



# How informal and non-formal learning is recognised in Europe

Austria – country report



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This country report was composed as part of a larger study on validation of non-formal and informal learning in Europe. The country reports of Austria, Denmark, Finland, France, Norway, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom as well as the summary of the study both in English and German, and finally the complete publication (in German only) can be found at

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## 1 Introduction

The aim of this country report is to systematically bring together the different instruments and procedures concerning the recognition of non-formal and informal learning, and to evaluate them in relation to their relevance for the target group of persons with low levels of formal qualification. The choice of recognition possibilities is selective. The central criterion for inclusion is the potential access possibility it offers to people with only the compulsory school-leaving certificate.

However, a conscious decision has been made to exclude access possibilities on the basis of recognition procedures for the higher education sphere (e.g. non-traditional routes to higher education) as well as further certification procedures at the level of higher professional practice (e.g. conferment of the title of HTL engineer). A good overview is provided by the report produced by Schneeberger, Schlögl and Neubauer (2007), which is still very up to date.

## 2 Initial situation

As part of the European initiatives, discussions concerning the validation and recognition of non-formal and informal learning were given a new impetus, even in Austria. Up until that point, the topic of the recognition of non-formal and informal learning had received very little attention; this can be attributed to the dominant position that the formal system of initial training has traditionally held in Austria. As a result of this strong formal system, there was seen to be no need in principle to establish a system for the recognition of non-formal and informal competences there (Schneeberger and Petanovitsch 2005). This situation led to the following findings in an international survey on the state of development of national systems of recognition (Bjørnåvold 2001: 221–225): “The topic of assessment and recognition of non-formal [learning] has not received very much attention in Austria and few practical initiatives can be identified. [...] So far, the role of prior and non-formal learning has for the most part been touched upon in debates linked to the question of modularization of education and training. While basically non-existent in initial education and training, modularization has, to a limited degree, been introduced in continuing vocational training.” Even some ten years later, a further study identified that no great progress had been made towards the development of systems of recognition (Hawley, Souto-Otero and Duchemin 2010).

It must be stated from the outset that in Austria there is no over-arching system for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning. Instead it is the case that some legal regulations have been built into the system, thus allowing for some recognition possibilities (Brandstetter and Luomi-Messerer 2010). Some of these regulations are a traditional part of the vocational education system, but in terms of non-formal and informal learning procedures they are gaining a new significance. However, there is no overall system or strategy; various methods of recognition exist side by side in an uncoordinated and unaligned manner. Introducing systems of recognition is made all the more difficult by the sheer number of rules that exist in the Austrian vocational education system. In this respect hopes rest with the development of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), whose aim is to enhance the esteem of informal and non-formal learning outcomes (BMUKK and BMWF 2011).

In terms of educational strategy, however, considerable efforts are currently being combined as part of the implementation of the lifelong learning strategy (LLL strategy) (Republic of Austria 2011). Action point ten “Procedures for the recognition of non-formally and informally acquired knowledge and competences in all sectors of education” outlines the vision that skills and competences, regardless of where they were acquired, should be recognized and certified as qualifications.

In the higher education sector over the last few years, alongside the traditional access possibilities (e.g. university entrance examination), innovative admissions possibilities have been introduced (for example, secondary school vocational certificate, entry to technical universities on the basis of relevant occupational experience), which contain elements of a recognition of non-formal and informal learning. The potential of systems of recognition with regard to the integration of people with low levels of formal qualification into the labour market has, however, only recently been recognized (as is similar to the situation in Germany – c.f. the Germany country report). An increasingly potential-oriented perspective stresses that people with low levels of formal qualification have many occupational competences, but they are not visibly demonstrable to the outside world and can therefore not be exploited on the labour market.

### **3 Vocational education and informal learning in Austria: characteristics and concepts**

#### **3.1 Characteristics of Austrian vocational training<sup>1</sup>**

In Austria, compulsory schooling <sup>2</sup> lasts for nine years (with children starting school at the age of six). The last year of compulsory schooling is normally completed in the first year of the upper secondary school. At the same time, the different forms of vocational education also commence in the upper secondary school, and finish at different levels of vocational training. Exceptions to this are the general education high school (AHS upper school – four years) and the polytechnic school (one year) which provide pre-vocational training. Neither the AHS upper school nor the polytechnic school lead to a vocational qualification.

In the upper secondary school the following vocational training routes are offered:

- Apprenticeship training (dual system): The training takes place in the workplace and the vocational school, with 80 percent of the learning period spent in the workplace. The workplace training follows a work-integrated model, which means that the training takes place under real work conditions. In the course of the training, the apprentice is already undertaking productive work. Each apprentice has a training contract with the workplace provider related to a recognized apprenticeship trade. The aim of the vocational school is to provide theoretical and practical support to the technical training, as well as general education.
- Vocational middle schools (BMS): Those who successfully graduate from a BMS gain a vocational qualification that enables them to carry out certain professions straightaway. On completion they receive a vocational completion certificate or a craft certificate. Those who complete the BMS have access to a relevant regulated trade in conjunction with relevant professional practice. A BMS lasts for between one and four years.

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<sup>1</sup> A good overview is provided by Tritscher-Archan, Grün, Nowak and Weiß (2012).

<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that legally in Austria, strictly speaking, there is no compulsory general school attendance, but only a compulsory general curriculum. The compulsory curriculum can also be followed outside of the public school system.

- Vocational high schools (BHS): The BHS leads to a high-level vocational qualification and access to relevant regulated professions. Those who successfully complete the upper secondary school leaving exam (“Reife- und Diplomprüfung”) achieve a type of dual qualification encompassing both vocational education and more in-depth general education, which at the same time provides access to general higher education. A BHS is a five year program.
- Schools for general health and nursing care (GuK – from the tenth year of schooling). These schools work in close cooperation with hospitals. At least half of the training consists of a practical element, but at the same time at least one third must be theoretical. The graduates gain the right to the title: Diploma in Health and Nursing.

At the upper secondary school level there are also post-secondary training routes (academies), and tertiary education routes (universities and other higher education institutions).

In addition, there is also a range of vocational training routes that are located outside of school and higher education provision, but which are also partly linked to the formal vocational educational system in some form or other (e.g. in the form of entry requirements or entitlements). Examples of these are the industrial master schools and the building craftsmen schools, the executive service, the qualifying examination for master craftsman, the civil engineering examination as well as the professional examination for accountancy.

### **3.2 Formal, non-formal and informal learning: Explanations**

Learning is normally divided into formal, non-formal and informal learning. In Austria, particularly in the wake of the development of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), there was considerable discussion of this topic, focusing on conceptual, academic and educational policy perspectives. At this point in time, this discussion and development process is still continuing, but basic terminological concepts have already been agreed. The NQF in Austria is subdivided into three strands (BMUKK and BMWF 2011:50):

- Strand 1: Mapping of qualifications of the formal education system (i.e. basically qualifications conferred by the state)
- Strand 2: Presentation and mapping of non-formally gained qualifications (including in adult education institutions, and via professional and in-house company training)
- Strand 3: Development of the first approaches to the incorporation of learning outcomes that are acquired via informal learning processes.

The aim of this strand structure is to ensure that the various learning paths in the NQF are transparent and can be mapped. Strands one and two are differentiated from each other by the type of learning outcome. “In a working definition, Strand 2 would be the location for those qualifications which demonstrate all the characteristics of a qualification in the sense of the EQR, but which are not statutorily regulated.” (Schlögl, Breinbauer, Lengauer, Paulus and Tritscher-Archan 2013: 4). To this extent the implied definition of the concept differs from that of the EU definition insofar as a learning outcomes-oriented, rather than an institutionally-organized concept is given preference.



The Austrian LLL strategy also implicitly follows this concept. Accordingly the following can be defined:

- Formal learning leads to a qualification that is legally regulated.
- Non-formal learning leads to a qualification that is not legally regulated.
- Informal learning is a mode of learning that can lead to a legally regulated or a non-regulated qualification.

In the context of the recognition of non-formal and informal competences, Schneeberger, Schlögl und Neubauer (2007) point out that a sharp distinction between non-formal and informal competences is not useful because, in practice, there is a frequent overlap of the two types of learning. “The distinction between formal education on the one hand, and non-formal and informal learning on the other, appears, at least in relation to the public-legal final examinations – with few exceptions – to be clearer and more explicit than that between the two concepts of non-formal learning” (Schneeberger et al., 2007: 69).

The consultation paper on the National Qualifications Framework (BMUKK and BMWF 2008: 12) identified that Austria “[...] was lagging behind in the presentation, development and dissemination of procedures for representing learning outcomes that had been acquired outside the statutorily regulated education system.” This can certainly be attributed to the traditionally strong dominance of vocational education that is deeply rooted in the formal education system. The dominant role of formal initial training means that the continuing education market is compelled primarily to assume the function of updating and extending competences. The sheer number of rules in vocational education is both enabling and limiting. On the one hand, it impedes the systematization and generalization of recognition procedures; on the other hand, there are already well-formulated vocational standards that offer an orientation framework for the achievement of vocational competences. However, there is also a danger that the barriers posed by formal education paths could once again be brought into systems of recognition via the back door. The development of the strand structure of the NQF also needs to be considered against this background. Owing to the strong dominance of statutorily regulated vocational training in Austria, the learning outcomes differentiation according to statutorily regulated and non-statutorily regulated qualifications seems to offer a better integration possibility for the development of the NQF. The development of structural concepts for the assessment and validation processes is being driven forward as part of the development process of Strand 2 (Schlögl et al. 2013).

## **4 Persons with low levels of formal qualification: concept, employment situation, further education behaviour**

### **4.1 Educational and economic policy background**

Persons with low levels of formal qualification are judged to be the group most at risk in respect of integration into the labour market (Dornmayr, Lachmayr and Rothmüller 2008; Prokopp and Luomi-Messerer 2009).

Unemployment statistics show that those with low levels of formal qualifications are by far at the greatest risk of being unemployed. They are up to three times more likely to be unemployed compared with the unemployment average (Haberfellner and Gnadenberger 2014). Against the background of increasing demands in working life, an increase of this risk is expected in the future. Above all, this risk can be strongly demonstrated in the percentage of this group that is affected by unemployment: in 2007, almost half of the non-self-employed were registered as unemployed for at least one day. The comparison for those with higher-level qualifications is no more than a fifth (Dornmayr et al. 2008).

In Austria, the integration of workers with low levels of formal qualification into the labour market therefore assumes a central role in labour market policy. There are two basic labour market policy starting points in this respect: (1) The period of unemployment should be used to gain higher qualifications. The Austrian Labour Market Service offers a number of programs that are based on an individualized, supported model, leading to the achievement of higher qualifications. Corresponding qualification models focus specifically on existing and useable qualifications. An introductory phase where an audit of existing vocational skills is undertaken, followed by a training phase to enable further skills to be developed, is becoming increasingly important (Haberfellner and Gnadenberger 2014). (2) Preventive measures for young people: Since 2008, within the context of a “training guarantee”, so-called supra-industry training establishments were created with the aim of guaranteeing every young person vocational training. The government has planned to turn the training guarantee into a training obligation by the end of this current legislative period. In addition, a range of measures for young people have been introduced to prevent them from dropping out of the training system (Mayerl and Löffler 2014).

In the national and regional strategies there is a labour market policy focus on the achievement of higher qualifications by those with low levels of formal qualification (Republic of Austria, 2011; Adam, 2014). Here several levels can be differentiated: 1) the promotion of basic education and literacy; 2) the successful completion of compulsory schooling at a later stage; 3) the achievement of a vocational certificate or its successful completion at a later stage.

### **4.2 Persons with low levels of formal qualification: concept and typology**

The Austrian labour market is closely linked to the formal vocational education system (e.g. the company-based focus of apprenticeship training, curriculum development in vocational schools). Rights of access to the (vocational) education system (e.g. university) as well as to the job market (e.g. regulated jobs and trades) are closely linked to formal educational attainment.

In Austria, people with low levels of formal qualification are “[...] those whose highest (formal) educational achievement is at most the successful completion of compulsory schooling.” (Dornmayr et al. 2008: 8; also Prokopp 2011). In Austria, however, this common (usually implicit) definition is by no means uncontroversial. For example, there are a number of vocational qualifications that have

no equivalence in the various formal educational classifications<sup>3</sup>. One strength of this conceptual approach is that it enables the “correct” classification of the actual qualification level to be identified – to the extent that there is an equivalence in the educational classification system (Prokopp 2011). At the same time, the use of the term “formal” implies that further potentially existing competences that have been developed non-formally or informally are not (able to be) included (Dornmayr et al. 2008).

In addition, implicitly included in the group of people with low levels of formal qualification are all those who have gained (vocational) educational qualifications abroad but which are not recognized in Austria and therefore have no currency in the labour market (Biffel, Pfeffert and Skrivanek 2012; Dornmayr et al. 2008). Those who have dropped out from school or vocational training (apprenticeships or vocational schools) will also have gained vocational competences in the course of their training prior to dropping out, but they cannot redeem them in the labour market because they do not have a formal qualification (Steiner 2009).

The group of people who have low levels of formal qualifications is therefore far from homogeneous but can be differentiated according to different characteristics:

- Socio-demographic factors: older people, women, people with a migration background, young people who have dropped out of education, people with disabilities (Dornmayr et al. 2008; Prokopp and Luomi-Messerer 2009)
- Milieu affiliation and educational affinity (Krenn and Kasper 2012)
- Drop-outs and those who have not completed their education (Steiner 2009)
- Different motivations for learning (Hafner 2005; Holzer 2004)
- Level and potential in relation to informally and non-formally developed competences (Dornmayr et al. 2008; Prokopp 2011)

The diversity of the groups of people among those with low levels of formal qualification needs to be taken into account when it comes to developing and evaluating the diverse range of recognition procedures. So that relevant recognition processes can be identified for this target group, the variety of their social and life situations also has to be taken into consideration.

Krenn (2012) adopts a critical perspective towards adopting a deficit perspective with regard to people with low levels of formal qualification, and instead adopts a competence and resource-oriented standpoint. This enables various social contexts and the link between life experiences, knowledge and learning processes to be considered. Ideally therefore, recognition procedures of informally and non-formally developed learning outcomes should put the subject centre-stage and establish links to the learning processes which are embedded in the learning contexts of the individual.

In the expert report of the PIAAC data collection 2011/12 (Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies) Kastner and Schlögl (2014) show that although a high proportion of people with low levels of formal qualification have a low level of competence in relation to everyday skills (reading, writing, problem-solving), at the same time, however, a significant number of them have reached a level of competence that is comparable to that of people with higher level educational qualifications.

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<sup>3</sup> An example of this is the Integrative Apprenticeship Training (Integrative Lehrausbildung - IBA) one version of which finishes with a vocational “part-qualification”.

### **4.3 The occupational spheres of persons with low levels of formal qualification**

According to the available data from the Labour Force Survey (micro census) 2013<sup>4</sup>, about 580.000 of the working population only have the secondary school leaving certificate. That corresponds to almost 14 percent of the workforce as a whole. Workers with low levels of formal qualification are employed in the service sector industries, primarily in commerce (90.000), in catering (60.000) and in health and social care (40.000), as well as in trade and industry in the field of goods manufacturing (100.000) and in the building trade (60.000). Also, a considerable number of workers with low levels of formal qualification are employed in the area of agriculture and forestry (50.000).

According to the ISCO–08 classification, people with low levels of formal qualification are employed above all as unskilled workers (24 percent), in the service sector and commerce (24 percent) and in the craft sector or similar occupations (15 percent). If one groups the ISCO-08 classification according to the skill level required, then it is clear that only a quarter of all employees with minimum compulsory schooling are working at the appropriate skill level 1, whereas the majority are working at skill level 2 (or even higher) for which a vocational qualification would typically be required. These data show that a considerable proportion of people with low levels of formal qualification are employed in occupations that formally require a skill level higher than that of their formal qualifications, and hence they are employed in jobs above their formal qualification level.

Although a medium-term employment forecast for Austria up to 2016 predicts a minimal increase of +0.1 percent in the volume of employment for those with level 1 skills (i.e. those whose highest qualification is the secondary school leaving certificate), in comparison with the total employment increase of +0.9 percent, this is nevertheless below average. Basically a shift is predicted from low-qualified jobs to those requiring higher qualifications, which continues the trend shown towards the need for higher qualifications since 1970 (Horvath, Huemer, Kratena and Mahringer 2012).

### **4.4 Patterns of participation of workers with low levels of formal qualification in continuing training**

The current adult education report of Statistik Austria (2013a), which is based on the data of the Adult Education Survey 2011/12, shows an increase in participation in formal and non-formal education compared with the 2007 survey. It shows an increase of the proportion participating in formal education from 4,2 to 5,9 percent and those participating in non-formal education from 39,8 to 45,5 percent.

The group of people with low levels of formal qualification clearly shows the lowest participation in non-formal education with a rate of 24 percent, whereas for those who have completed an apprenticeship the participation rate is almost 40 percent.

In an overview of a range of surveys, Krenn (2009: 13) states “[...] that there is hardly any doubt about the marginal participation of the group with low levels of formal qualification both with regard to initial education (compulsory schooling), as well as in terms of occupational status (semi-skilled and unskilled workers), and that over the years nothing significant has changed in this respect.” This leads to the conclusion that those who do not take part in formal education processes during the phase of compulsory schooling are to a large extent excluded from vocational training. It is difficult to estimate the extent of participation in informal learning using mass data because of problems of operationalization. However, it can be assumed that here, too, the group of people with low levels of

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<sup>4</sup> Survey of STATcube – Statistische Datenbank der Statistik Austria (Statistical Database for Austrian Statistics) (Micro-census Labourforce Survey - annual data) undertaken on 18. September 2014.

formal qualification has a lower level in respect of both quality and scope, and hence informal learning can only partially compensate for non-participation in formal and non-formal education (Erlor and Fischer 2012).

In addition, current in-depth analyses of the data of PIAAC 2011/12 (Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies) are available that show that participation in further training is dependent on the level of reading competence: i.e. the higher the reading competence level, the higher the participation in further training. This pattern can also be observed for the population with low levels of formal qualification group (Schlögl, Iller and Gruber 2014). A further in-depth analysis of informal learning in the workplace stresses the fact that the competence levels in reading and numeracy are significantly related to the concrete levels of skill required in leisure time activities and at work in these areas. This finding can also be deduced for the group of workers with low formal skill level requirements (Iller, Mayerl and Schmid 2014).

#### **4.5 Summary: Persons with low levels of formal qualification and informal learning**

Diagnoses of data and research results indicate a below-average participation in continuing training by workers with low levels of formal qualification in formally and non-formally organized learning contexts. At the same time, however, the employment situation of the low-qualified also shows very clearly that a high proportion of workers with low levels of formal qualification are employed in jobs which would normally require a qualification at the skilled worker level. This allows the conclusion to be drawn that these people have developed the competences necessary for performing their particular roles via informal learning processes. According to Dehnbostel (2008), these processes of learning through experience while at work can lead to the development of vocational skills and competences without the need for a formal period of vocational training.

Data for the Austrian labour market indicate an increased risk of unemployment for workers with low levels of formal qualification. On the basis of further trends in the labour market, this risk situation appears to be increasing. Therefore attempts are being made via specific labour market policy measures and strategies to counteract these trends. In this context, procedures for the recognition of informal competences appropriate to the target group are necessary.

With regard to the life situations of the low-qualified and the heterogeneity of informal learning processes, it is necessary for procedures of recognition to find solutions that take account of individual circumstances, relevance to everyday life and flexibility. For a detailed, description see the Germany country report.

## 5 Core elements of the validation of non-formal and informal learning: status quo

In the following the central procedures of the recognition system in Austria will be presented with reference to five core elements, and evaluated with regard to their relevance for the group of people with low levels of formal qualification.

### 5.1 Legal basis

In Austria vocational education is regulated by a number of legal bases and responsibilities. There is no overarching legal basis that determines the recognition of non-formal and informal competences. However, within the system there are numerous legal regulations that enable formal recognition to occur in different ways (Brandstetter and Luomi-Messerer, 2010).

Because there are so many laws that regulate vocational education, it is not possible to provide a complete overview. However, in the context of recognition three laws are of central significance:

- Berufsausbildungsgesetz (BAG) (The Vocational Training Act)
- Schulunterrichtsgesetz (SchUG) (The School Curriculum Act), Schulorganisationsgesetz (SchOG) (The School Organization Act)
- Gewerbeordnung (GewO)<sup>5</sup> (§18, §19) (The Trade, Commerce and Industry Regulation Act)

Apprenticeship training for 199<sup>6</sup> occupations is regulated by the BAG in Austria, whereby for each occupation, individual training and examination regulations are set. The recognition of non-formal and informal competences is regulated in §23 BAG in two ways. Firstly in the form of exceptional admission to the final apprenticeship examination, and secondly via direct recognition of relevant vocational and/or occupational competences, first introduced in 2011.

Further there is the possibility of crediting learning outcomes gained in the school context for the apprenticeship training (§28 BAG). Here, however, it is less a matter of the recognition of informally developed competences but rather the recognition of certificates and qualifications gained in a formal context.

In addition, an apprenticeship training gained in another country can be recognized as equivalent to an Austrian apprenticeship qualification if it can be demonstrated that the vocational training, and the knowledge and skills demonstrated in the examination abroad are on a par with that required for the Austrian examination (§27a BAG).

The examination for external candidates (§42 SchUG) is embedded in the SchUG which makes it possible for a certificate of a stage of schooling or a type of school as well as a diploma or school-leaving certificate to be achieved without having previously attended the relevant school. In order to be admitted to the examination for external candidates there is only one basic requirement: the examination candidate is not allowed to be younger than a pupil of the relevant school stage or type would normally be.

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<sup>5</sup> [www.gewerbeordnung.at](http://www.gewerbeordnung.at) (accessed: 10.09.2014)

<sup>6</sup> [lehrberufsliste.m-services.at](http://lehrberufsliste.m-services.at) (accessed: 10.09.2014, as at: 01.07.2014)

In the GewO, access to the regulated trades is clearly stipulated, i.e. if an activity is practiced professionally, if it is undertaken independently, regularly and with the intention of achieving an income or any other economic advantage, regardless of the purpose (§1 Para. 1 GewO). At the present time 82 trades are regulated. In order to be able to practice one of these regulated trades, a certificate of vocationally relevant skills is required (Certificate of competence for trades; master craftsman's certificate). This certificate can be provided in various forms.

*Table 1: Summary table of the legal basis for the recognition of informal learning*

<b>Legal title</b>	<b>Subject</b>	<b>Requirement</b>	<b>Scope</b>
BAG § 23 Para. 5	Exceptional admission to final apprenticeship examination	a) Over 18 years of age and evidence of the skills and knowledge required for the apprenticeship  b) At least half the apprenticeship period normally required for the apprenticeship	National
BAG § 23 Para. 11	Recognition of vocationally and/or occupationally relevant learning outcomes	Over 22 years of age; the practical final apprenticeship examination is conducted in two parts: (1) proof of acquired qualifications; (2) practical examination of qualifications not yet achieved.	National
SchUG § 42	Admission to an examination in the formal school system	The examination candidate is not allowed to be younger than a pupil of the relevant school stage or type would normally be	National
GewO	Entry requirements for regulated occupations	Over 18 years of age; certificate of competence	National

The overview shows that the recognition of non-formal and informal learning in Austria is legally regulated primarily by means of admission to examinations and entry requirements. The legal frameworks ensure that there are binding regulations for entitlement to access (formal type of recognition according to Colardyn and Bjornavold 2004) to examinations in the formal education system.

### 5.1.1 Acceptance and relevance for the target group

In the formal education system there are a number of mechanisms available to gain the right to admission to various examinations within the formal (vocational) education system, without having completed the corresponding courses of study. The recognition of non-formal and informal competences therefore leads to recognition in the form of the right to be admitted to sit examinations, but not to having achieved the examinations themselves (The exception to this: recognition according to BAG § 23 Para. 11).

The standards and procedures of these examinations are therefore oriented towards the assessment logic of the formal education system. It is a case of the same examination and assessment standards for all, regardless of the mode of learning. It can therefore be assumed that without appropriate support mechanisms, the resistance to learning and examinations often exhibited by those with low levels of formal qualification will be reproduced in such formal learning contexts.

National as well as regional strategies for lifelong learning are relevant here in order to enable workers with low levels of formal qualification to gain higher qualifications. However, the question of how to reach this target group continues to be problematic. At present, by far the most effective way of reaching the unemployed with low levels of formal qualification is via the Austrian Labour Market Service (the Arbeitsmarktservice - AMS) (Kanelutti-Chilas 2014).

With regard to the labour market orientation, it is above all the formal recognition possibilities within the BAG that are most highly relevant; however, a binding recognition of non-formal and informal competences is also possible in about 200 occupations.

## 5.2 Procedures and instruments

In Austria there are many procedures and instruments linked to the issue of the recognition of non-formal and informal learning, each of which approaches the topic from different angles and starting points (Brandstetter and Luomi-Messerer, 2010; Schneeberger et al. 2007). The findings of Colardyn and Bjornavold (Colardyn and Bjornavold 2004) are still relevant to the extent that Austria is still considered to be in an “experimental phase”. In the meantime, however, a number of different procedures for the recognition of non-formally and informally achieved learning outcomes have been developed; they differ from each other in terms of their aims, usefulness and relationship to the formal education system (obligations within a legally binding framework), as well as to the instruments and methods employed.

In relation to the NQF strands, the procedures can be differentiated according to the type of recognition (see also Schneeberger et al. 2007):

- Legally binding procedures: These procedures lead to the attainment of legally regulated qualifications. This type is associated with a “formal approach” (according to Schneeberger et al. 2007); in other words, it requires certificates and authorizations from the formal education system. By definition, legally regulated qualifications lead to a binding recognition.
- Procedures that are not legally binding: These procedures lead to a qualification that is not legally regulated, and can be divided into summative and formative approaches. Summative approaches lead to certificates that do not have any equivalence in the formal education system and provide a statement of existing competences. By contrast, formative approaches focus on an individual, development-oriented perspective. What is common to both these approaches is that they do not lead to binding recognition by virtue of the fact that they lack a legal basis.



## 5.2.1 Binding procedures

### 5.2.1.1 Successful completion of compulsory schooling at a later stage

The successful completion of compulsory schooling is a key entitlement to admission to a range of schools offering continuing secondary education (vocational middle schools, vocational high schools, high schools offering general education). The successful completion of compulsory schooling is not a key legal requirement for an apprenticeship, but in reality it increases one's chances of gaining an apprenticeship place and a job.

Having the opportunity to successfully complete the compulsory schooling stage at a later date is a key focus of the Adult Education Initiative<sup>7</sup> (Initiative Erwachsenenbildung 2011). As part of this initiative, a new completion of compulsory schooling examination law<sup>8</sup> was also developed, coming into force from September 2012. This examination is intended to be interdisciplinary (six modules), adult-oriented and competence-based<sup>9</sup>. The entry requirements allow anyone over the age of 15 to enter for the examination. Examinations that have already been successfully passed in the 8<sup>th</sup> school year or equivalent examinations can be recognized as part of the examination entry procedure.

In the context of this program, preparatory courses are offered free of charge; each one begins with a competence assessment procedure that forms the basis for the development of an individual learning plan which is then used to develop the preparatory curriculum. Throughout all phases of the program, ongoing learning guidance and support are available (Initiative Erwachsenenbildung 2011).

It is intended that the competence-based tasks for the examination should be closely linked to everyday life and previous experiences, that connections should be made to interests and previous knowledge, and that the existing knowledge of the examination candidates should be discussed and analyzed in a critical way<sup>10</sup>. The conceptual aim of this examination is to bring the formal knowledge of the 8<sup>th</sup> school year and informally gained knowledge closer together, and to bring the participants' social, personal and interpersonal skills to the centre of the process (Hackl-Schuberth 2014: 3f).

The monitoring report for the Adult Education Initiative identified a great demand for this program. Between the beginning of August 2013 and January 2014, 3.273 new participants joined the program (Adult Education Initiative 2014). A survey of those participating in the course and in the examination revealed that "the expectation that the participants would continue to actively engage further in education, work and society" was being fulfilled (Hackl-Schuberth 2014: 6).

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<sup>7</sup> [www.initiative-erwachsenenbildung.at](http://www.initiative-erwachsenenbildung.at) (accessed: 11.09.2014)

<sup>8</sup> [erwachsenenbildung.at/bildungsinfo/zweiter\\_bildungsweg](http://erwachsenenbildung.at/bildungsinfo/zweiter_bildungsweg) (accessed: 11.09.2014); BGBl. I Nr. 72/2012 idF from 11.09.2014

<sup>9</sup> This examination continues to exist formally as an external examination.

<sup>10</sup> Circular letter of BMUKK (2012): Implementing Regulations for the Successful Completion of the Compulsory Schooling Stage Examination, Reference number: BMUKK-12.661/0016-III/3/2012

### 5.2.1.2 Exceptional admission to the final apprenticeship examination

Within the BAG (§ 23 Para. 5), the possibility exists for an exceptional admission to the final apprenticeship examination; this means that a person can be admitted to an examination without having completed the required apprenticeship period as laid down in the relevant training regulations. In order to be granted exceptional admission to the final apprenticeship examination, the following prerequisites must be met:

1. The applicant is over 18 years of age and can provide evidence that s/he has attained the necessary skills and abilities for the apprenticeship (e.g. via training activities, relevant practical activities, attending courses) (§ 23 Para. 5 lit. a BAG) or
2. “if a person can prove s/he has completed at least half of the required apprenticeship period, if necessary taking into consideration a substitute period of apprenticeship, and there is no possibility of obtaining an apprenticeship contract for the remaining time that is prescribed for the length of his/her apprenticeship” (§ 23 Para. 5 lit. b BAG).

The applicant has to submit an application for exceptional admission to the final apprenticeship examination. In order to be admitted, proof must be provided (in any form) which verifies relevant practical experience in a specified occupation. In the case of admission via an apprenticeship place, a theoretical and practical final apprenticeship examination also has to be successfully passed, although the theoretical examination can be waived if relevant proof of knowledge can be provided.

In 2012, around 60.000 people were admitted to a final apprenticeship examination within a year, of which 9.500 gained exceptional admission and 8.700 of these were admitted on the basis of relevant vocational practice (§ 23 Para. 5 lit. a BAG). A proportion of 16 percent of those admitted to a final apprenticeship examination were exceptionally admitted. The number of exceptional admissions has almost doubled since 2003, which indicates the increasing importance of this procedure. In 2012, 79 percent of examination candidates who were granted exceptional admission passed the examination, which is only slightly under the overall average of 82 percent (Dornmayr and Nowak 2013). This only slightly below average percentage demonstrates the high quality of vocational skills and abilities gained via informal means. Up until now there have been no studies investigating the particular characteristics of this group of candidates who gain exceptional admission to the final apprenticeship examination. It is therefore impossible to draw any concrete conclusions as to the learning contexts in which the requisite skills and knowledge were gained. Many education establishments offer preparatory courses of different lengths to prepare candidates for exceptional admission to the final apprenticeship examination.

Particularly within the framework of active labour market policy, measures are being put in place to enable people with low levels of formal qualification to gain higher qualifications via this route (see Competence with System). In the regional Vienna Qualifications Plan 2020, the successful completion of previously started apprenticeships (including suitable preparatory measures) is seen as a central educational policy measure (Vienna Employee Development Funds, 2013). This clearly shows that this form of recognition of non-formally and informally acquired learning outcomes is also being integrated within the framework of an activating labour market policy specifically for educational policy measures.

### 5.2.1.3 Du kannst was! (You do have skills!) – Recognition of vocationally and occupationally relevant learning outcomes

An amendment of BAG (§ 23 Para. 11) in December 2011 created a new possibility for the recognition of informally acquired vocational skills and aptitudes<sup>11</sup>. The legal embedding of this possibility can be attributed to the regional initiative of the social partners<sup>12</sup> in the federal state of Upper Austria (Oberösterreich) in cooperation with interested educational providers, and with the support of the state of Upper Austria (Bauer 2008). As part of the pilot project “Du kannst was!”<sup>13</sup> (*You do have skills!*), a procedure of validating informally gained vocational competences was developed, at the end of which formal recognition is conferred in the form of a final apprenticeship examination certificate for a recognized apprenticeable trade. A complete vocational qualification can therefore be achieved via this route. Legally, this route of achieving a final apprenticeship examination certificate is based on the possibility of being able to take the final apprenticeship examination in two parts (BAG § 23 Para. 11):

1. The first part consists of a verification of the achieved qualifications in consultation with a member of the board.
2. In the second part, any missing qualification components are examined by an examining board, via a practical examination.

Overall, this process must cover all parts of the practical examination.

This provision is aimed particularly at people who (1) have no vocational qualification, (2) no longer practice their originally learned occupation and (3) come from a migrant background with a vocational qualification that is not recognized in Austria. It is a legal pre-requisite that the person is at least 22 years old.

In contrast to the exceptional admission to the final apprenticeship examination, the process here is intended to be individualized, which means that it should be built around already existing vocational competences. Proof of vocational skills is produced via a validation process in the form of portfolio building. If all the vocationally relevant skills and knowledge can be fully demonstrated, the candidate is awarded a final apprenticeship examination certificate without having to have taken the final apprenticeship examination in the traditional setting.

Typically, a model validation process would ideally be divided into six steps (Eichbauer 2012; also for a more detailed description see Bauer 2008; Firmenausbildungverbund Oberösterreich (Business Training Association of Upper Austria) 2012<sup>14</sup>):

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<sup>11</sup> BGBl. I No. 148/2011, date of the public announcement: 29.12.2011. However, the reader of this passage of legislation has to be well informed to recognize that this offers an alternative recognition procedure for apprenticeships: “Following the passing of educational measures within the context of projects to support the raising of qualification levels, which were positively agreed by the Federal Advisory Board on Apprenticeship with regard to the suitability of introducing participants to the final apprenticeship examination, the Apprenticeship Office can confirm that the practical examination of the final apprenticeship examination according to Para. 5 lit. a can be taken in two parts. In this case, the first part consists of a verification of the achieved qualifications by the Apprenticeship Office in consultation with a nominated board member according to § 22. In the second part, the candidate has to demonstrate competence to the examining board in those components missing from the qualifications. Overall, all parts of the practical examination must be covered. In order to take this form of the practical examination, the candidate must be at least 22 (BAG § 23 Para. 11)

<sup>12</sup> Chamber of Labour of Upper Austria, Chamber of Commerce of Upper Austria, Austrian Federation of Trade Unions, The Chamber of Agriculture of Upper Austria and The Federation of Austrian Industry

<sup>13</sup> [www.dukannstwas.at](http://www.dukannstwas.at) (accessed: 15.09.2014)

<sup>14</sup> Additional information about the current situation regarding implementation was received by telephone on 03.11.2014 from the organisation responsible for this project, the Business Training Association of Upper Austria (FAVOÖ).

1. Initial discussion: To start with, there is a compulsory initial discussion that covers the prospects of success and the requirements of the process. In Upper Austria, the introductory discussion is carried out by the project partners: the Chamber of Commerce, the Chamber of Labour and the Chamber of Agriculture. There are very low threshold requirements for access to this initial advice session. To reach the next stage the participants, via self-assessment, have to determine whether they already possess roughly half the knowledge and skills required for their particular occupational area, as well as demonstrating a basic level of German. If this program is not suitable for them, they are advised about alternative routes.
2. Portfolio building: The participants compile a portfolio of vocational competences with an emphasis on informally acquired competences. Here, portfolio building tools developed during the course of the project are used. The portfolio work takes place during three three-hour workshops with the support of portfolio trainers. The workshop groups consist of between eight and twelve participants. The outcome of this stage is a portfolio folder containing the candidate's self-assessment of the knowledge and skills required for their particular occupational area. The self-assessment is supported with a variety of forms of evidence (certificates, course attendance, etc.). When it is completed, the portfolio trainer delivers the folder to the examiners at the Apprenticeship Office.
3. First performance assessment (Quality check 1): The vocational competences which are presented in the portfolio are subsequently jointly evaluated and reviewed during a discussion with vocationally experienced assessors. As a framework of reference the training and examination regulations for the relevant occupation are used. If competences for the whole occupational area can be covered in this stage, then the final apprenticeship examination certificate will be awarded. If, however, not all the competences are covered, but the existence of at least 50 percent can be evidenced, then further, individualized additional training measures to cover the remaining competence areas are arranged.
4. Additional training: In relation to the competence requirements of the occupational area, an individualized training plan is negotiated to develop any vocational competences that are lacking. For example, this could take the form of completing courses, through the involvement of the vocational school, but also through the "extension" of vocational practice in a relevant workplace. Experience has shown that this aspect is the most difficult to implement because in some cases the participants have very specific additional training needs. Normally, relevant measures are put in place in conjunction with adult education establishments.
5. Second performance assessment (Quality check 2): An assessment takes place of the skills and competences that have not yet been demonstrated. The assessment takes the form of a discussion, as well as a practical task (a work sample), and is carried out in front of an apprenticeship examining board. In comparison to the final apprenticeship examination, the assessment methodology at the centre of this process is one that is appropriate for this target group, namely "more discussion and less examination".
6. Validation of the final apprenticeship examination: If the validation process is successful, the vocational competences are recognized via a final apprenticeship examination certificate awarded by the Apprenticeship Office. This certificate is no different from the one that is awarded to those following the normal apprenticeship route and leads to a formal, legally recognized vocational qualification.

Throughout the whole process the participants are provided with ongoing support and guidance appropriate to whichever stage they are at (Eichbauer 2012).

The experiences of this pilot project were overwhelmingly positive, meaning that it will be continued. Eichbauer (2012) provides feedback on the extraordinarily high motivation of the participants to engage in learning, as well as the high degree of existing, but informally gained, vocational competences. This has resulted in 100 completed portfolios being produced from 150 initial discussions in the pilot phase, and in the final analysis 72 new final apprenticeship examinations being achieved. 26 percent of participants are aged between 24 and 30, 35 percent between 31 and 40, and 39 percent are over 41. 69 percent of participants are male, and 26 percent do not have Austrian citizenship (Business Training Association of Upper Austria 2012).

However, there are still a number of challenges that need to be addressed, such as an improvement of the initial discussion, more individualized further training, as well as better coordination with the workplaces and the vocational schools.

In Austria this procedure is currently still in the development phase, and its scope is still relatively manageable. Above all, the provision is still regional in scope. Currently in Upper Austria (as at September 2014) only twelve vocational areas can be recognized in this way, although according to information gained via a telephone interview, this can be immediately extended if required. A further extension of the provision is planned, with social partners in particular advocating the implementation of this model of validation and recognition strategies throughout Austria. The federal states of Salzburg and Burgenland have already introduced this provision based on the Upper Austrian model. Moreover, Salzburg has an assessment agreement with Upper Austria, whereby Upper Austrian assessors are being employed in Salzburg. In addition, other federal states are expressing interest in the model.

#### 5.2.1.4 Entry requirements for regulated occupations

In Austria there are a number of regulated occupations whose practice is permitted only with proof of relevant occupational experience. Alongside regulated “professions” (e.g. doctors, lawyers, teachers in vocational schools), the access to a number of trades (including crafts) is also regulated via the *Gewerbeordnung*<sup>15</sup> (The Trade, Commerce and Industry Regulation Act). In order to be admitted into a regulated trade, a relevant certificate of competence must be produced. The certificate can be achieved via two routes:

- Each of the regulated occupations has its own regulations governing the certificate of competence (trade) or the master’s certificate (craft)<sup>16</sup>. The certificate of competence can normally be achieved by completing relevant vocational training, relevant practical training, as well as, if necessary, individual additional training or via a qualifying examination. The only admission criterion for the qualifying examination is that the candidate must be over 18 years of age. The examinations are conducted by the examination offices of the Chamber of Commerce. Since 2004, the examination for the certificate of

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<sup>15</sup> More information at [www.gewerbeordnung.at](http://www.gewerbeordnung.at) (accessed: 15.09.2014)

<sup>16</sup> § 18 GewO

competence and the master's certificate consist, with few exceptions, of five modules<sup>17</sup>. The modular training system offers many opportunities for accreditation.

- Via an individual certificate of competence<sup>18</sup>: In this case there is the possibility, using relevant evidence, to demonstrate the knowledge, skills and experiences required to carry out the trade. Assessment takes place by applying to the district administrative authorities. As a rule, the relevant evidence required takes the form of a portfolio (e.g. school reports, certificates, testimonials). If there is only evidence for part of the required skills, the authorities can restrict the performance of the relevant occupation to certain activities.

Within the trade regulations there are at the same time, therefore, depending on admissions prerequisites, several opportunities for the recognition of informal learning which take the form of vocational practice, the assessment of relevant vocational competences via an examination, and the production of proof of competence via alternative types of evidence.

The number of entrants for the master's certificate and the certificate of competence is relatively high. In 2012, 7.747 entered for the oral examination (Module 2) with a 74 percent success rate (Dornmayr and Nowak 2013).

#### 5.2.1.5 Collective agreements

Arrangements for collective agreements are also mentioned repeatedly in conjunction with the recognition of informal learning (cf. Presch, 2010; Schlögl and Sturm, 2005). The collective agreement<sup>19</sup> reached for workers in the non-university-based research sector can be cited as a typical example. The salary scheme grading is based on the quality of the work undertaken and is structured according to development stages that are reached via experience at work. However, the development stages can be reached more quickly by gaining work-based quality points. Quality points can be gained in the areas of work quality, task mobility, innovation, communication and cooperation, particular aptitudes and skills and further training, as well as the transfer of knowledge and skills.

The pay scale is not related to a certificate “[...] but to the individual worker's ability to put the qualifications and experiences they have gained directly into practice (Schlögl and Sturm, 2005: 5).

Further examples in this area are the collective agreement of the Austrian social economy<sup>20</sup> and the collective agreement for employees of the metal trade<sup>21</sup>. Here the pay scale is not related to qualifications but to the concrete occupational activities that are performed at the workplace (“Usage group”).

In Austria efforts are being made to develop models for the recognition of non-formal and informal competences and to explicitly embed them in collective agreements.

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<sup>17</sup> Module 1: Vocational practical examination; Module 2: Oral examination Module 3: Vocational written examination, Module 4: Training examination, Module 5: Entrepreneur examination.

<sup>18</sup> § 19 GewO

<sup>19</sup> Agreed between the Trade Union of Private Sector Employees, Print, Journalism and Paper and the Association for Austrian Research – non-profit making association for the promotion of non-university based research. Collective agreement in the version of 01.01.2014: [www.kollektivvertrag.at/kv/ausseruniversitaere-forschung-forschungs-kv-arb-ang](http://www.kollektivvertrag.at/kv/ausseruniversitaere-forschung-forschungs-kv-arb-ang) (accessed: 15.09.2014).

<sup>20</sup> [www.bags-kv.at](http://www.bags-kv.at) (accessed: 15.09.2014)

<sup>21</sup> [www.kollektivvertrag.at/kv/metallgewerbe-ang](http://www.kollektivvertrag.at/kv/metallgewerbe-ang) (accessed: 15.09.2014) in the version of 01.01.2014

Collective agreement regulations for the recognition of informally gained competences represent an important element for the group of people with low levels of formal qualification, particularly because in the workplace they are very hard to reach via the traditional means of career guidance and qualification upgrading (Kanelutti-Chilas 2014). Although this form of recognition does not lead to any kind of certification, it does mean that for employers, legally binding regulations on the basis of concrete work profiles can be created in respect of better remuneration. However, it is conceivable that in the future it will be possible to make greater use of the collective agreement grading as “evidence of competence” for possible recognition via portfolio procedures.

Considered critically, in the context of increased over-qualification in the workplace<sup>22</sup>, this could however have an overall disadvantageous effect on the workers (Presch 2010). A grading below the qualification level for a typical usage group could as a consequence lead to a devaluation of vocational qualifications; that is, to a reduction of their educational value. The employer would then only have to reward the qualifications that the employees are actually using (“used qualifications”).

#### 5.2.1.6 Recognition of foreign vocational qualifications

In Austria, people with foreign vocational qualifications are particularly often working below their qualification level (Gächter 2006; Huber, Nowotny and Bock-Schappelwein 2010). The reason for this can be attributed to a number of factors, such as the lack of recognition of qualifications gained abroad, problems in providing the necessary documentation, insufficient language skills to be able to exploit their qualifications in the job market, as well as the difficulty of establishing transferability as a result of training which is strongly country and system-based (Biffl et al. 2012: 11).

When considering the equivalence of foreign vocational qualifications with Austrian ones, it is less a question of the recognition of non-formally and informally developed competences but rather of a formal recognition of formal qualifications gained abroad<sup>23</sup>. The recognition of foreign educational and vocational qualifications in Austria is regulated by different legal sources and regulatory authorities. In addition, there is a confusing number of concepts that are used in practice, with different concepts referring to different areas of recognition.

The nostrification process (the process of granting recognition to educational qualifications gained abroad) entails establishing the equivalence of school certificates and leaving qualifications gained abroad (for example, the school leaving examination) by comparing them with Austrian school certificates and leaving qualifications, and is regulated in the SchUG. Nostrification has to be applied for at the Federal Ministry for Education and Women (BMBWF). To establish equivalence of school leaving certificates gained abroad, Austria has agreed a number of bilateral/multilateral contracts which lead to recognition without detailed examination of content. A total of 48 contracts have been agreed, primarily with European countries. A specialist department in the Federal Ministry for Knowledge, Research and Economic Affairs (BMWFV) is responsible for establishing the equivalence of foreign school leaving certificates.

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<sup>22</sup> According to the current PIAAC (Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies) study, 21 percent of employees in Austria are working below the level of their qualifications (Statistik Austria, 2013b).

<sup>23</sup> The content of this section as well as the figures are taken primarily from Biffl, Pfeffer & Skrivanek (2012), who provide a comprehensive overview of the current situation with regard to the recognition of foreign vocational qualifications in Austria.

The §27 BAG regulates the equivalence of vocational certificates with the Austrian final apprenticeship examination. Equivalence must be applied for at the BMWFW<sup>24</sup>. If the application is accepted it will result in one of the following outcomes: a full equivalence, admission to a shortened final apprenticeship examination, or exceptional admission to the final apprenticeship examination. In 2010, a total of 359 procedures were undertaken, of which 199 received full equivalence and 159 were admitted to a shortened final apprenticeship examination. Only one application was rejected. In addition, there are bilateral education agreements with Germany (395 examination certificates and 26 master craftsman examinations), Hungary (23 skilled worker examinations), and South Tyrol (77 final apprenticeship examinations); these make the equivalence procedure easier, but do not replace it.

Access to regulated occupations for certificates gained abroad is primarily regulated via the EU Directive 2005/36/EC, mainly in combination with national legislation. In the Regulated Professions Database<sup>25</sup> of the EU, 231 professions<sup>26</sup> are registered for Austria. For 2013, a total of 291 procedural decisions were considered, 238 of which had a positive outcome. Depending on the profession and the type of recognition, there is a wide network of jurisdiction that ranges from different ministries to professional organizations.

Because of the lack of transparency regarding official responsibility for the recognition of foreign vocational qualifications, a new website was set up in 2012 ([www.berufsanerkennung.at](http://www.berufsanerkennung.at)) to provide guidance for migrants, and in particular to direct them to the contact points (hereafter abbreviated to ASTs) for people with qualifications gained abroad as well as to consultation services for migrants. A closer look at how these ASTs work in practice shows that sometimes methodologically complex but non-binding competence audit procedures are being used (see Haberfellner and Gnadenberger, 2013: 122ff). For example, at the AST in Vienna a competence audit process is used that is specifically adapted to the migrant target group<sup>27</sup> (Seipel 2010). The aim of the audit is to help individuals to think about and clearly identify their own competences. The competence audit is a structured individualized coaching procedure that combines the coaching phase with the completion of independent tasks. The whole process is intended to take about nine hours.

Since 2008, the “Migrare – Centre for Migrants in Upper Austria” has also been using a competence profile on behalf of the AMS of Upper Austria, using the well-known CH-Q procedure. Experiences show that not only is there improved success at employment agencies but also that the completed competence profile offers an appropriate starting point for formal recognition procedures.

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<sup>24</sup> [www.bmfwf.gv.at/Berufsausbildung/InternationaleBerufsausbildung/Seiten/GleichhaltungeinerauslaendischenBerufsausbildungmitderoesterreichischenLehrabschlusspruefung.aspx](http://www.bmfwf.gv.at/Berufsausbildung/InternationaleBerufsausbildung/Seiten/GleichhaltungeinerauslaendischenBerufsausbildungmitderoesterreichischenLehrabschlusspruefung.aspx) (accessed: 24.09.2014)

<sup>25</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/internal\\_market/qualifications/regprof/index.cfm](http://ec.europa.eu/internal_market/qualifications/regprof/index.cfm) (accessed: 24.09.2014)

<sup>26</sup> These however have to be qualified, as specializations and closely related occupations are recorded separately.

<sup>27</sup> The competence audit procedure was developed by the Tirol Future Centre, but has now been made more widely available. The Vienna Employment Promotion Fund (WAFF), including the AST, has adopted this procedure and adapted it for specific target groups. As well as the migrant target group, it is also being used with people with low levels of formal qualification.



## 5.2.2 Non-binding procedures

### 5.2.2.1 Competence with system<sup>28</sup> (“Kompetenz mit System”)

The basic features of Competence with System (hereafter abbreviated to KmS) were established on behalf of the Labour Market Service (hereafter abbreviated to AMS) of Lower Austria from 2007, and were further developed by the AMS of Austria from 2009 (Weber, 2014). This program is aimed particularly at the group of people registered as unemployed who have successfully completed their compulsory schooling and relevant occupational experience and would like to formalize it with a certificate or an apprenticeship, or would like to be able to gain relevant occupational competences up to the level of the final apprentice examination (Weber, Putz and Stockhammer 2011). The model is intended to be aligned to the lifelong learning “life-phase orientation” strategy (Republic of Austria 2011), which means it should take account of the restrictions people face in terms of finance, time and personal circumstances. It is thereby intended to be particularly suitable for women with care responsibilities who at this phase in their lives experience particularly fragmented periods of education and employment, or who want to catch up on their formal vocational qualifications after returning to the job market.

The KmS consists of three modules per occupation that build on one another. The length of the individual modules can vary from between eight and 18 weeks (Weber 2014). A competence matrix has been developed for every occupation that is offered in the program, thus providing a framework for the modules. The competence matrix maps in a competence-oriented way the relevant training regulations of the corresponding occupation in line with the module scheme. The aim of this is to make each individual module “job-relevant”, which means that it can be independently utilized in the job market (Weber 2014).

Depending on the level of competences that have already been developed, this model allows a “lateral entry” to the individual modules. This possibility is targeted at people who have relevant vocational practice or experience in a particular vocational area or who have broken off their training. At the start of any module, an assessment of occupational competence is carried out in order to check whether the required level of occupational competence for the respective module can be demonstrated. “Lateral entry” on the basis of relevant occupational experience enables non-formal or informal competences to be recognized and then recorded on an appropriate certificate.

At the end of each module a competence check is carried out to assess the learning outcomes that are covered in the module. If this is successful the participants receive a certificate that records the competences that have been developed. On the certificate the relevant competences for a particular occupation are highlighted in colour on the competence matrix. The aim of this is to enable easy identification of which competences a person possesses within an occupational area. If all three modules are successfully completed the certificate highlights the whole competence matrix for that occupation. The certificate does not lead to any formal recognition of a completed apprenticeship but is intended for use primarily in the job market, as an indication of employability. At the present time no systematic studies are available to indicate how well these certificates have been accepted in the job market. At the same time the certificate is also intended to provide an indication of a person’s own competences.

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<sup>28</sup> This procedure was recently introduced as a case study in the context of the European inventory on the validation of non-formal and informal learning (European Commission, Cedefop, and ICF 2014).

An additional aim of this program is to successfully lead unemployed people to the final apprenticeship examination. After the successful completion of all three modules, the aim is to support those who have completed the program to apply for exceptional admission to the final apprenticeship examination so that they can also achieve formal recognition in the form of a final apprenticeship examination certificate.

At present this program is available for 14 apprenticeable occupations<sup>29</sup>, although there are ongoing plans to increase this provision (cf. for example, Adam 2014). By January 2014 a total of about 1.500 people had taken part in at least one module, of which 1.000 were women. As far as the age structure is concerned, there is a fairly even distribution of people who are younger than 25 and people who are between 25 and 45. A tenth of people are over 45 (Weber 2014: 3).

An evaluation shows overwhelmingly positive experiences with the KmS (Weber 2014: 3f). The flexible structure of the provision in the form of modularization offers a good basis for realizing the idea of the “second chance”<sup>30</sup>. The modular structure and the award of interim certificates are seen as a particular advantage. These lead to a transparency of the learning process and enhance the motivation of the participants. However, this provision provides huge challenges for the Labour Market Service (AMS). Particularly in rural areas it is difficult to organize relevant provision for a small number of potential participants. A long-term goal is to offer the KmS modules not only to people who are unemployed but also in a work-based learning format.

#### 5.2.2.2 KOMPAZ

The competence recognition system KOMPAZ<sup>31</sup> was founded at the municipal library of Linz Adult Education Institute (AEI). Under the title “competence profile”, KOMPAZ offers a procedure that is based on CH-Q<sup>32</sup>, a competence management procedure developed in Switzerland. The method involves procedures of both self and external assessment. The competence profile is a portfolio procedure with the aim of recognizing one’s own competences, reflecting on them and then subsequently managing them independently in relation to a career or occupation (Schildberger, 2010). This tool can be used for both personal as well as job-related orientation. The CH-Q competence profile is internationally certificated and quality-assured. Participants are supported by a CH-Q certified training program which can also be gained at the Linz AEI.

As part of the validation process four workshops are offered, each with different focuses, (initial assessment, development potential and competence audit, personal profile and action plan, implementation training and final reflection), and each facilitated by a trainer. In addition, individual tasks have to be completed, covering an estimated 20 hours. At the end a certificate is awarded that contains the individually compiled competence profile as well as a statement concerning the person’s ability to manage their own competence development. If requested a written evaluation from the trainer can also be included.

To support the individual competence management process Linz AEI have produced a competence profile folder (sub-divided into competence profile, certificates, applications, notes.) It can be used for example to produce a CV which can be referred to specifically to support future applications (Reumann 2012).

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<sup>29</sup> Situation as at March 2014. For example, retail salesman/woman; office clerk; cook; metalworker.

<sup>30</sup> In Austria the process of catching up on qualifications at a later date is normally referred to as the “second education path” (second-chance education).

<sup>31</sup> [www.kompetenzprofil.at](http://www.kompetenzprofil.at) (accessed: 17.09.2014)

<sup>32</sup> See [www.ch-q.ch](http://www.ch-q.ch) (accessed: 17.09.2014)

In addition, there is also the possibility of taking part in a one-day assessment centre event, in which social and communicative competences are assessed.

So far since its foundation about 1.500 certificates have been awarded. An evaluation shows very positive individual effects in the areas of “awareness of one’s own competences”, “relevance for the job market” and “competence transferability and the communication of competences” (Auer, Beyrl, and Öhlmann 2007).

The aim for the future is to promote the Austrian-wide expansion of this provision and to network more strongly with the various national and international providers of competence assessment procedures.

### 5.2.2.3 Evidence of competence in voluntary work

Undertaking voluntary work is considered particularly important for the informal acquisition of competences in the context of lifelong learning. In addition, volunteering is being increasingly combined with participation in non-formal initial and continuing training (Kellner 2005). According to the 2006 micro census, around 44 percent of all Austrians had been involved in voluntary work. Moreover, a company survey showed that the skills and knowledge gained while volunteering were also useful in working life and helpful in job applications (More-Hollerweger and Heimgartner 2009: 83).

Motivated by these considerations, the voluntary work portfolio<sup>33</sup> was developed by the Federal Ministry for Social Security, Generations and Consumer Protection (BMSG<sup>34</sup>). The portfolio is a key component of the volunteer pass. Completion of a form with an online help function systematically supports the identification of skills and competences gained in the process of undertaking voluntary work, with an emphasis on key skills (enthusiasm, teamwork, commitment etc.), as well as providing a record of completed training.

A further example is the competence portfolio for volunteers of the Association of Austrian Educational Institutions<sup>35</sup>, which aims to systematically record, evaluate and document the competences gained while undertaking voluntary work (Kellner 2005). The aim of the competence portfolio is to record the acquired competences and to support the individual’s further development and re-orientation in relation to the labour market and job applications in a focused way.

The compilation of the competence portfolio takes place during a multi-phase supported self-assessment process. In essence, the portfolio is compiled in a one-to-one competence-based discussion lasting about one and a half hours. If desired, this process can also take the form of a competence workshop with several participants. In this case, a qualified portfolio development coach guides the participants through the process. Using a structured conversation, the portfolio is compiled and evaluated together in a systematic way. Each participant then completes the final compilation individually, if necessary in consultation with the coach. The competence portfolio consists of three parts: (1) a personal competence profile: in this part technical and methodological, social and communicative, and personal competences are identified and categorized; (2) a work activity profile: in this section participants describe the activities they have been involved in and what they have learnt from them; (3) an action plan: here planned follow-up action points are recorded.

Overall, the competence portfolio should consist of between six to eight pages. The total amount of time taken to compile the portfolio should be up to nine hours for the participants and three hours for the coaches.

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<sup>33</sup> [www.freiwilligenweb.at](http://www.freiwilligenweb.at) (accessed: 17.09.2014)

<sup>34</sup> Today: Federal Ministry for Work, Social Affairs and Consumer Protection (BMASK)

<sup>35</sup> For more detailed information see: [www.kompetenz-portfolio.at](http://www.kompetenz-portfolio.at) (accessed: 17.09.2014)

In order to systematically support the job application process, an appendix can be added specifically identifying competences related to person specifications for jobs. However, experience has shown that this instrument is more often used for individual self-reflection and less often to support the application process (More-Hollerweger and Heimgartner 2009).

#### 5.2.2.4 The certification of the competences of individuals

When certifying the competences of individuals, a fundamental distinction can be made between certification on a legal basis and certification without a legal basis (market-based).

The most significant certification on a legal basis is guided by the standard ÖNORM EN ISO/IEC 17024. In order to be able to grant personal certificates according to this standard, the awarding authorities have to apply for accreditation authorization from “Akkreditierung Austria”<sup>36</sup>. Currently 17 accreditation authorizations<sup>37</sup> have been granted, conferring the right to issue personal certificates. Personal certification plays a particularly important role for welders and quality management personnel. However, a steady increase in certification is being seen. Admission to the examination to gain the certificate is based on the production of evidence of relevant vocational competences. Evidence can take different forms and can refer both to formal and non-formal training processes (long or short courses) as well as informal ones (with appropriate evidence). Currently there is no complete overview of all areas of personal certification, nor of the volume of use.

There is also a range of additional market-based certification, particularly in the areas of information technology<sup>38</sup>, languages<sup>39</sup> and project management.

Normally personal certification is time-limited and therefore has to be regularly renewed via re-certification. In the opinion of experts, personal certification is only of significance when used as additional training to supplement a solid vocational training base (Schneeberger et al. 2007).

### 5.2.3 Acceptance and relevance for the target group

In respect of the processes presented for the binding recognition of non-formal and informal vocationally relevant competences, only those for the “exceptional” attainment of a final apprenticeship examination are of relevance for the group of people with low levels of formal qualification. In practice, the admissions processes to regulated trades are only of significance to people in exceptional circumstances; that is to say they are not aimed specifically at this target group.

On the other hand, the implicit recognition of non-formal and informal competences via collective agreement classification does not lead to a legally recognized qualification.

Exceptional admission only leads to binding admission to the examination, without candidates needing to have fully completed the formal training. In the course of the examination the candidates are tested on their practical and theoretical knowledge of vocationally relevant knowledge and skills. Although the examination statistics show a slightly lower success rate for exceptional admission

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<sup>36</sup> “Akkreditierung Austria” is located in the Federal Ministry for Knowledge, Research and Economic Affairs.

<sup>37</sup> As at: June 2014. The list of accredited personal certification centres can be seen under: [www.bmwfw.gv.at/TechnikUndVermessung/Akkreditierung/Seiten/AkkreditiertePIZ-Stellen.aspx](http://www.bmwfw.gv.at/TechnikUndVermessung/Akkreditierung/Seiten/AkkreditiertePIZ-Stellen.aspx) (accessed: 16.09.2014)

<sup>38</sup> For example, the European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL), as well as many others and particularly applied certification.

<sup>39</sup> Cambridge, IELTS, TOEFL and many others.

candidates, there have been no studies on the “deterrent effect” of this traditional, formalized examination procedure. In particular, the prospect of having to pass a theoretical paper could well deter many people from applying to take the examination.

This is where the AMS model KmS comes into its own: based on an occupational profile, it offers a supported, modularized program right up to the final apprenticeship examination. Even if the final goal is the attainment of a final apprenticeship certificate, the process is oriented towards the potential of the individual, focusing on existing competences with a combination of evaluation, support and working towards a qualification. Occupationally relevant competences are listed on a certificate without being part of the final apprenticeship examination. At the same time, the people themselves are able to see which competences they possess. However, it remains to be seen whether such certificates will be recognized on the labour market. Through the modularized structure and the mix of evaluation, advice and working towards a qualification, it can be assumed that KmS corresponds well to the life situation and needs of the group of people with low levels of formal qualification.

The recently created opportunity for the recognition of vocationally and occupationally relevant competences within the framework of the project “Du kannst was!” (*You do have skills!*) was specifically designed for the group of people with low levels of formal qualification. In place of the traditional examination format, portfolio methods and performance observations by specially trained trainers are used. These innovative assessment settings are very different from the traditional examination situation of the final apprenticeship examination in front of a panel. Initial experiences show that they have been well-received by the group of people with low levels of formal qualification. In order for this model to be further developed, however, it is necessary to critically evaluate the procedure of performance observation. In addition, quality assurance methods need to be established. However, this approach does seem to offer considerable potential to establish a well-known procedure for the recognition of non-formal and informal vocationally and occupationally relevant competences, particularly for those who have low levels of formal qualification.

The significance of the many non-binding procedures can be considered to be of little value for them. Such certificates can only be considered as relevant in the job market in combination with a sound vocational training base. To this extent, such procedures should best be seen as complementary to those which lead to a vocational qualification.

### **5.3 Financing of accreditation procedures**

Regulations regarding funding can often represent a decisive incentive for a person to take up learning opportunities (Kuwon 2005: 25). This aspect is particularly significant for people with low levels of formal qualification, who are normally employed in low-pay sectors, as well as being hit by regular periods of unemployment. The funding aspect is normally a central criterion in the decision as to whether or not to participate in educational offers.

### 5.3.1 Publicly-funded procedures

Just as there is no over-arching recognition system, there is also no comprehensive public system for the funding of recognition, but rather a number of sources of funding that are not transparent and in terms of procedures differ considerably from one another. Essential public funds come from resources from different federal ministries, European Social Funds (hereafter ESF) the Austrian Labour Market Service as well as regional federal state governments<sup>40</sup> (Brandstetter and Luomi-Messerer 2010). Those who are employed can also apply for an education voucher from the Austrian Chamber of Labour.

Public funding is available for those procedures that are linked to central educational policy issues, such as the “Nachholen” (resumption at a later stage) of a school-leaving certificate or an apprenticeship qualification (via exceptional admission to the final apprenticeship examination or the validation of vocational competences in the form of an apprenticeship qualification). Offers to resume studying for a school-leaving certificate are funded by resources from the BMBF, with co-funding from the federal states. Here the costs of accredited training providers are directly reimbursed.

The costs of the “Kompetenz mit System” provision are met by the Labour Market Service.

Educational advisory services offered by the network Austrian Education Advice Service (“Bildungsberatung Österreich”) are fully funded from the resources of the BMBF and co-funding of the ESF. However, there are no public funding sources available for the general support of commercial recognition processes.

### 5.3.2 Free-of-charge procedures

Most procedures belong to the “free of charge” category, even if in the course of some procedures additional costs are incurred (examination fees, possible preparatory courses, etc.).

Recognition procedures in the context of the completion of the school-leaving certificate at a later stage are free for the participants. Here the total provision is funded by the BMBF and the federal states.

There are two basic ways of gaining access for the recognition of non-formal and informal competences in the form of the attainment of a final apprenticeship examination, and they are linked with slightly different costs. Recognition via exceptional admission to the final apprenticeship examination via the Chamber of Commerce is free of charge; that is, the recognition takes the form of entry to the final apprenticeship examination, where non-formal and informal competences rather than the period of the apprenticeship are recognized as entitlement to access the examination. For the examination itself, however, there is a fee of 96 Euro, as well as costs for materials. These vary according to the occupational area and the federal state. Generally, however, they are under 100 Euro. To prepare for the final apprenticeship examination there are a range of courses available which, depending on the scope of the course and its provider, can incur considerable costs. The range of the preparatory courses can extend from a preparation course that covers the whole occupational area to a few specialist courses.

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<sup>40</sup> For example in Vienna from the Vienna Employment Promotion Fund (WAFF).

The second possibility for attaining the final apprenticeship examination by recognizing vocationally and occupationally relevant competences is free of cost for the participants. The costs for the introductory advice session and the validation via workshops are covered by a regional host organization. For example, in Upper Austria the costs are borne by the state of Upper Austria.

The recognition regulations with regard to the entry requirements for regulated occupations are diverse, and accordingly incur different costs depending on the form they take. The official admission to a regulated occupation, in which context recognition of time spent undertaking vocational practice takes place, is free of cost. If there is an assessment of vocational competences in the context of a qualification examination, then there is an examination fee for three modules (347 Euro), the trainer examination (96 Euro) and the entrepreneur examination (287 Euro)<sup>41</sup>.

In the case of the provision of an individual certificate of competence, there is a cost of 14,30 Euros (plus 3,90 Euro per page), as well as 59,50 Euro for a positive assessment decision.

Fees (up to 250 Euro) usually have to be paid for the recognition of foreign school-leaving certificates, as well as for written documents. Further costs are incurred for authentications, translations and possible supplementary examinations (e.g. final apprenticeship examination).

The provision of the recording of competence certificates in voluntary work is also free of charge for the participants. With the volunteer pass, relevant forms, documents and help with completion either online or by post are available. The target group is therefore to a great extent left to their own devices. Participation in the development of a competence portfolio for volunteers, including support, is free of charge.

### **5.3.3 Commercial procedures**

Generally the certification of competence for individuals is a commercial procedure which has to be paid for by the participants themselves. Depending on the area of certification, this could incur considerable costs.

A further example is the competence profile procedure of KOMPAZ. Each series of workshops costs 195 Euro, plus a fee of 50 Euro for a results summary, and 35 Euro for the certificate.

### **5.3.4 Acceptance and impact for the target group**

Direct costs of competence assessments are manageable. However, considerable costs can be incurred by models which include support measures and possible qualifying examinations. Given the high labour market policy priority, there are numerous sources of funding available for people to resume their study for a final apprenticeship examination. In a period of unemployment the Labour Market Service will generally meet the full costs. In addition, there are regional sources of funding available for those that want to resume the completion of an apprenticeship.

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<sup>41</sup> As at 2014. Depending on the specialism, however, there can be slight variations in costs.

## 5.4 Institutionalisation

Currently in Austria there is no recognized, agreed institutionalization of the procedure of the recognition of non-formal and informal competences at a national level. Although there are a number of different mechanisms for recognizing non-formal and informal learning, accessibility and relevance differs according to the individual situation. The corresponding procedures and possibilities are generally not well-known and as such have either not attracted much attention, or their potential has only recently begun to be acknowledged. Yet recognition of non-formal and informal competences in the admission to regulated occupations has already been an implicit part of the admission procedure for years. In addition, the exceptional admission to the final apprenticeship examination has also been a component of the training system for many years.

The Republic of Austria's lifelong learning strategy, which supports its educational policy, and regional labour market-oriented qualification strategies, such as the Vienna 2020 qualification plan, do develop the vision of a comprehensive "visibility and recognition of informally and non-formally acquired competences" (Republic of Austria 2011) and the establishment of "a system for the recognition of informally and non-formally acquired competences" (Adam 2014). However, current initiatives and projects still have a considerable tendency to attach themselves to mechanisms that already exist.

Particularly in the context of an activating labour market policy, the potential of these recognition possibilities was recently recognized via the Labour Market Service. It is true that recognition procedures have already been implemented for years as an implicit component of modularized qualification models, for example in the Vocational Training Centre for Building and Wood Trades and Automation Technology (Prüwasser 2000); what is new, however, are attempts to bring such models (e.g. KmS) from a regional to a federal level. In this sense, the Labour Market Service is promoting at least a partial institutionalization in the labour market sphere; however, this is always with the aim of securing an active job placement. Alongside an increased placement rate, the Labour Market Service hopes to achieve a more efficient use of resources (participants no longer have to plough their way through all the requirements of a full qualification) and a shorter time spent on expensive measures.

A further partial institutionalization in the recognition sphere was achieved in 2013 with the establishment of drop-in centres (ASTs) for people with qualifications gained abroad. These act as contact points, and if needed they support people with the formal recognition of overseas qualifications. Sometimes, within the context of this process, competence assessment processes that are adapted to the target group are developed and implemented.

It is difficult to provide a general evaluation of the quality standards of the current procedures as they fall into the area of responsibility of many different institutions and establishments. Due to the diversity of the procedures, there are no over-arching standards for quality assurance. The examination administration for the final apprenticeship examination is aligned to the BAG, but in practice it often falls into the sphere of responsibility of the social partnership. The quality of the examination administration for apprenticeship training is currently under scrutiny; at least here there seems to be the potential for a quality development (Dornmayr et al. 2013). The step towards the professionalization and development of quality standards for the recognition of vocationally relevant learning outcomes has not yet been made explicit at its current state of development, and is still subject to informal social partnership agreements. For a successful Austria-wide implementation this step towards professionalization seems to be unavoidable. The quality assurance of "Kompetenz mit System" is



entirely subject to the AMS, who during the tender process demand corresponding standards (organization, training, trainers etc.) from the training providers.

Procedures that are based on the CH-Q procedure are as a rule correspondingly CH-Q certified. The Adult Education Institute in Linz offers, within the framework of KOMPAZ, a certified training program for trainers. In the context of the Competence Portfolio for Volunteers project, a training program for portfolio-building coaches is also offered.

#### **5.4.1 Acceptance and relevance for the target group**

A general institutionalization of recognition procedures is still not discernible in Austria, although in some areas a partial institutionalization is apparent. Opportunities on the labour market are primarily determined by educational qualifications. From the perspective of the people with low levels of formal qualification, those procedures which lead to a formal recognition on the labour market are therefore of particular relevance.

In this area it is primarily the AMS which is promoting institutionalization. An example of this is the number of exceptional admissions to the final apprenticeship examination, which has almost doubled since 2003 (Dornmayr and Nowak, 2013). This development must be attributed, amongst other things, to the heightened activity of the AMS. However, the AMS is focused on finding job placements for unemployed people. An opening up of this model for those in work could signify a further step towards institutionalization.

There is also a lot of potential in the planned expansion of the model “Du kannst was!” which is also supported by social partnerships. However, there are still many labour market and educational policy coordination measures required here, along with a development process, in order to clarify responsibilities and establish quality assurance standards.

### **5.5 Support structures**

In Austria, as a result of the low level of institutionalization there is not a very distinctive recognition culture in the strict sense of the word. Even if, in the broader sense, traditional procedures, which include the elements of a recognition of non-formal and informal learning, have a very high significance in the vocational education area in terms of the volume of their uptake. It is expected that in the future the demand for exceptional admission to the final apprenticeship examination will continue to increase. At the same time, it is clear that this procedure demonstrates the relatively low level of awareness the public have of the potential of such possibilities, which for the most part are only recognized in connection with problem situations on the labour market (unemployment, pay gradings in collective agreements, in promotion opportunities etc.).

In relation to the pillars of information and guidance, there are numerous offerings available in Austria, although as far as guidance is concerned a distinction has to be made between guidance which is not related to specific provision and guidance related to a specific course.

In this context, a central role is being played by the “Austrian Educational Guidance Service”, which was initially set up in 2007 and has been constantly expanding. The main aim of the Austrian Educational Guidance Service is to provide an independent system for educational information and guidance. Educational guidance networks based in the federal states are intended to be a first point of contact for people with questions about vocational initial and further training. After the initial contact, when necessary, interested people will be referred on to appropriate specialist establishments. In this way, the Austrian Educational Guidance Service acts as a “signposting function” for vocational

initial and further training. In total, some 40 establishments providing guidance belong to the Austrian Educational Guidance network.

Via the establishment of quality standards and network activity the professionalization of guidance services is being expedited. In 2013, a total of 50.000 guidance contacts were documented, of which a considerable number can be associated with themes which, in the broadest sense, seem to be related to the recognition of non-formal and informal learning: the resumption of school-leaving certificates (17 percent), individual competences (8 percent), and international issues (4 percent) (Schlögl, Imer and Lachmayr, 2014). This data shows a general need for information and guidance services, as well as the fact that this is also being met by relevant provision.

Within the framework of the Austrian Educational Guidance Service guidance processes are being implemented which to some extent contain elements of a development-oriented identification of competences (e.g. competence + guidance: Brandstetter and Kellner 2014).

There are additional establishments that offer information and guidance, but which are normally linked to specific target groups, procedures and organizations<sup>42</sup>:

- Labour Market Service (AMS): An element of re-integration via the AMS occurs mainly at the appropriate “clearing phases” for the target groups, which are intended to offer on the one hand vocational guidance, and on the other recognition of the individual’s own vocational abilities. In some programs, information and advice phases are also an integral component of the qualification model (for example KMS). In addition, the AMS also operates extensive information portals and establishments in the areas of vocational information and further training. For example, throughout Austria there are 67 Vocational Info Centres (BIZ) which have just been provided with an IBOBB certificate (Information, guidance and orientation for education and careers).
- Contact points (drop-in centres) for migrants: The contact points (ASTs) provide a service targeted specifically at migrants who have qualifications gained abroad. This specialized guidance and information service was first established in 2013 with funding from the Federal Ministry for Labour, Social Affairs and Consumer Protection. Throughout Austria there are five ASTs. A central part of their offering includes, among other things, a free guidance session about recognition, a review of recognition possibilities, information about educational and guidance possibilities, and if necessary, guidance on the whole recognition procedure. In practice, formative competence assessment procedures are already being partially integrated into the guidance procedure. The multilingual information portal [www.berufsanerkennung.at](http://www.berufsanerkennung.at) provides a guidance service whose aim is to “pilot” interested migrants to the correct places.
- Educational providers: Large educational establishments normally also offer guidance provision. However, this provision is not always free of charge and usually steers people very strongly towards following provision delivered by the provider.

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<sup>42</sup> An overview of providers in the area of educational and vocational information can be found, for example, at: [www.bildungundberuf.at](http://www.bildungundberuf.at) (accessed: 02.10.2014).

### 5.5.1 Acceptance and relevance for the target group

People with low levels of formal qualification in employment are considered to be a “hard-to-reach target group” (Kanelutti-Chilas 2014) who have difficulty in accessing information and guidance; contact possibilities are provided via the AMS at the unemployment stage, making AMS an important dispenser of information and guidance.

However, in Austria there has been success in establishing a demand-oriented provision of information and guidance services as part of the vocational education landscape. The documentation of guidance contacts shows that this provision is also taken up by the people with low levels of formal qualification, who are only slightly under-represented (Steiner, Pessl and Wagner 2013). However, there is no central contact point or information service that focuses specifically on recognition questions. In addition, the landscape also lacks mobile approaches to the provision of information and guidance that workers with low levels of formal qualification could access in their everyday life.

## 6 Education policy positions on the validation of informally and non-formally acquired competences

The educational policy positions of the key players with regard to the recognition of non-formal and informal competences can basically be seen as positive. In addition to their inclusion in official documents, the positions of the different stakeholders are recorded and documented primarily within the context of the National Qualifications Framework (NQR) consultation process<sup>43</sup>. In this context, it should be noted that the establishment of recognition systems does not make any basic educational policy demands on the players, but rather “forces” them to some extent, as part of the development of the NQR and the LLL-strategy, to develop a position.

In the current government program of the federal government there is a vague commitment to the “extension of the generally valid certification possibilities of informal learning experiences and their consideration in the national qualifications framework” (*Government Program for the XXV. Legislative period 2013-2018*, 2013). In the current lifelong learning strategy, the area “procedures for the recognition of non-formally and informally achieved knowledge and competences in all educational sectors” is embedded in the strategy as a separate action point (Republic of Austria 2011). Here the goal that there should be comprehensive certification possibilities of learning outcomes acquired outside of educational establishments is clearly articulated. Furthermore, it is intended that these certificates will be transparently located within the National Qualifications Framework alongside formal qualifications. A further goal is the development of a comprehensive validation strategy and the implementation of standardized procedures.

In the NQR consultation paper the ambivalent position of the Austrian Federation of Trade Unions (ÖGB) towards the validation and recognition of non-formal and informal competences is clearly revealed. On the one hand, the Trade Union welcomes an increased transparency for informally and non-formally achieved learning outcomes. From the point of view of the workers this would lead to an improved collective agreement pay grading scale and to a potential extension of occupational

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<sup>43</sup> [www.bmbf.gv.at/schulen/euint/eubildung\\_nqr/nqr\\_sn.html](http://www.bmbf.gv.at/schulen/euint/eubildung_nqr/nqr_sn.html) (accessed: 30.09.2014)

protection. On the other hand, however, there is a fear that there could be an infiltration and deregulation of the formal vocational education system leading to the replacement of full qualifications by a string of numerous part qualifications.

The Bundesarbeiterkammer (Federal Chamber of Labour) adopts an analogous position, but is more strongly committed to an “identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning” as well as to a “standardization and more objective approach to the processes of accreditation and certification procedures”<sup>44</sup>. The Chamber of Labour supports the planned development of a “comprehensive validation strategy for informal and non-formal learning” as identified in the LLL strategy paper (Federal Chamber of Labour of Austria 2013).

The group representing employer interests supports a consistent learning outcomes orientation. Regardless of where a learning outcome was achieved, it has to be made visible and transparent to others via qualification certificates. “The relative value of qualification certificates should not be related to the place or type of learning but solely to the validation of the learning outcomes. It is not a question of where someone has learnt something but what he or she can demonstrably do” (Austrian Chamber of Commerce 2010: 15). In its position statement in response to the consultation paper, the Chamber of Commerce was rather sceptical about an extension of the validation and recognition of informal learning: “[...] the main question is whether, in addition to the existing qualifications which can now already be achieved via the recognition of informally achieved learning outcomes, new additional qualifications should be created specifically for this purpose.”

The Industriellenvereinigung (Federation of Austrian Industry) has already explicitly embedded the creation of a recognition system into their central educational policy demands relatively early on by means of (1) the improvement of the documentation of acquired competences (Education Pass) and (2) the extension of the recognition of informally acquired competences (Industriellenvereinigung, 2007). This standpoint has been recently reiterated, particularly in the context of the theme of integration under the demand of the promotion of professional qualifications through the recognition of informally and non-formally acquired competences” (Industriellenvereinigung, 2013: 28). Concretely, the Federation would like to see the extension of the “Du kannst was!” model as the standard procedure for the recognition of informal and non-formal competences.

In Austria the social partners<sup>45</sup> are key players in the regulatory process of the vocational education system<sup>46</sup>. In the latest paper “Educational foundations” it is emphasized that in the context of the EU recommendation for validation and recognition, a “common Austrian approach should be adopted, and innovative projects from the area of the dual training system (“Du kannst was!” – Upper Austria, and “Kompetenz mit System” from the AMS) should be put on a broader basis and extended to other educational areas” (Social partners 2013: 11-12). In stating this the social partner paper is not referring to a comprehensive validation strategy, but purely to a vocationally relevant recognition within the BAG.

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<sup>44</sup> See position statement of the Bundesarbeiterkammer (Federal Chamber of Labour) in the NQR consultation process.

<sup>45</sup> Consisting of: the Austrian Federation of Trade Unions, the Austrian Chamber of Labour, the Austrian Chamber of Commerce and the Austrian Chamber of Agriculture.

<sup>46</sup> The social partners are represented in the vocational education system at many levels: (1) at the steering level, through participation in a huge number of committees, for example the Vocational Education Advisory Council, and the Labour Market Service. (2) in the adult and further education and training sector, through large institutions of further education (3) many examination boards in the vocational education sphere (particularly apprenticeship training) have members nominated by social partnerships.

This short analysis of the educational policy positions of the stakeholders shows that while the main principles of the issue of the recognition of non-formal and informal competences are supported, no demand to implement comprehensive validation and recognition strategies has been formulated. Rather the prevailing position holds sway – according to the traditionally established social partnership agreement – that possibilities for recognition that already exist within already existing legal possibilities (especially of the BAG) should be better used and developed.

## 7 Summary and prospects

Differentiated according to the core elements, the situation of the recognition of non-formal and informal learning in Austria can be summarized as follows:

- In Austria there are several legal bases that contain the elements of a recognition of non-formal and informal learning. As an additional offering alongside exceptional admission, a legal possibility has recently been created which offers the opportunity for the development of recognition procedures of non-formal and informal vocationally relevant competences, thereby replacing the final apprenticeship examination, either wholly or in part. However, the law does not specify any relevant criteria for establishing these procedures (e.g. procedures for establishing competences, sequencing, guidance, advice, quality assurance, etc.). The approval of relevant procedures is the responsibility of the National Training Advisory Board (“Landesausbildungsbeirat”) at federal state level. Whether these legal possibilities for recognition are utilized is very strongly dependent on whether, at federal state level, they are successful in developing and establishing appropriate models for implementation (for example “Du kannst was!”). In addition, there is the possibility of a vocationally relevant certification of competences (KmS); however, at present this is only available to unemployed people and is restricted to only a few occupations. This certification is not legally binding. It remains to be seen whether this will result in a de-facto recognition of the certification of (partial) qualifications on the labour market.
- The procedures and instruments that are relevant for the people with low levels of formal qualification are dependent on the legal bases. Whereas exceptional admission is open for all occupations, the alternative model for the recognition of vocationally relevant competences is only available in those federal states that have a procedure linked to it (“Du kannst was!”). The first experiences with this model have been very positive; however, there still needs to be a thorough evaluation of the procedure, the instruments and methods employed, and the guidance procedure. Likewise it is still difficult at present to judge whether the various components of the model meet the needs and life situations of the potential target group.

The additional non-binding procedures employ some elaborate competence audit processes in part, but they might not be suitable to meet the needs of the group of people with low levels of formal qualification. The value of these non-binding certificates on the labour market is unclear. Moreover, these procedures are mainly used for self-reflection and as complementary, supporting evidence of a basic vocational training (e.g. for an application). Such non-binding certificates cannot replace a formal recognition of vocationally and occupationally relevant competences.

- The funding of recognition procedures is often the determining factor as to whether the provision is used by the target group. To cover the high cost of guidance and coaching that such procedures necessarily incur, considerable financial resources must be found. However, due to the high educational and labour market policy relevance in relation to the “Nachholen” (completion at a later stage) of apprenticeships and higher-level qualifications, considerable financial support is available. Hence the procedures “Du kannst was!” and KmS are completely supported from public funds. A further expansion of these procedures will essentially depend on the political financial will.
- In Austria a certain institutionalization is evident in some specific areas. In particular, the Labour Market Service as the key labour market policy stakeholder is driving forward with the development of validation procedures in combination with qualification models; however, this is always with the background of securing placements for unemployed people. A further step towards institutionalization could occur through the expansion of this offer to employed people as well. A partial institutionalization in the sphere of the recognition of foreign qualifications has come about through the recent establishment of drop-in centres, which offer support and guidance specifically targeted at migrants. In addition, the provision of the recognition of vocationally relevant competences in the context of “Du kannst was!” is steadily expanding. However, there is still a lot of development work to be done to achieve institutionalization of this provision on a national (federal-wide) level.

Nevertheless, there is at least an educational policy commitment, agreed by all the social partners, to extend this model to the national level, with a view to implementing the LLL strategy and the EU recommendation for validation and recognition.

- The establishment of the Austrian Education Guidance Service had already led to the creation of information and guidance provision for educational questions. In the framework of the Educational Guidance Network, numerous institutions offering guidance are available as initial points of contact to “pilot” those who are interested through the educational landscape. Moreover, in the context of the newer innovative models (KmS, Du kannst was!) the stages of clearing, advice and guidance are integral components. At the same time, however, it is clear that it is very hard to reach people with low levels of formal qualification who are in employment and inform them about current opportunities for further training. Here it is necessary to develop a relevant advice and guidance provision with outreach elements.

Although some starting points for recognition are in progress, a general institutional embedding of a recognition culture at the present time in Austria does not appear very likely. Despite the fact that there is a fundamental political desire for it to happen, the establishment of a recognition culture is a complex process. There are a number of challenges that have to be overcome. The question of formal responsibilities has to be addressed. Particularly in adult education, different opinions about who should have formal responsibility for which different areas are discussed time and again. Institutionalization would have to clearly regulate and control these formal responsibilities. The current situation is nowhere near this state of affairs.

In addition, in times of tight budgets there is a resource and funding problem. There is little hope that recognition procedures will reduce costs. The high cost of individualized learning and guidance makes recognition procedures particularly costly for the public purse.

Finally, there is the crucial question of whether Austria really has great need for validation and recognition procedures. Vocational education is deeply embedded in the Austrian education system. The problem of making the transition from education to the labour market in Austria is not at all pronounced in comparison to Germany and other European countries. Here there are many preventive support measures available to young people.

## 8 Case studies: Practical consequences of the core elements

### KIRA

#### *Legal Basis*

The legal bases offer Kira no opportunity to obtain certification for the competences she has acquired informally at work. For the areas in which Kira has worked up until now there are no relevant occupational areas within apprenticeship training. This means that the key pre-requisites for exceptional admission to a final apprenticeship examination or to a vocationally or occupationally relevant recognition procedure are not available. To complete a final apprenticeship examination she would have to choose another occupation and in addition attend a huge number of preparatory courses.

#### *Procedures and instruments*

Quite by chance Kira discovers the possibility via the KOMPAZ set-up of developing a competence profile where she can work on her own existing competences. With this provision she sees the opportunity to clarify what she can do and what she knows. Kira is unsure as to whether a certificate that records her ability in independent competence management will be of any help to her in finding a new job.

#### *Financing*

The provision of preparing a competence profile is inflexible in terms of location and time. The large number of workshops are time-consuming and would require her to leave home very early and stay overnight in the town. Given her care responsibilities, that would be very challenging for Kira, both time-wise and also financially. There is no funding available for travel, overnight accommodation or procedural costs.

#### *Support*

With the support of the AMS, Kira attends a course for vocational orientation and coaching, the aim of which is to help her decide which future career path she should pursue. Her coach makes her aware of the KOMPAZ provision but also discusses other possibilities for her to gain a vocational qualification. Kira also goes on the Internet to try and find further support in addition to the AMS. By searching for “training” and “guidance” she discovers some specialist advisory services. Via a telephone guidance interview she is referred to a training establishment where she is offered the opportunity of completing a training program as a care assistant that is specially targeted at people with relevant vocational experience. At the same time she is given advice about funding possibilities.

## **BASTIAN**

### *Legal basis*

Bastian has several options with regard to legal bases. On the basis of his work experience he fulfils the requirements for exceptional admission to the final apprenticeship examination as well as being able to claim recognition for occupationally relevant knowledge and skills for the career of “information technologist”. A further possibility for the recognition of informally acquired competences might be to take the master’s examination for the trade of mechatronic engineer for electronics, office and IT systems technology. With this examination Bastian would have the right to practice this trade as a self-employed person.

### *Procedures and instruments*

Bastian would like to be self-employed in the future, but decides that he would first like to gain more occupational experience and achieve a final apprenticeship examination qualification as an “information technologist”. On the basis of his previous negative exam experiences, Bastian would prefer to avoid a traditional exam situation. He is lucky: information technologist is one of 12 career paths available within the “Du kannst was!” framework. In the introductory guidance meeting it becomes clear that Bastian fulfils all the requirements, and that the provision would be ideal for him. He will not have to take an extensive exam, but can demonstrate what knowledge and skills he has so far acquired in the IT field in a workshop setting. He is familiar with such situations from his previous work experience, where he had dealt with problems as part of a team. When he has his quality check it is established that he lacks some occupationally relevant knowledge; however, Bastian is motivated to gain this via targeted further training. At the end his knowledge and skills are tested again in another quality check, with the results once again being positive. Bastian receives a full final apprenticeship certificate for the occupation of information technologist.

### *Financing*

The “Du kannst was!” provision is free of charge. The Labour Market Service (AMS) pays for the required further training course. The Labour Market Service is particularly interested in Bastian gaining an apprenticeship certificate because in this case he will already have the offer of a job from a company.

### *Support*

Bastian had not previously known that it was possible to gain an apprenticeship certificate without serving an apprenticeship. Only when he became unemployed did he discover that an apprenticeship certificate would significantly improve his job chances. His AMS adviser had discussed with him the possible ways of gaining an apprenticeship certificate. In the context of these discussions they also talked about the alternative provision “Kompetenz mit System”. The information technologist career path was also available through KmS. However, because Bastian no longer needed a full qualification and the KmS certificate did not lead to a binding recognition on the job market, he decided to take the “Du kannst was!” route.



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