. For example, depending on the specific validation offer, social partner organisations might cooperate with adult education providers and certification bodies, public employment services with adult education providers or organisations supporting migrants, etc.

The extent to which validation activities and lifelong career guidance services are coordinated depends on the specific offers, local or regional approaches, but there is no systematic coordination of these services across Austria. However, formative validation approaches, comprising identification and documentation of a person's competences, are often integrated into career guidance activities[65]. For example, the initiative *Kompetenz+Beratung* (Competence+Counselling[66]) was developed in the context of the initiative *Bildungsberatung Österreich* (Educational Guidance Austria[67]) and has been offered by different organisations since 2012 (for free). This standardised format combines guidance with formative validation and support for further action steps and educational processes and follows a tailor-made strategy for further competence development of the participants. It includes the identification and documentation of competences in a workshop and face-to-face counselling.[68]

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[64] As mentioned earlier, for the Higher VET qualifications, a system of professional certification along the lines of the engineer qualification is envisaged.

[65] This is also one of the reasons why the TRANSVAL-EU project targeted validation and guidance practitioners.

[66] Brandstetter & Kellner, 2014; Muckenhuber et al., 2022.

[67] The initiative Educational Guidance comprises more than 30 guidance institutions in regional project networks as well as a supra-regional network.

[68] This initiative is among the activities highlighted in the Austrian National Implementation Plan for the 2020 Council Recommendation on VET and Osnabrück Declaration (BMBWF & BMDW, 2022).

7 Outreach, awareness raising, provision of information, advice and guidance

7.1 Outreach and awareness-raising

Outreach and promotional activities are usually carried out separately for the different validation opportunities, i.e., by the organisations responsible for a validation initiative, the respective ministries, regional authorities, public employment services or by social partner organisations. The target groups for this therefore also differ. There are no specific nation-wide awareness raising campaigns/approaches in place to improve overall awareness of validation arrangements.

The information activities carried out in the context of the Erasmus+ project TRANSVAL-EU (n.d.) can, for example, be considered as awareness-raising activities at national level. This includes, for example, the strategic exchange on validation in general and the validation of transversal competences in particular in the framework of the 'Austrian Forum TRANSVAL-EU' as well as the dissemination activities of the project partners, for example on the project results and the national and international events.[69]

7.2 Information, advice and guidance

In Austria, information as well as counselling and guidance is mainly provided – by different means – by the relevant authorities, educational institutions or by those organisations offering the specific validation processes. The public employment services or career guidance services can also refer individuals to appropriate measures. The AST-Counselling/Contact Points for people who gained professional qualifications abroad (*Anlaufstellen für Personen mit im Ausland erworbenen Qualifikationen*) provides professional expert counselling and support for recognition of foreign qualifications. The procedure of AST-counselling includes: clarification of requirement and possibility of formal recognition, cost coverage of certified translations of documents, assistance with the application for assessment and if necessary, assistance during recognition proceedings as well as assistance in the search for 'bridging courses' and its financing.[70]

There is no commonly used or systematic approach to the provision of advice and guidance to support validation and to follow up with individuals after guidance interventions to assess if further guidance related to validation is needed and of what type, etc. The coherent communication strategy and easily accessible online portal to present information on available validation measures, their link to the qualification system and on accompanying measures that was envisaged in the validation strategy (BMB & BMWFW, 2017, p. 19) have not yet been developed. There are currently also no plans in this regard.

Relevant information on opportunities for validation is usually made available on websites (but content and comprehensiveness of the information varies depending on the initiative) – for example:

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[69] For more information on the TRANSVAL-EU project, see Chapter 8.2.

[70] In 2019 the AST recognition counselling was awarded the 'VINCE Validation Prize' and in nominated for the European Social Services Award of the European Social nominated. In 2022, the AST contact points received the VPL Prize for their commitment to the recognition of migrants' acquired qualifications in Austria (AST, 2022).

- The website of the Ministry of Education, Science and Research provides information about second-chance education (such as acquisition of compulsory qualifications by adults, *ExternistInnenreifeprüfung, Studienberechtigungsprüfung,* and *Berufsreifeprüfung)* (BMBWF, n.d.d).
- The Ministry of Education, Science and Research also provides a dedicated website for presenting comprehensive information on Austrian adult learning and second-chance education offers, including possibilities for the validation and recognition of informally developed competences (BMBWF, n.d.e).
- The website of the Austrian Initiative for Adult Education (Initiative Erwachsenenbildung, n.d.c) provides information about accreditation of programmes and courses provided within this framework.
- The website of the Ministry for Labour and Economy informs the public about apprenticeship training as well as the exceptional admission to the apprenticeship examination. This website also gives detailed information about the awarding of the *Ingenieur* qualification (BMAW, n.d.b).
- The website of the initiative for professional recognition (*Berufsanerkennung*) targeted at migrants provides information about the acceptance and recognition of vocational qualifications or professional experience acquired in other countries as well as about counselling offers (ÖIF, n.d.b).
- An example of a regional approach is the *NÖ Kompetenzatlas* (Lower Austrian Competence Atlas) (Menschen und Arbeit GmbH, 2020). This initiative of the province of Lower Austria in cooperation with Menschen und Arbeit GmbH is a digital service point for competence orientation. The province of Lower Austria, its social partners and the PES have brought together all their offers (including and further training) in one place in order to prepare every possible support for economic and working life in a simple and clear way.
- The Austrian Federal Economic Chamber has developed the instrument *Bildungspfade* ('Education Pathways') as a kind of 'Google Maps for Occupations' that systematises and makes visible the numerous opportunities for further and continuing VET. These Education Pathways are predefined offers for career paths, most of which start with an apprenticeship. They combine different qualifications that build on each other and can be completed in parallel to a specialised career in the company. They only include training that can be completed while working and show the connection between formal, non-formal and informal learning. They are clearly presented on a website according to occupational fields (WKO, 2023b) and are used by individuals and educational counsellors as well as by companies, which can use and adapt them for the acquisition of apprentices and for internal career planning (Hassek-Eder, 2022).

Sometimes also events (conferences, workshops) are organized to inform specific target groups about validation opportunities. On 13 January 2023, for example, a joint expert conference of the Ombudsman's Office for Students and the Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research on the topic of validation procedures in the Austrian higher education area took place at the University of Teacher Education Vienna. The symposium provided a cross-sectoral overview of validation procedures in the Austrian higher education area, complemented by recommendations on the design of validation procedures. Event documents can be found on the website of the Ombudsman's Office for Students (Ombudsstelle für Studierende, 2023).

8 Validation practitioners

8.1 Profile of validation practitioners

There are no common national standards nor is there a specific profile of professionals carrying out validation processes in Austria. Depending on the specific measures and the sector it belongs to, the profile of validation practitioners differs. Many practitioners supporting the processes for identifying and documenting competences (including portfolio methods) are trainers or career counsellors at adult-education institutes. They have to prove expertise in the field of adult education and/or counselling and undergo the respective special training, if existing. In summative validation initiatives, the validation practitioners are often teachers, trainers, assessors or experienced professionals. In validation procedures leading to formal qualifications, the same people who carry out assessments in the formal context usually assess the validation candidates.

The validation strategy envisaged the development of competence profiles for validation practitioners and, where appropriate, training to reinforce quality principles at all stages of the validation process (BMB & BMWFW, 2017, p. 19); this has not yet been delivered. In recent years, however, individual initiatives have been taken in this direction to enhance professionalisation of validation practitioners.

For example, a four-year project (2015-2018) supported by the Austrian Ministry of Education, Science and Research and the ESF shed light on, among other things, the competences and orientations that underpin the practice of validation staff in adult education (Gugitscher & Schmidtke, 2018). In course of the follow-up project 'wba digital' (2019-2022; funded by Austrian Ministry of Education, Science and Research and the ESF), which was carried out by ibw Austria - Research & Development in VET (ibw) and the Austrian Institute for Research on Vocational Training (öibf), a competence-based qualification profile for validation practitioners was developed. This cross-field and cross-role qualification profile takes into account the heterogeneity of validation procedures in Austria by comprising key competences that all validation practitioners must have and also allows for activity- and context-specific differentiations. Learning outcomes have been formulated for all aspects of competence.

> **Box 8.1   Competence-based qualification profile for validation practitioners[71]**
>
> The qualification profile for validation experts includes the following four competence areas:
>
> Competence area 1 'Validation knowledge and field/specialist expertise' comprises
>
> (a) 'basic validation knowledge', which all validation practitioners should have, and
>
> (b) 'field and subject expertise, which can vary according to the validation context (e.g., education system, professional field, labour market, voluntary sector, etc.) and subject area
>
> Competence area 2 'Validation competence in practice' is intended to be deepened in one of the three sub-areas, i.e., either 'information and guidance', or 'identification and documentation of competences', or 'diagnostics and assessment of competences'.

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[71] Gugitscher et al., 2022a, b.

> Competence area 3 'Communication, coordination and quality assurance competence' is conceived as a practical professional competence that all validation professionals, regardless of their field of work, must have.
>
> Competence area 4. 'Personal competences and professional values' is designed to regulate, secure and continuously develop professional validation activities, which is also relevant for all validation professionals.

Based on this, it is planned to make the elaborated qualification profile compatible with the NQF and to develop a qualification and certification procedure for validation practitioners in a follow-up project (Gugitscher et al., 2022a, b).

Moreover, Austrian organisations are participating in dedicated EU-funded projects, such as PROVE (PROfessionalization of Validation Experts – PROVE, 2021) or TRANSVAL-EU (n.d. – see below). The TRANSVAL-EU 'Competence Profile is structured into: a) more general transversal competences of guidance and validation practitioners – these are applicable in different validation stages and for different purposes (e.g., working with validation candidates, working with colleagues, organisational purposes, one's own further development; b) technical competences related to the use of concrete tools, methods and techniques, etc. at (a) specific validation stage(s) and c) competences specifically used for validating transversal skills / guiding candidates through the identification, understanding, documentation, etc. of their own transversal competences' (TRANSVAL-EU, 2022). The above-mentioned competence-based qualification profile could be further developed by integrating the results of the TRANSVAL-EU project (Müllner & Walder, 2023, p. 7).

8.2 Provision of training and support to validation practitioners

The training and support provided to validation practitioners depends on the respective context and measure. There is no standardised training or systematic support for them in Austria. For example, since 2012, AQ Austria has been the statutory contact point for higher education institutions and provides information and advice on the recognition of non-formally and informally acquired competences (AQ Austria, n.d.e).

In some cases, a specific training for using the Swiss Qualifications Handbook (CH-Q) System of Managing Competencies is required (e.g., in case of the competence profile offered at the Adult Education Centre Linz – KOMPAZ, n.d.). Another example is the training course offered by the Ring Österreichischer Bildungswerke, the platform of Austrian Adult Education Associations, for carrying out *Kompetenz+Beratung.* Since November 2022, the Ring also offers the 'Training course for dialogical competence assessment' in which participants are trained in all competence formats (individual setting and group setting, with the provision of documentary evidence and, if required, also with further counselling) or on all possible applications (Ring Österreichischer Bildungswerke, n.d.b).

For supporting validation practitioners, the Austrian Public Employment Service funded the development of a manual including methods for 'competence balances' and 'portfolio analyses' in 2009 that was updated in 2016 (Steiner et al., 2016). Tool kits with relevant methods and tips have also been developed in EU-funded projects, such as the ones mentioned above: PROVE and TREANSVAL-EU.

Box 8.2   TRANSVAL-EU

TRANSVAL-EU (n.d.) was one of the largest European policy experiments on VNFIL. It was coordinated by the National Coordination Point for the NQF in Austria (OeAD, Agency for Education and Internationalisation) on behalf of the Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research (Section I, General Education and VET) and co-funded by Erasmus+ KA3 Policy Reform – Policy Experimentations. The project had 16 full partners from 7 countries. In addition, TRANSVAL-EU was supported by a pool of subject-matter experts – the associate partners, who form the Advisory Board of the project.

The TRANSVAL-EU project worked on professionalising the field of validation of transversal competences in Europe. The project aimed to build the capacity of validation assessors, guidance and counselling practitioners and other stakeholders, as appropriate, in innovative approaches to the validation of transversal competences and to strengthen cross-sectoral cooperation between practitioners, policy makers and other stakeholders in order to build coherent VNFIL systems and effective processes.

A database of proven and innovative tools and methods for validation of transversal competences[72] as well as a competence profile and curriculum for validation and guidance practitioners (TRANSVAL-EU, 2023) have been developed. The Competence Profile Framework includes the following competences (TRANSVAL-EU, 2021):

- Managing and organizing activities
- Solving problems and reacting to the unforeseen
- Cooperating and fostering cooperation
- Using oral communication in one or several languages
- Ressource Management
- Taking professional, social and cultural norms into account
- Using written communication in one or several languages
- Communicating using digital technologies
- Managing information and critical thinking
- Building one's career path
- Developing one's competences and profile
- Self-reflection

Austrian practitioners and experts were involved in the development process as well as in the European-level training. The training programme was then tested in field trial countries with validation and guidance practitioners and adults as validation candidates.

In Austria, two national trainings were organised (de Greef et al., 2023a): 16 practitioners from different organisations providing guidance and validation for different target groups in different regions in Austria participated in the training in Vienna and 25 practitioners from different fields and working with different target groups were involved in the training offered in Salzburg. In total, around 80 candidates were reached in the Austrian experimentations for the validation of transversal competences. The field trials were evaluated by a research team, including pre- and post-tests with practitioners (19 from Austria) and candidates (33 from Austria). The findings show that 'most of the involved European practitioners[73] (68% to 76%) experienced to have an improvement in their competency level of transversal competences, providing guidance during the validation process and providing an assessment. This increase seems to be significant'. Also the impact on the candidates involved seems to be promising as '30% to 50% of them experienced that some of their transversal competences increased' and '55% to 58% of candidates experienced an

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[72] https://www.transvalproject.eu/competences/

[73] As the sample of practitioners is too small to describe per country, only the analysis of the entire European sample was carried out.

increase in social inclusion'. 'Furthermore, most of the involved Austrian candidates (58%) experienced that they were involved in a constructive process of validation and guidance of transversal skills and perceived to be among others more aware of their transversal competences' (de Greef et al., 2023a, p. 11)[74].

In a final step, policy recommendations (Gmaj et al., 2023) were derived from the experimentations. The results were presented at two European conferences (one focussing on research and the other one on policy level) and at national events[75].

In order to ensure the sustainability of the results and to further drive joint developments, a long-term goal was to build an EU-wide community of practitioners and policy-makers who are aware of and have expertise in the validation of transversal competences.

In some cases, specific institutions are tasked with organising networking and support. For the higher education sector, for example, AQ Austria is entrusted with coordination and networking tasks: As of 1.1.2021, AQ Austria has been legally mandated as a contact point for information and counselling on the recognition of non-formally and informally acquired competences. They also coordinate the RPL Network Austria and initiated the European RPL network.

Sometimes events (conferences, workshops) designed to support practitioners, among others, are also organised; some recent examples are:

■ The online symposium 'Validation and recognition of non-formally and informally acquired competences at higher education institutions' (organised by the Danube University Krems on 25 February 2021) aimed to inform about the framework conditions for recognition and validation at Austrian higher education institutions, to point out possibilities for action and opportunities and to give suggestions for developments at one's own institutions by means of practical examples.
■ The conference '*Validierung – quo vadis?*' ('Validation – qui vadis?', organised by the ZEP project in Linz on 30 May 2022) explored possible future developments in the Austrian validation practice and offered space for networking with successful initiatives from Austria and Germany.
■ The conference '*Validierung kann, darf, soll, muss… Suchbilder aus Wissenschaft und Praxis zur Anerkennung von Kompetenzen*' ('Validation can, may, should, must... Snapshots from science and practice on the recognition of competences ', organised by the Chamber of Labour in Vienna on 22 October 2022) showcased some established and emerging Austrian (formative and summative) validation initiatives.
■ The conference '*Brennpunkt Fachkräftemangel – Kann Validierung eine Lösung sein?*' ('Focus on the shortage of skilled workers - Can validation be a solution?', organised by the DEValAT project/BILL in Linz and hybrid on 10-11 October 2023).

8.3 Qualifications and experience

Currently, there are no general mandatory requirements for validation practitioners. The requirements set depend on the respective context and measure.

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[74] Compared with the other field trial countries, the percentage of candidates that experienced that some of their transversal competences increased is similar across countries. However, the experienced increase related to social inclusion shows higher results for the Austrian candidates (across the field trial countries: 35% to 42%) whereas lower results for Austrian candidates can be observed related their feeling of having been involved in a constructive process (overall results: 89%) (de Greef et al., 2023b, p. 4).

[75] Moreover, national policy coherence reports (for Austria, see: Müllner & Waldner, 2023) and a European one (see Boivin, 2023) were drafted.

9 Inputs, outputs and outcomes

9.1 Funding and costs

The funding for validation activities depends on the respective measure, procedure, or project. There is no national funding framework for validation in Austria and there is no public funding specifically allocated to validation. Also, there was no funding specifically allocated to the implementation of the validation strategy. National or regional schemes supporting up- or reskilling activities can be used in some cases for covering costs related to relevant validation measures (e.g., related to the exceptional admission to the apprenticeship exam – see Chapter 3.2). As mentioned earlier, some regional-level schemes could be considered as fulfilling some of the functions of the ILA concept and the Skilled Workers Grant (*Fachkräftestipendium*), PES-funded support for adult learning, can be considered as a national-level equivalent to ILAs.

Validation arrangements are sometimes included in collective labour agreements, for example in the collective agreement for workers in the non-university-based research sector (Kollektivvertrag.at, n.d.).

No overall data on costs to individuals or organisations is available and there are no systems/arrangements in place to collect information on the cost of validation. The direct and indirect costs differ between the different measures and initiatives. Also, the fees that might have to be paid by individuals to complete a validation process differ across providers of such initiatives. There is no general information on whether a lack of financial support prevents certain groups from participating in validation.

9.2 Beneficiaries and users of validation processes

9.2.1 Validation trends

Because Austria does not have a national institutional framework for validation, no overall data on flows of beneficiaries is available; specific figures related to trends over the last four years regarding the number of individuals who have entered, gone through and succeeded in the different stages of validation are not available.

No general conclusions can be drawn from the data available for individual measures, especially as these sometimes point to different trends. For example, while the proportion of around 17% of all successful apprenticeship-leave examinations that were taken as part of an exceptional admission (see Chapter 3.2) stayed rather stable during the last years (Dornmayer, 2022, p. 106), the number of users of the *Kompetenz+Beratung* format has dropped down from 451 contacts in 2020 to 346 contacts in 2022.[76]

9.2.2 Validation users

Because Austria does not have a national institutional framework for validation, no overall data on validation users, their profile or characteristics are available.

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[76] In any case, the decline in counselling contacts overall is also due to the Covid-19 pandemic. However, of the total 51,942 counselling contacts reported as part of the initiative 'Education Counselling Austria' in 2021, the lowest proportion falls to the *Kompetenz+Beratung* format with 346 contacts (Gugitscher & Lachmayr, 2022, p. 10).

9.2.3 Validation and disadvantaged groups

As mentioned above, overall data on validation users, their profile or characteristics are not available. Therefore, data on the proportion of validation users belonging to disadvantaged groups cannot be provided.

All initiatives that aim at upskilling or that provide opportunities to obtain qualifications in second chance education (such as measures related to the exceptional admission to the apprenticeship examination) and several measures linked to skills audits (formative validation approaches including identification and documentation of competences) are targeted towards low-qualified adults or unemployed people. Some initiatives are specifically targeted towards other disadvantaged groups (but they might also be addressed in initiatives related to low-qualified people). Data on proportions of participants with these profiles are not available.

Relevant initiatives targeting disadvantaged groups are presented in the 2018-update of the Inventory report; examples of initiatives specifically targeted to Ukrainian refugees are presented here below:

■ The Public Employment Service has developed a skills assessment form for the creation of placement profiles for Ukrainian refugees with a 'Blue Card' (ID for displaced persons) (AMS, 2022).

■ *KomIn Kompetenzorientierte Intensivberatung – Modul Ukraine* (Competence-oriented Intensive Counselling - Module Ukraine): The counselling service KomIn-Ukraine is offered by migrare on behalf of the Public Employment Service (migrare, n.d.). It was initiated in response to the war situation in Ukraine and the associated challenges in the labour market. It is aimed at people who are registered as displaced persons from Ukraine and already registered with the AMS, who want information on job opportunities on the Austrian labour market, who need help in finding a job in Austria, who need support in finding education and training (e.g., German courses) or who have questions about the recognition of their diploma and who want to build up a professional and social network.

■ The 'project femme! empower, employ, emulate me' (Diakonie, n.d.) is a labour market integration offer of the Diakonie de La Tour (co-financed by the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund and the Federal Chancellery as well as the Province of Carinthia) for displaced persons from Ukraine. The participants are to be enabled to find a further educational measure or to enter into a sustainable employment relationship. The Kärntner Bildungswerk (Facebook, 2023) accompanied the participants in January 2023 in creating their individual competence profiles.

■ The Austrian Young Workers Movement offers the identification of competences and vocational qualifications brought from abroad. Since 2022, this has also been offered to Ukrainian refugees under the title *MIKA: ANKOMMEN MIT KOMPETENZ!* (ARRIVING WITH COMPETENCE!) (ÖJAB, n.d.):

Box 9.1   MIKA: ANKOMMEN MIT KOMPETENZ!

Participation is open to people who had to flee in the course of the military invasion of Ukraine and who have training or work experience in the occupational fields of social work, commercial and administrative professions/trade & sales, media technology/media design/technical professions. In addition, basic knowledge of German or English and possession of a valid ID card for displaced persons are required.

The MIKA project offers a complete package of skills assessment, tailored to the participant:

- professional assessment centre

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10 Validation methods

10.1 Methodologies and methods

Many procedures and initiatives for validating non-formally or informally acquired competences belong to the formal education system and/or aim at a formal education and training qualification (external examinations). Therefore, the assessment methods used in this context are usually the same as those used in the formal system. Relevant exams are also held at education and training institutions authorised by law.

For formative validation approaches, in many cases, the portfolio method is used, e.g., in the initiatives developed at adult learning institutes. In this context, supported self-assessment is usually the chosen method – with a strong focus on developing the ability of self-reflection. This is similar to many initiatives in the youth and volunteering field, where the focus is on the phases of identification and documentation of competences.

Some summative validation approaches, such as the '*Du kannst was!*' ('You have skills/competences') initiative or the *wba* qualifications, also use portfolios. In these cases, portfolios are created by mapping a person's competences to the competences required for the qualification in question.

In some cases, multiple methods are used. The validation process for obtaining the *wba* certificate starts, for example, with the creation of a portfolio to provide evidence of existing competences. At the final phase, they have to participate in a certification workshop where they have to show a practical sequence from their activities in adult education. They will receive feedback and suggestions for further development. Furthermore, as part of the certification workshop, they also have to take a multiple-choice test on educational theory topics. For receiving the *Ingenieur* qualification ('engineer'), candidates first have to indicate the areas of work in which they worked in their practice and the activities they performed there. They draw up a job description and explain these activities on the basis of concrete projects and tasks in which they were/are involved or which they may even have managed. This description serves as a basis for the expert discussion with the certification commission, which aims at ensuring and confirming the existence of the professional requirements for the acquisition of the engineer qualification.

Since there is no national regulation determining the methods to be used in validation, different methods are applied in the different initiatives. The examples presented above suggest that the methods are adapted to the respective purposes and target groups.

10.2 Use of ICT in validation

There are several ICT-based initiatives to support validation; in most cases these focus on identifying and sometimes documenting competences. These tools are

mainly used in the field of career orientation. Most of these tools are based on self-assessment and therefore represent more of a subjective judgement. Some examples are listed here below:

■ PES Austria offers the '*Berufskompass zur Neuorientierung*' ('career compass for re-orientation') (AMS Berufskompass, 2022), an online self-assessment tool to support people who are interested in changing their career pathway. It is accessible for free and takes about 30 minutes. The compass combines the profile drawn up on the basis of the interests, training and professional experience of the person with the requirement profiles of occupations and draws up a list of proposals for professional change on this basis.

■ The network project 'ZEP - Access to higher level education and development of perspectives' (2018-2022) (ZEP, n.d.a) aimed to help learners access higher level education or prepare for education from upper secondary level onwards through a variable and diverse range of provision. The ZEP approach incorporates learners' existing skills, knowledge and competences into the planning of learning opportunities. Digital competence assessment tools have been developed to elicit these competences (Burgstaller et al. 2022):

Box 10.1   Tools for competence assessment within the framework of the offers of the ZEP project

The tools were designed for the following areas:

- For ZEP digital (ZEP, n.d.b): Recording and reflection of already existing digital competences (based on the content of the 'Digital Competence Model for Austria - DigComp 2' and the curriculum for digital basic education).

- For ZEP social (ZEP, n.d.c): Recording and reflection of personal motives for and expectations of a profession in care.

The tool for self-assessment or competence reflection was developed by means of the application 'Google Forms' because it is easy to use on a smartphone. To use the competency assessment tools, participants are sent the link to the competency assessment questionnaire and open it on their devices. This takes them to the online questionnaire with open and multiple-choice questions supported by images. Participants answer the questions and submit their competency survey by clicking on the SEND button. The trainers can access the results individually or as a whole (as digital templates).

The concept provides for the competence assessment to be carried out twice, first at the start of a ZEP learning offer and again towards the end of the learning offer. The results of the competence assessment at the beginning of the course support the initial interview and the participant-oriented content design of the learning offer. The results of the repeated assessment towards the end of the learning offer are included in the final interview and clarify for each person which competences have been strengthened by the course.

Another example is the ICT-tool *Netz der Kompetenzen* (Net of Competences) that was developed on behalf of the Austrian Federal Economic Chamber (Federal Section for Trade and Crafts):

Box 10.2   Net of Competences

With the help of the 'Net of Competences' app, a competence model was developed that can be used to objectify the granting of 'individual competence' within the framework of the Trade Regulation Act (i.e., to determine the individual's ability to exercise a trade independently on the basis of proof of commercial knowledge, skills and experience), but also to recruit skilled workers in third countries (Bundessparte Gewerbe und Handwerk der Wirtschaftskammer Österreich, 2023, p. 13)

The Net of Competences scaffolds the whole process of validation of prior learning. It is a self-assessment instrument which includes an interface to upload documents (users can upload evidence for their formal, non-formal, and informal learning in form of a portfolio) and an interface for external assessment. Through this, 'professional associations evaluate the self-assessment and portfolio of the applicant, and can ask the applicant to demonstrate his or her professional competences in action via simulation methods. professional associations evaluate the self-assessment and portfolio of the applicant, and can ask the applicant to demonstrate his or her professional competences in action via simulation methods' (Fahrenbach et al., 2019, p. 332)[77].

The 'Net of Competences' is currently being piloted and the research project will be completed in 2023. Based on the findings from the research project, the app will be further developed to be even more customer-friendly.

Some examples are also available related to summative validation approaches from the education and training sector (for further information on these initiatives see Chapter 3.2):

■ The University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences Vienna currently develops an online tool to support the validation process (in all four stages) using the Moodle platform (BOKU, n.d.).

■ Digital technologies are now also used to manage validation processes at the Academy of Continuing Education (wba): Since March 2021, a new portal (login area) has been available to all candidates and graduates of the wba to register and keep track of the learning achievements of individuals. The portal has been redesigned to allow uploading of evidence to prove acquired competences, communication with the wba advisor and saving of agreements. This supports the allocation of evidence to the individual areas of the curricula and progress in the certification process is visible to candidates in the login area through a progress bar. The portal also offers better networking opportunities with other wba graduates (wba, n.d.). It also supports the Accreditation Council in reviewing applications from candidates and training providers.

11 Quality assurance

11.1 Quality assurance processes

In Austria, validation arrangements exist in various sectors and areas, are more or less regulated and formalised and focus on different stages of the validation process, different target groups and purposes. There are no generally prescribed quality standards for the validation of non-formal and informal learning in Austria to be used in all sectors and validation offers. However, the provision of high-quality validation services is seen as crucial in the validation context to ensure confidence in the outcomes of validation. Several validation initiatives have therefore developed robust quality assurance procedures, and the existence of such procedures is also important for the mapping of qualifications to the NQF. In general, the extent to which and the way in which validation initiatives are underpinned by quality assurance measures or take into account the catalogue of quality criteria for validation initiatives in VET and adult education (BMBWF, 2018) (see box below) or the recommendations for recognition of prior learning in higher education (AQ Austria, n.d.a) depends on the respective measure and context.

[77] See also Fahrenbach et al. 2020; Kaiser et al., 2020

Box 11.1 Catalogue of quality criteria for validation procedures in the area of VET and adult education in Austria

The catalogue of quality criteria for validation procedures in the area of VET and adult education in Austria was developed as a bottom-up approach based on analyses of existing validation initiatives in Austria and inspired by experiences and approaches in other countries. The 'European Guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning' (Cedefop, 2015) were also taken into account as well as principles and requirements included in ISO/IEC 17024:2012[78]. It was published in Spring 2018 and is considered as a recommendation. Validation providers can and should use it as an orientation for the (further) development of validation procedures and/or as a guideline for internal quality assurance. In a longer-term perspective, the set of criteria could become more binding: e.g., as a voluntary commitment of the providers, as a qualitative catalogue of requirements for receiving subsidies or as the basis for a quality seal or for accreditation.

The catalogue of quality criteria comprises a preamble (referring to key principles, such as voluntariness, benefits for candidates and embeddedness in their career pathway) and nine quality areas:

1. **General quality criteria** (learning outcomes orientation, orientation towards general standards of competence or making individual competences explicit, equivalence of validation results with qualifications acquired through educational programmes or connectivity of the results, access for target groups, interface management before, during and after validation procedures, data protection and data security),

2. **Public relations and information** (active advertising, information in advance free of charge, inclusion in the planned online-portal for validation),

3. **Clearing and agreement** (free initial consultation and clearing, agreement on the validation procedure),

4. **Counselling and support** (professional counselling and support),

5. **Validation focusing on identification and documentation** (suitable methods and instruments for identification, comprehensible and sufficient documentation, written and transferable documentation),

6. **Validation focusing on assessment and certification** (multi-eye principle in assessment, independence and suitability of assessors, clear purpose and transparent conditions of assessment, appropriate methods and instruments for assessment and appreciative process, documentation of assessment process and result, candidates' rights: feedback to candidate, inspection of files, right of objection and possibility of repetition, meaningful certification document, credible organization and recognition of certification by relevant stakeholders),

7. **Outcomes for candidates** (benefits for candidates, offering follow-up information and advice),

8. **Staff** (competences of the practitioners/counsellors, competences of assessors, regular further training),

9. **Quality management** (internal quality management, documentation of all procedural steps, involvement of relevant stakeholders/cooperation partners, feedback of candidates, including an external perspective, further development of the validation procedure, cross-institutional quality assurance).

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[78] ISO/IEC 17024:2012 contains principles and requirements for a body certifying persons against specific requirements, and includes the development and maintenance of a certification scheme for persons - https://www.iso.org/standard/52993.html

Source: BMBWF, 2018.
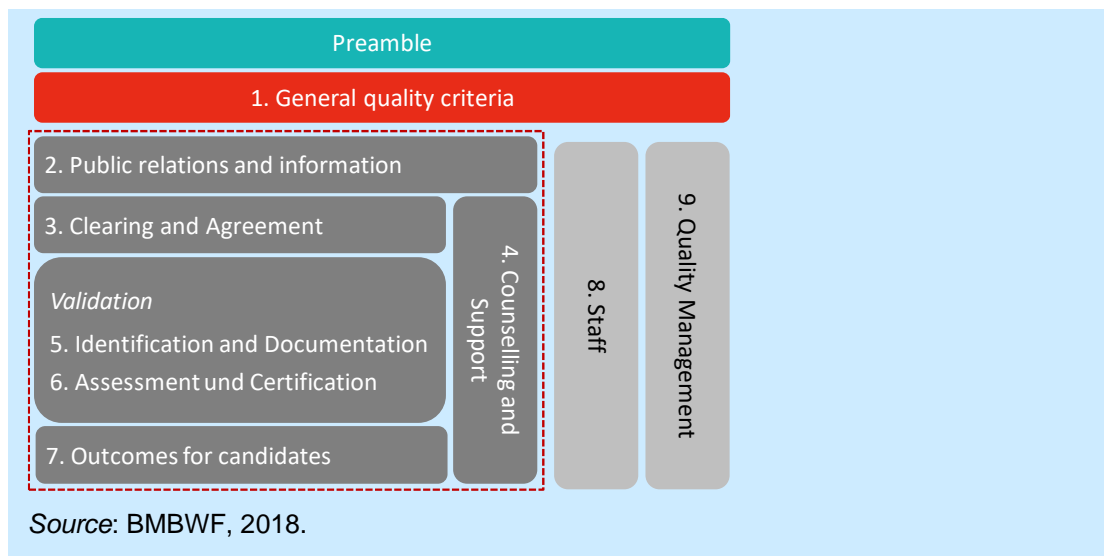
11.2 Monitoring and evaluation

In many cases, the initiatives that provide validation procedures also perform monitoring and often evaluation activities in various forms. Evaluation studies dealing with this issue, however, are only (publicly) available for certain measures and only few data on the impact of validation on individuals have been published. There is also no overall overview for Austria in terms of take up and success of validation practices.

Some examples of evaluation studies are available in the previous updates of the Austrian Inventory report; some more recent reports are presented here below.

■ Within the framework of an online survey of the graduates of the validation procedure of the Academy of Continuing Education (wba) Austria, the individual perception of benefits from the summative validation procedure was surveyed. An important finding is that the wba promotes both individual and structural professionalisation, while the valorisation of the newly acquired qualification on the labour market is not achieved through it (Steiner, 2019).

■ The initiative 'Du kannst was' in Salzburg was evaluated in 2019 using document analyses, interviews, focus groups and quantitative data analyses (Lankmayer et al., 2019). The evaluation found, among other things, a success rate of 94% of the participants and an increase in their income of 8.2%. Furthermore, so-called 'soft' impact factors were identified, which point to a sustainable positioning on the labour market. These include labour market-related benefits (better career opportunities, knowledge and skills update, options for setting up a business) as well as personal benefits (securing skills and know-how, experience of self-efficacy, appreciation by colleagues and environment, strengthening of self-esteem and self-confidence, increased educational aspiration). However, gaps in needs were also identified; for example, support or accompanying structures would be necessary if a broader target group is to be addressed.

■ Danube University Krems is entrusted with the scientific monitoring of the implementation of the *Ingenieurgesetz* 2017 and examined, among other things, the functionality and suitability of the certification procedure for obtaining the *Ingenieur* qualification. The results of the study indicate that despite a stronger focus on professional practice (certification is based on written job descriptions and a professional interview), the procedure as a whole still attaches greater importance to the formal examination of prior qualifications than to the professional examination of competences acquired in practice (Pfeffer, 2021).

- The TRANSVAL-EU project was designed as a policy experiment and therefore included research activities to identify the impact of the validation of transversal competences in the participating candidates (see Chapter 8.2).

12 The position of validation in society; visibility and trust

Regarding the position of validation in society, the visibility of validation opportunities or the trust in validation results, no solid facts can be presented, as corresponding studies are missing. However, some indications suggest that the status of validation is increasing. The emphasis on validation in policy documents as well as recent developments in this area presented in this report (such as the anchoring of recognition of prior learning in higher education, the inclusion of validation in the Nursing Assistant Professions Training Ordinance or the initiative to establish Higher VET as a separate sector with qualifications based on certification procedures) point to an increasing importance of validation. Another indication in this regard is the fact that there are a large number of validation initiatives in the education and training sector as well as in the labour market and in the third sector, and that some of the projects have already a long history and a high degree of visibility – also beyond Austria. However, Austrian validation practitioners in particular repeatedly point out that the term 'validation' or the alternative approach to acquiring qualifications is often not sufficiently well known, nor are the benefits for the individual and for society as a whole.

Regarding trust in validation procedures, it can be said that also in Austria there are people (from educational institutions as well as from companies and other stakeholders) who are sceptical about the quality and reliability of validation results. Nevertheless, according to other experts interviewed, there also seems to be an increased trust in validation – at least in some areas. Of course, this may be due not least to the fact that validation procedures are expected to make skilled workers available on the labour market more quickly, which can be a convincing argument in times of a shortage of skilled workers. However, interviewees also highlighted other aspects that, in their experience, have increased trust in specific validation practices, such as good data on the effectiveness of validation procedures or positive experiences with people who have participated in validation procedures. From the higher education sector, for example, it is reported that the involvement of experts from abroad, who already have many years of experience in the field of validation in their national context and were able to credibly present the advantage and benefits of validation procedures, played a major role in increasing trust.

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13.2 Sources

Interviews were conducted with representatives from the following organisations:

- BMBWF – Bundesministerium für Bildung, Wissenschaft und Forschung (Austrian Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research)
- Ring Österreichischer Bildungswerke (Platform of Austrian Adult Education Organisations)
- Gesundheit Österreich (Austrian National Public Health Institute)
- BOKU – Universität der Nachhaltigkeit und des Lebens (University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences Vienna)
- BILL-Institut für Bildungsentwicklung Linz (Institute for Educational Development Linz)
- WKO – Wirtschaftskammer Österreich (Austrian Economic Chambers)
- ibw – Institut für Bildungsforschung der Wirtschaft (ibw Austria – Research & Development in VET)

Conferences attended:

- 10 October 2023: Brennpunkt Fachkräftemangel – Kann Validierung eine Lösung sein? (conference organised by the DEValAT project/BILL, Wissensturm Linz, AT/hybrid)

- 22 October 2022: VALIDIERUNG KANN, DARF, SOLL, MUSS… (conference organised by the Chamber of Labour, Vienna, AT)[79]

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[79] https://ring.bildungswerke.at/der-ring-oesterreichsicher-bildungswerke-bei-der-validierungstagung-der-arbeiterkammer-wien/

- 15 September 2022: 15 Jahre Arbeit in der Kompetenzanerkennung und Professionalisierung (wba event, Vienna, AT)[80]
- 30 May 2022: Validierung – quo vadis? (conference organised by the ZEP project, Wissensturm Linz, AT)[81]

Other contacts:

3s (including author) was a partner in the Erasmus+ funded project TRANSAVAL-EU[82]: The project was coordinated by the Austrian NQF NCP/OeAD (on behalf of the Austrian Ministry of Education, Science and Research); the Austrian partner organisations are well-known players (including researchers and practitioners) in the validation context. The members of the Austrian partnership have been invited to share details of recent developments in validation; information was also gathered during national meetings.

The author is also a member of the Accreditation Council of the Academy of Continuing Education (wba), one of the Austrian flagship initiatives in validation.

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[80] https://wba.or.at/de/aktuelles/news/237-15-jahre-wba-feier.php

[81] https://erwachsenenbildung.at/downloads/aktuell/termine/Validierung_Programm.pdf

[82] https://www.transvalproject.eu/

European inventory
on validation of non-formal
and informal learning
2023 update

This report is part of the 2023 update of the European Inventory on the validation of non-formal and informal learning. The inventory provides a comprehensive overview of validation practices across Europe, covering 32 systems in EU-27 Member States and EFTA countries.

The European inventory is the product of a long-standing cooperation of the European Commission, Cedefop and ETF on the field. The inventory was endorsed by the Council recommendation of 2012 on validation and works together with the European guidelines as a tool to support countries in developing and implementing validation arrangements.

A rich source of information, the inventory informs dialogue and learning between countries and stakehold-ers developing and implementing validation in Europe. Our key objective is to support Member States so that more learners and workers can acquire and make visible new skills, which will support their career and further learning and improve their quality of life.