
A European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning

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1.0 VALIDATION OF NON-FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING IN AUSTRIA

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1.1 Introduction

Work and discussion on methodologies for validating non-formal and informal learning in Austria is still at an early stage of development. Relatively few methodologies have been developed and are applied; the responsible central government department (the Federal Ministry for Education, Science and Culture - BMBWK), while recognising the importance afforded to the issue by debates on lifelong learning at EU level, currently has no personnel dedicated to advancing work on validating non-formal and informal learning.

There are several reasons for the relative scarcity of validation methods. The BMBWK does not have competence over matters of continuous training and has therefore not been very active in promoting the validation of non-formal and informal learning. The Austrian dual system of vocational training, which provides a mix of in-company and school-based training, is sometimes seen as reducing the need for alternative recognition methods (Mayer 2001, Wallner 2003) as it reaches most young people and provides a sound educational basis.¹ Importantly, the social partners – as well as trade bodies – are closely involved in setting training standards in the dual system. This makes them reluctant to accept methods for validating non-formal and informal learning as these could infringe on their competencies and potentially make the dual system of vocational training redundant. Finally, Austrian business culture places great emphasis on degree certificates and diplomas issued by recognised providers as proof of professional competence and skills. This means that other certificates, including those identifying or recognising skills acquired through non-formal and informal learning, tend to be regarded with scepticism. However, it could be argued that non-formal and informal learning is inherent to the Austrian apprenticeship system where workplace learning is an integral part of formal learning.

Nevertheless, examples of methods to validate non-formal and informal learning do exist. Work in this area is being driven forward mostly by project work funded through EU programmes. For this work initiatives from Switzerland (in particular the so-called “Qualification Book” and the “Re-organisation of vocational training in the health sector” by the Canton Zurich) have often been used as guiding examples. This project-based approach to advancing work on validation of non-formal and informal learning is set to continue:

¹ This must be seen in the context of a labour market which is characterised by regulated occupations. Occupations are usually based on occupational profiles which include information on where and how the required competences should be acquired. Usually they are also linked to entitlements, responsibilities and wages. Although in private industry wages and salaries are increasingly linked to task descriptions, salary systems are still often based on formal qualifications, in particular within the public sector. The occupations listed in the *Gewerbeordnung*, as well as others defined in the *Berufsausbildungsgesetz* (Vocational Training Act), form the basis for the areas of apprenticeship training (currently more than 250 occupations). These also provide the framework for fully school-based VET and thus ensure recognition of the qualifications acquired.

development partnerships for the validation of non-formal learning are to be set up under the current EQUAL 2 funding round.

In the following section we will introduce the four main methodologies developed in Austria to validate non-formal and informal learning. In doing so, the common structure proposed for all of the national chapters is followed, by discussing public sector, industry and third sector initiatives in this order. The last two sections of the chapter present a review of stakeholders working in this area and our conclusions.

1.2 Review of existing initiatives: Public sector

There has so far been little concrete impetus from the federal level to drive forward the development of methodologies in the field of validation of non-formal and informal learning. While the BMBWK became involved in discussions on the topic in relation to the EU Memorandum of Lifelong Learning in 2001, no policy documents have so far come out of the Ministry. This is sometimes attributed to the fact that the BMBWK does not have competence over continuous training which is the context in which the issue tends to be seen. Currently the Ministry does not have an individual with responsibility for taking the issue of validation of lifelong learning forward. Nevertheless, an awareness of the importance of the subject exists and this is also expressed at the European level. Currently a task force on lifelong learning is being set up in the BMBWK that will also address the issue of validation.

While no new instruments to validate non-formal and informal learning are currently promoted at the federal level, a number of federal acts give access to the regular vocational and higher education examinations to people who have gained relevant knowledge through practical (work) experience. These measures are formative and aim at accreditation of knowledge gained in an informal and non-formal way through participation in examinations in the formal system.

1.2.1 Access to vocational training

The Berufsausbildungsgesetz (Vocational Training Act) and the 2002 amendments to the Gewerbeordnung (Trade Regulation Act) provide for access to final examinations on vocational training courses.

According to the Berufsausbildungsgesetz, individuals who have not been enrolled in the dual system of vocational training may still take the Lehrabschlussprüfung (apprenticeship completion examination). In order to be able to sit the examination, the candidate must:

- Be aged 18 or over
- Have proof that the skills required in order to achieve the apprenticeship have been acquired, for instance through practical experience, a comprehensive relevant learning process or participation in a relevant training programme (CEDEFOP 2003).

If the experience acquired does not cover all competences required for the apprenticeship exam, individuals have to undergo additional training. However, they get credit for their experience, thus reducing by up to two thirds the regular duration of an apprenticeship.

Successful completion of the examination means the relevant professional qualification is awarded. It also gives the same rights in terms of industrial/labour law and social law as those people who have acquired the qualifications within the formal education and training system. In 2003 approximately 5300 people were admitted to apprenticeship exams on the basis of APL. This method of recognising informally gained skills therefore adheres to the standard national system of vocational qualification and does not establish a separate set of requirements.

More and more people are gaining a vocational qualification facilitated by this Act. In 1990, 8.6% of apprenticeship examinations were taken in this non-conventional way, in 2001 this had risen to 14.3% (7,277 of the total 50,770 examinations passed).

The 2002 *amendments to the Gewerbeordnung (Trade Regulation Act)* also make provision for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning. The new regulations accept certificates demonstrating work or management experience as the *Befähigungsnachweis* (certificate of competence) required to set up business in certain sectors where formal qualifications were previously required. An 'individual qualification verification' can also be issued if certificates cannot be submitted. This means a person can submit to the relevant local authority proof other than formal certificates that they have the necessary skills, knowledge and experience to run their business (WKO 2003). It must be noted, however, that the local authority can request a training course or restrict the individual *Befähigungsnachweis* to certain aspects of the business. Moreover, for certain activities (planning, managing construction and underground work) a certificate of competence is not accepted (WKO 2003).

There are also no entry requirements other than being an adult (18 years and over) to enter the Master Craftsman examination which is traditionally required of people in the trades and crafts intending to set up their own business.

Finally, knowledge acquired in a non-formal and informal manner can also be recognised formally by participation in the Matura (school leaving certificate granting access to higher education) examination without the need to have taken the preparatory classes. Upon successful completion of the examination, the graduate is entitled to the same rights to enter higher education as a person having gained the qualification through conventional means (CEDEFOP 2003).

1.2.2 Access to further and higher education

There are a number of ways in which non-formal and informal learning is accredited to allow an individual access further and higher education.

The ***Externistenprüfung (school examination for external candidates)***: individuals who do not participate in formal school programmes may, in principle, participate in the final school exams. Preparatory courses are available but not compulsory. Upon successful completion, the graduate is entitled to the same rights as an individual who has acquired the qualification within the framework of a formal programme.

The ***Berufsreifeprüfung*** was introduced in autumn 1997. It provides **higher education entrance qualifications** for graduates of 3-4 year school-based VET programmes (including those in the health sector) and apprenticeships. This qualification allows access to any area of study at universities and non-university tertiary and post-secondary educational establishments without any restrictions in terms of institution or subject area.

The *Berufsreifeprüfung* increases the vertical mobility in the education system and acknowledges workplace learning. Contrary to the *Reifeprüfung* (upper secondary leaving exam which provides access to higher education) acquired within the regular programmes, the exam can be taken step by step in the form of individual exam modules. The elements comprise German, mathematics, a foreign language and a subject area related to occupational practice. Recognition of prior learning is an important element. This includes exemption from individual elements (e.g. languages, or relevant technical area) upon proof of relevant competences. An ordinance of 1 Sept. 2000 to the *Berufsreifeprüfung Act* (Federal Legal Gazette I no. 68/1997 in its amended version 52/2000) includes a list of programmes and qualifications/exams that are recognised as proof: foremen and master craftsperson courses, other specific programmes offered within the framework of CVT, nursing diplomas, apprenticeship leaving exams of 4-year programmes if passed with distinction. Skills and knowledge acquired at work are thus recognised as equivalent to knowledge and competences acquired at (VET) schools and colleges.

The ***Studienberechtigungsprüfung*** (higher education access examination) grants access to specific study areas of higher education. It only provides access to study areas that are related to the (work)experience the person has already acquired. A later change of study area would require additional exams. For those who can prove they have completed a minimum of four years of initial vocational training and continuing vocational training the minimum age for entry is 20. Exams are required in German and 1 – 3 other pre-determined subjects plus 1 – 3 electives related to the intended study area and the individual's previous experience (which the candidates can suggest themselves). To prepare, the options are self-study and courses at adult education establishments or higher education institutions in the areas that are frequently required.

Access to programmes at *Fachhochschulen* (University of applied sciences) is also possible via accreditation of prior learning (initial vocational training, relevant work-experience and

additional exams). Candidates may have to pass additional exams (e.g. in German, Maths, English and other areas related to the intended studies). Providers set the requirements upon agreement with the *Fachhochschulrat* (Council of a University of applied sciences). Requirements vary depending on the technical focus of an FH degree programme.

Finally, people enrolling on VET programmes for adults in order to acquire, for example, a *Reife- und Diplomprüfung* can be given credit for parts of their initial education and training in the same or a similar field.

1.2.3 Other instruments

In connection with the European Commission Memorandum on Lifelong Learning a number of additional methods for validating non-formal and informal learning were discussed. In addition to the competence portfolios discussed below, the introduction of “certification commissions” was proposed that would identify and assess qualifications gained in various ways (Schneeberger and Schlögl 2001).

1.3 Review of existing initiatives: Private sector

Austrian trade unions, Arbeiterkammer (Chamber of Labour)² and employers’ associations, as well as the trade and craft chambers as representatives of the professions, tend to be sceptical about methods to validate non-formal and informal learning. These stakeholders are closely involved in setting training standards under the dual system of vocational training. They are thus concerned that validating non-formal and informal learning might infringe on these competencies or even undermine the dual system of vocational training.

The only fully-fledged methodology was developed by the Arbeiterkammer Tirol (Chamber of Labour Tyrol) which represents the interests of employees in the region. The organisation’s think tank, the Zukunftszentrum (“Centre for the Future”), has, with the support of the regional government, developed a ‘competence statement’. This methodology, which was developed in conjunction with business and organisational behaviour psychologists, is a six-step process completed over three weeks to identify the skills and knowledge a person has gained through non-formal and informal learning. A personal coach supports and guides the individual throughout this process.

As a **first step**, the coach provides information about content, aims and usefulness of the competence statement and the individual begins to reflect on the important experiences in their life. The **second stage** is the creation, by the participant, of an all-encompassing profile of their life including family, schooling, vocational training, work and leisure. A discussion with the personal coach helps the individual, **thirdly**, to become aware of important learning experiences, recognition of abilities and of the importance of different stages in their life. **Fourthly**, the individual writes their CV at home referring to certificates as well as competencies. The **fifth stage** is a self-assessment: how does the individual see themselves,

² Both Trade Unions and the Arbeiterkammer represent workers and employees in Austria. Trade Union membership is voluntary, whereas membership in the Arbeiterkammer is mandatory.

how do others see them? What is important to them for their future? Both questions and answers are discussed with the personal coach. In the final and **sixth stage**, further steps and objectives for the future are defined. The end product of this process is a written 'competence statement' showing a person's main skills and abilities.

The Centre's competence statement is widely applied. Participation is open to all members of the Chamber of Labour (that is, all employees including apprentices). It is heavily subsidised; in general, the individual is expected to make a contribution of EUR 100 to the costs of developing the competence statement - the Workers' Chamber and the Tyrol regional government contribute the bulk of the costs (EUR 700). In 2004 alone, the budget allowed for 1000 competence statements to be completed. The courses are so popular that waiting times of several weeks can occur.

Austrian businesses, too, have in recent years become more interested in assessing the competencies of their employees in order to be able to react to market requirements for a flexible work force (Schmid 2003). They are beginning to attribute greater importance to the development of staff competencies in order to respond to the need for expanding employees' skills and the information gathered about these. In this context, non-formal and informal learning is gaining in importance. To date this has had an impact primarily on the delivery of continuous training rather than on the elaboration of methodologies to identify, validate or recognise non-formal and informal learning (Schmid 2003). Thus, businesses are beginning to use non-formal learning arrangements (such as learning from colleagues through job rotation or e-learning) for workforce development. On occasion, simple tools to assess employees' skills are used. For instance, the steel company Voest in Linz uses questionnaires (in the manner of a checklist) to identify staff competencies.

These initiatives do not yet translate into fully-fledged methodologies to validate non-formal and informal learning (Schmid 2003). In fact, a survey of human resource experts has revealed that there is little awareness among organisations that certification may be used to validate non-formal and informal learning in addition to the market-based and organisational certification for which it is conventionally used (Wallner 2003).

1.4 Review of existing initiatives: The third sector

Austrian public Adult Education Centres are particularly active when it comes to developing methods to validate non-formal and informal learning. Funded by EU education programmes, two institutions in particular are at the vanguard of validation methodologies in Austria: the Ring Österreichischer Bildungswerke (Circle of Austrian Adult Education Institutes) and the Linz Adult Education Centre. They have developed two of the three major Austrian validation methodologies outside federal law. Both approaches are tailored to specific sectors or competencies. In developing the approaches, both organisations were strongly influenced by Swiss work on validation, in particular the Swiss qualification book.

The Circle of Austrian Adult Education Institutes, which represents adult education institutions in Austria, has developed a formative assessment method for validating competencies gained through voluntary work, called the 'competence portfolio'.

The competence portfolio is a folder that documents an individual's skills gained through voluntary work. The assessment process involves a 2-hour discussion with a certified portfolio tutor (Portfolio Begleiter) which is then jointly evaluated. Portfolio Tutors are adult education trainers, working on a voluntary or professional basis, who have gained a certificate in "Development of competence and portfolio tutoring". To gain the certificate, the would-be tutor needs to have participated successfully in 4 training modules, have developed an extensive competence portfolio for themselves and have created an additional 5 practice portfolios. Portfolio tutors have both methodological knowledge (of how to create a competence portfolio and the ability to pass on information about it) and contextual knowledge (knowledge about volunteering and associated human resources policy). The competence portfolios are currently offered by Austrian adult education providers and volunteering organisations. In future, group portfolios are to be provided.

The competence portfolio is designed to identify skills gained in all areas of volunteering. As such, it has pioneered the validation of non-formal and informal learning in Austria (Kellner 2004). Since 2003, work on the competence portfolio has been developed further through the ESF project "Development of competencies through volunteering". In this project the regional members of the Circle of Austrian Adult Education Institutes get involved in the validation work by providing competence portfolios, competence workshops and information events.

A second adult education provider with a strong involvement in work on validation of non-formal and informal learning is the *Volkshochschule Linz* (Linz Adult Education Centre).³ The organisation has co-ordinated two consecutive Socrates / Grundtvig projects entitled "From competence to qualification" in which the partner organisations developed and piloted methods of validating non-formal and informal learning. As part of these Grundtvig projects, the Volkshochschule Linz developed a methodology tailored to the Austrian "market" which aimed to identify social and communication skills.⁴ This methodology is also called the competence portfolio. In developing the competence portfolio, the Volkshochschule Linz involved several local stakeholders from the city administration, two universities and the workers' chamber. The consultation revolved in particular around the usability of the competence portfolio in the labour market, and the input of these stakeholders fed into the validation methodology.

The competence portfolio of the Volkshochschule Linz contains information about an individual's core competencies. This is achieved by means of three workshops guided by two trained coaches, an individual's work at home in between these workshops and a concluding discussion to address any unresolved issues and open questions. In these three steps a portfolio is created that contains information on the following issues [Wenidoppler 2003]:

³ The Adult education centres are a national "chain" of state-funded adult education centres providing affordable courses on a wide range of subjects.

⁴ For the development of the competence portfolio, the Volkshochschule Linz based its work partly on the Swiss Qualification Book.

- *Career progression*: this shows all of the steps taken in the formal education and training system as well as the steps that have led to the acquisition of skills and competencies through non-formal and informal learning.
- *Analysis of potential*: this is an analysis of individual tasks and activities that an individual has carried out in different roles and stages of their life in view of the skills and competencies used, or gained, to complete them. Individuals also carry out a self-assessment of their competencies.
- *Personal profile*: the abilities highlighted in the stages above are reduced to core competencies. The individual has the choice of which competencies are selected.

Once the portfolio is complete, the coaches are responsible for highlighting the individual's core competencies and for assessing the extent to which the indicators that have been set to define social and communication competencies can be found in an individual's competence portfolio.

The portfolio method is complemented with an assessment centre where a group of people who have completed the work on the competence portfolio undergo a number of tests including: psychometric tests, mock job interviews, group discussions, role plays, case studies and other tasks. Several observers are assessing the behaviour of the participants in view of six dimensions of social competence:

- Ability to work with others
- Team work
- Ability to reflect
- Ability to resolve conflicts
- Self-awareness
- Communication skills.

The method was piloted with 24 employees and trainees from Austrian businesses. A certificate is issued at the end of the portfolio process.

1.5 Stakeholders

In Austria, the discussion on validation of lifelong learning is currently played out mostly in conferences organised around relevant EU programmes (for example Leonardo and EQUAL). In developing their methodologies, some projects have already sought dialogue with representatives of business and labour. Interest in the issue is still growing and in future the following stakeholders are likely to be more systematically involved in the debate.

1.5.1 The Federal Ministry for Education, Science and Culture (BMBWK)

The Federal Ministry has overall responsibility for the Austrian education system. Any efforts to provide a more systematic approach to validating non-formal and informal learning will therefore need to involve BMBWK representatives.

1.5.2 The Federal Ministry for the Economy and Labour (BMWA)

As validation of non-formal and informal learning is to contribute to an individual's employability, the Austrian Ministry for the Economy and Labour has a stake in the development of any methodologies. Vocational training as well as continuous vocational training including the issues of final examinations and quality assurance are all part of the remit of this Ministry. In addition it is brokering consensus between employer and employee organisations and aims to promote social justice. As the validation of non-formal and informal learning raises concerns about its impact on the dual system of vocational training, a widening of the debate will therefore need involve the BMWA.

1.5.3 Federal Ministry for Health and the Federal Ministry for Agriculture

These two Ministries hold responsibility for training in their relevant sectors and thus have an interest in the development of validation methodologies.

1.5.4 Business Chambers, trade bodies and the social partners

In the Austrian vocational training system, these organisations are responsible for setting training standards and taking the final examinations of apprentices studying under the dual system of vocational training. If informal learning is to be validated and to contribute to vocational education, these organisations will be key actors as they will have to consent to building the informally acquired knowledge into training plans. Indeed, the Volkshochschule Linz has already consulted businesses and employer organisations in the process of developing the competence portfolio. However, as the recognition of non-formal and informal learning infringes on the competencies of these two organisations, winning their consent is anticipated to be a difficult process.

1.5.5 Training providers

Training providers are currently pioneering methods for validating non-formal and informal learning and might also be the organisations involved in delivering any institutionalised validation approach.

1.6 Conclusions

The discussion above shows that in Austria the development of methodologies for the validation of non-formal and informal learning is still in its infancy. The European Commission Memorandum on Lifelong Learning in particular meant that at the level of the responsible ministry (the BMBWK) interest in the issue was raised. Nevertheless, the development of methodologies to validate non-formal and informal learning is not nearly as advanced in Austria as it is in other European countries, most notably the Netherlands and Switzerland that tend to be reference points for any new developments in Austria. An important reason for this is a certain scepticism of key actors regarding the effect of the instrument on vocational training in the dual system. This scepticism encompasses both concerns about a narrowing down of vocational training as a result of validation and loss of

stakeholder influence over training standards. As a result, the three main initiatives to validate non-formal and informal learning have come out of EU-funded projects and have entailed minimum stakeholder involvement.

Indeed, there are essentially two sets of validation approaches. On the one hand, a number of federal laws recognise knowledge gained outside formal teaching structures as qualification for enrolment into the formal education system. On the other hand, validation methodologies are being developed by labour and education organisations in the framework of EU-funded projects. It is interesting to note that two of these methodologies offer tailored approaches, aiming either to validate skills gained from a particular activity (such as volunteering) or at identifying particular skills (such as communication and social competence). While there are thus few fully-fledged methodologies, the examples shown are all available to the public and appear to be received with increasing interest.

While events in Austria have to date perhaps lagged behind developments in other European countries, the question of validating non-formal and informal learning is set to gain in importance in the next years. Actors currently involved in the debate note increasing interest in the issue from key stakeholders, the BMBWK is setting up a new task force on lifelong learning and a number of conferences on the topic are to be held in 2004 and 2005. A lively debate can thus be expected in the near future.