



Building Learning Societies: Promoting Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning

Validation of learning outcomes of non-formal and informal learning in Austria / Status 2014

Summary

Since 2010 the **topic** of validation has **gained importance** in Austria. Many activities are started, but **no uniform framework** for validation and recognition of non-formal and informal learning is yet **in place**.

The goal of the European Union to offer individuals the opportunity to **demonstrate** what they have **learned outside formal education** and training is **partly fulfilled**. Some acts and regulations including mechanisms and arrangements that enable formal education and training institutions to recognize learning outcomes acquired in non-formal and informal settings were introduced.

Many **initiatives** in Austria can be **linked to the sector of adult education** (also second chance education) and some to the labor market and the third sector. Traditionally there is a **strong orientation** of education and economic culture **towards the initial vocational education** and training sector and a focus towards occupational profiles and activity descriptions and on formally acquired qualifications as proof of abilities and competences.

Validation exists in many contexts but is still **lacking in coherence**. Also there is no general individual right for individuals to access validation initiatives, the access requirements are defined for each initiative separately. Beneficiaries (low-qualified and early school leavers) seek to enhance their employability or to gain access to higher education programs. Some initiatives are targeted towards migrants. Many of the competence audit or portfolio initiatives particularly focus on empowerment of the participants.

- The **participation in informal learning activities** in Austria is **86 %** (Eurostat 2005)
- **75,7 %** of the population **learns informal** (Statistic Austria 2013)
- **28 %** of all adults participate in **institutional adults education** (Statistic Austria 2013)

Legal framework

In July **2011**, **four federal ministries** (Ministry for Education, Arts and Culture; Ministry for Science and Research; Ministry for Economy, Family and Youth; Ministry for Labour and Social Affairs) supported by the **social partners** and all **key stakeholders**, agreed on a **joint strategy, Lifelong Learning 2020** (LLL: 2020, 2011). This was based

on a set of guiding principles, benchmarks for 2020, and ten action strands, including concrete operational measures for LLL implementation. Validation and recognition of non-formal and informal learning is a central element in this strategy.

Agreed measures include the **establishment of a national validation strategy**, the development and **implementation of ‘competence balance’ schemes**, the provision of **training programs** for enhancing know-how regarding assessment of learning outcomes gained via non-formal and informal learning as well as the development of a **cross-sectoral quality assurance system** for assessment procedures (LLL: 2020, 2011, 46). (cf. Karin Luomi-Messerer: Country Report – Austria)

Types of validation initiatives in Austria

- acquisition of **certificates/qualifications from the formal education system** (such as ‘exceptional admission to the final apprenticeship exam’, the ‘acquisition of lower secondary school qualifications by adults’ or other so called external exams;
- acquisition of **certificates/qualifications without any equivalents in the formal education system** (such as awarding of the professional engineering title *HTL-IngenieurIn*, the certificates issued by the Academy of Continuing Education in the adult education sector, access conditions to regulated professions, and the certification of individuals [e.g. in IT or welding sectors]);
- procedures to **identify and validate informal learning** (such as reference frameworks for linguistic competence and ICT competences as well as competence identification by applying portfolio methods mainly in adult education and career guidance or in the third sector).

Target group / Purpose of the initiatives

- **gaining access** - ‘non-traditional’ access paths **to regular study programmes** and courses at higher education institutions for learners without the upper secondary school leaving exam (such as higher education entrance examination, special VET diploma etc.);
- **shortening programs** - e.g. possibilities for **skipping grades** for pupils at a general education school or VET college who demonstrate relevant achievements, reduction of training times in qualified healthcare and nursing based on relevant professional experience, and shortening of degree programmes at universities of applied science based on the recognition of professional experience;
- **making acquired competences visible** for enhancing one’s chances in the labour market or for career planning;
- **defining salary structure** based on the **recognition of an individual’s competence** gained through professional experience (e.g. as part of the collective bargaining agreement for employees in non-university research).

Methods / Availability of Validation

- In Austria, **almost all qualifications** (from the school system and dual system, but not university degrees) **can be obtained without participating in the relevant programmes** or courses, but not without passing the same exam (as ‘externals’) as required in the regular system
- Validation can be used to **acquire credits** towards a module of a programme in higher education (ECTS is used).
- Validation can be used for **gaining access to certain exams** or higher education programmes (such as CVET university courses).

- Information and **guidance** to individual candidates is **only** provided **in certain cases** (usually by the institution offering the validation measure, such as adult education providers) and only in some cases it is publicly financed (e.g. as part of career guidance).
- **Many** validation **procedures** and initiatives **belong** to the **formal education system** and/or aim at a formal education and training qualifications ('external examinations'). Therefore, the assessment methods used in this context are usually the same as those used in the formal system (such as presentations, simulations, evidence extracted from work, written tests, and oral exams).
- In many cases, the **portfolio method** is used 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.
- In some initiatives, specific methods are used, such as **certification workshop, assessment centre, and online testing**.

Credit systems

Austria currently does **not** have an **explicit national credit transfer system**, the **European credit transfer systems** are only **partly being implemented** in Austria. However, there are credit arrangements in the form of regulations governing the crediting of learning outcomes if learners change between training institutions and/or training levels. Most of these regulations refer to the crediting of learning times and are based on a comparison of curricula or training plans.

The **higher education sector** has implemented the **European Credit Transfer System (ECTS)** according to the Bologna process. The **European Credit Transfer System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET)** has **not yet been implemented**.

Currently, a new ECVET strategy is being developed and a consultation process was launched at the beginning of October 2013.

Future perspective

The **NQF has not yet reached operative level**. Since almost all qualifications from the formal system (excluding higher education) that are planned to be included in the NQF can be obtained by passing exams without participating in the relevant programs, a close **link between non-formal and informal learning and the NQF** can be assumed. Furthermore, in some cases programs leading to qualifications that are planned to be included can be accessed based on validation.

The work to **fully set up an institutional framework** for the validation of learning outcomes, namely knowledge, skills and competences acquired through non-formal and informal learning **has recently begun** and the final outcome should be reached till 2018 (according to the Austrian strategy for lifelong learning).

Best practice examples / initiatives

wba

wba is an institution for the recognition and accreditation of adult educators in Austria. It recognises formally acquired competences as well as competences that have been obtained in non-formal or informal ways.

For the acquisition of *wba* certificates acquired and missing competences are documented in an e-portfolio, and an individual education and training plan is identified. A further method used by the wba is a three-day-assessment, the so-called certification workshop, where candidates who want to be awarded a wba certificate have to show their professional competences and personal and social skills.

wba sets standards and strengthens the professionalization of adult education because it enables those taking part in its certification process to gain a qualification widely recognized within the profession. Practical experience in the field of adult education is a prerequisite for a certification by the Academy. wba acknowledges prior learning results and offers guidance as far as the acquisition of skills identified as missing is concerned. Adult educators can submit competences and practical experience acquired in various ways and with different types of proof. These supporting documents are assessed based on the wba-curriculum and then acknowledged. Lack of competences can be made up by attending further courses or by submitting further evidence. wba graduates receive a recognised *wba* certificate or wba diploma. wba does not offer further education programmes itself but accredits suitable further education programmes offered by various adult education institutes throughout Austria.

The recognition process can be divided into three stages:

1. Status-quo-evaluation (*Standortbestimmung*) (including online portfolio)
2. *wba*-certificate Certified Adult Educator
3. *wba* diploma Graduate Adult Educator

wba enables a transparency between adult education and university education and continuing education. University study courses for which wba graduates get their wba diplomas acknowledged include the university study course, Adult Education/Continuing Education, and the study course, Educational Management. The *wba* curricula have been recently revised for making them more suitable for NQF inclusion; they are now written in terms of learning outcomes.

wba was implemented in the adult education sector in 2007 and is considered as successful initiative in Austria and beyond. For example, it received the Validation Prize 2013, an award given in three categories to the most innovative and promising initiatives in the area of Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning in all sectors and levels of education in Europe in the context of the Observal-Net project.

Number of beneficiaries (as of 07.08.2013 - 1095 Status-quo-evaluations

- 633 wba certificates
- 152 wba diploma

Kompetenzerweiterung durch Kompetenzerfassung

(KOMKOM – Expanding competences based on competence identification):

The project, initiated in 2012, financed by the Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture, and co-financed by the University of Klagenfurt, is targeted towards low-qualified people who want to achieve a qualification that could be linked to NQF level 1. The

project aims at the development of a flexible instrument for identifying and recording competences that can be used by social integration enterprises.

The instrument must be suitable to the different requirements of these enterprises (different fields for learning and working). So far, a set of learning outcomes and assessment indicators are defined for the 'initial technical qualification'. These learning outcomes are related to professional and methodical competences, social and communicative competences and personal competences.

In April 2013, the project was extended by a further 15 months. In this phase, the instrument will be tested and learning outcomes for an 'initial technical qualification' will be defined related to NQF level 2 with a particular focus on compatibility and connectivity with training programs belonging to the formal system. Furthermore, specific software will be developed for facilitating a structured identification and recording of competences.

Join in a Job!

The initiative Join in a Job! was developed as part of an EQUAL project and further developed as part of a Leonardo da Vinci project (2008-2010). This project focused on 15 to 25 year-old migrants without a complete (vocational) education or who were unemployed. The method combined social work (case management), career-planning advice, and vocational counseling. One aim was to visualize already acquired competences by using the portfolio method.

Sources:

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