



Case Study - Austria

YOU are able to do something

The case study is based on an analysis of relevant publications and an interview with Dr. Fritz Bauer from the Federal Chamber of Labour who is one of the initiators of the project described.

DU kannst was! (The approximate translation is 'YOU are able to do something!' or 'YOU have skills/competences!') is a pilot project for validation of professional competences acquired in informal and non-formal learning and is carried out in the province of Upper Austria. Participants can obtain certificates for the final apprenticeship examination in one of nine fields.

It is rooted in several processes: a discussion on education for persons with low qualifications in Upper Austria; European projects to validate competences acquired in informal or non-formal contexts; and information on other projects in the European context. These processes met the interests of employees' and employers' stakeholders to train unskilled workers and thus improve their chances on the labour market and, at the same time, meet the increasing need for skilled workers.

The project was initiated by the EB Forum (Erwachsenenbildungsforum Oberösterreich - Adult Education Forum Upper Austria) in a working group on validation of informal learning in 2005. The working group consisted of:

- Training institutions: bfi (Berufsförderungsinstitut, CVET provider institution of the Chamber of Labour and the Austrian Trade Union Association), LFI (Ländliches Fortbildungsinstitut, CVET provider for agriculture and forestry), VHS (Volkshochschulen, adult education centres), WIFI (Wirtschaftsförderungsinstitut, CVET provider institution of the Economic Chamber; Institute for Economic Promotion of the Austrian Federal Economic Chamber)
- Social partners: AK (Arbeiterkammer, Federal Chamber of Labour), IV (Industriellenvereinigung, Federation of Austrian Industry), LK (Landwirtschaftskammer, Austrian Chamber of Agriculture), ÖGB (Österreichischer Gewerkschaftsbund, Austrian Trade Union Federation), WK (Wirtschaftskammer, Economic Chamber)
- The provincial government of Upper Austria

Important for the project's success was coordination with the federal agencies of ÖGB and WK and the bm:we (Bundesministerium für Wirtschaft und Arbeit, Federal ministry of Economics and Labour) and, also, embedding the project in the BAG (Berufsausbildungsgesetz, Federal Training Act).

The working group decided to conduct a feasibility study and to develop a model for practice in a pre-project with financial support from the social partners and the provincial government. The FAV (Firmenausbildungsverband Oberösterreich, Business Training Network Upper Austria) organised the project. In June 2007, the provincial government approved the project proposal. The project seeks to develop and test a model for the validation of non-formal and informal learning for exemplary professions that is adapted to Upper Austrian and Austrian conditions.

It shall improve motivation and access to further education and training for persons with low qualifications in Upper Austria. Target groups are persons with low qualifications and immigrant adults. Participation is voluntary.

A first counselling session evaluates whether the applicant should take part in the project or can obtain his/her certification in another way. In Austria, there are preparation courses for final apprenticeship examinations, and the examinations can also be taken without any course when the applicant is able to prove that he/she has acquired relevant competences. Minimum age for applicants is 22 years.

The 'regular' apprenticeship in the dual system takes place under real working conditions in companies (Lehrbetriebe, training enterprises) and Berufsschulen (part-time vocational schools).

The programmes' duration is between two and four years; most programmes last three years. Apprentices take the final apprenticeship examination, which is carried out by a commission of professional practitioners. (Tritscher-Archan 2007, 20ff)

At the end of the pilot project, methods for validation will have been developed in nine professions that were chosen in cooperation with the AMS (Arbeitsmarktservice, Labour Market Service) Upper Austria: cooking, masonry, welding, gardening, metalwork, carpentry, IT, retail sales and gastronomy. Leaflets for two professions have been developed (http://www.ooe.wifi.at/ftp/DU_kannst_was_KOCH.pdf, http://www.ooe.wifi.at/ftp/DU_kannst_was_Schweisser.pdf). The methods will be tested with a small group of applicants. Funding is provided for 60–90 individual validation procedures.

Project phase

1. In Phase I, working structures and methods are developed.
2. Phase II is an interim evaluation, decisions for further proceedings are taken.
3. Model testing with 60–90 persons takes place in Phase III.
4. Phase IV is an overall evaluation with focuses on sustainability and transferability of the concept to other professions and provinces.

Counselling concepts and portfolios for 3–4 professions have already been prepared. The first portfolio processes started in March 2008. First validations will be conducted in the second half of 2008. The pilot project will be finished in spring/summer 2009, and there is a continuous evaluation by the University of Linz.

People

VNFL-IFL candidate(s)

47 persons (87% men, 13% women) started the qualification process in the first phase of the pilot project. 23% of the participants have an immigrant background. The biggest age group (38%) is the 31–40 year olds, 32% are 22–30 year olds, 26% are 41–50 year olds, and 4% are more than 50 years old.

VNFL-IFL advisers/staff: tutors:

The VNFL-IFL advisers are adult educators experienced in portfolio work. In some cases, they were involved in the portfolio development and then worked with the relevant professional group in the portfolio process.

The assessors/ evaluators:

The assessors are professional experts and have experience in assessment because they work as assessors in the Lehrabschlussprüfungskommission (Commission for the Final Apprenticeship Examination).

Assessors and advisers worked together in the elaboration of the portfolios for the respective professions. This was a complex process because these experts in adult education and professionals had to find a 'common language' that also corresponded to official job

descriptions and could be understood by the participants (non-skilled workers).

To sum up: The process

This is the process from the participants view:

- Information/acquisition of participants via target group specific communication channels (workers' union, chambers, persons responsible for personnel in companies)
- Access counselling: potential participants are informed on chances and requirements of the process and can decide if they want to take part.
- Personal portfolios are elaborated with focus on competences relevant for the chosen profession
- First performance check: competences made visible in the portfolio process are compared to those in the corresponding job profiles and examination regulations. The performance check results in a 'positive list' with proven competences and an 'open list' of competences that still must be acquired.
- Counselling on further education includes the development of an individual training plan to cover the competences in the 'open list'.
 - Compleitive education and training can be obtained in courses, cooperation with vocational schools for apprentices and with companies (for the acquisition of practical skills) are planned for the future.
- Counselling related to certification focuses on a discussion of the 'open list' of competences and information on the final performance check.
- Second performance check focuses on the competences in the 'open list'.
- Validation as skilled worker: The overall result of the validation process is regarded as equivalent with a regular apprenticeship certificate issued after passing the final apprenticeship examination. The person validated receives a Lehrabschlussprüfungszeugnis (certificate of apprenticeship).

The portfolio process is an interaction between applicants, portfolio-trainers and professionals.

There are three workshops (duration: three hours each) with 8-12 participants from one profession. In the first workshop, participants are introduced to biography work and portfolio work, the second workshop focuses on the elaboration of a portfolio, clarification of further questions and the integration of a professional. In the third workshop, portfolios are finished and further steps are considered. Participants work on their portfolios between the workshops with the support of portfolio trainers.

Expert for performance checks are regular examiners for the final apprenticeship examination. They were also involved in the development of the portfolio material.

Portfolio trainers are practitioners in adult education, counselling or coaching, have experiences with portfolio processes and, if it is possible, professional competences in the respective sector.

There was a lack of trainers with this profile, so persons nominated by the project partners had to undergo a special training (two half-days) and can ask for coaching from experienced portfolio trainers.

Counsellors are recruited from the social partners' educational institutions. Counselling and compleitive education and training are strictly separated. A uniform counselling concept was elaborated for the initial counselling.

The apprenticeship office validates the competences and issues the apprenticeship certificate. For the process management, it has already been shown that more resources are necessary than as planned in the original concept of the project. The need to concentrate the integrated process on a single organisation with a clearly defined leading role is regarded as essential for a large-scale implementation of the process.

The good cooperation between social partners in Upper Austria and their good will are seen as

decisive factors for the success of the pilot project. Legal mandates and clear rules are also necessary for large-scale implementation.

The process is conceived to meet the common European principles for accreditation and validation of non-formal and informal learning.

Status quo of the project (July 2008)

Portfolios for the first professions (welding, gardening, metalwork, cooking, and masonry) were elaborated in cooperation with advisers and assessors. Based on these experiences, the elaboration of the portfolios for the other professions should each take about a week.

For each profession, 8–12 persons were chosen for the project. The organiser was contacted by 130 people wanting to participate; some had to wait for the second phase with the other four professions. This number was remarkable because there was no large-scale media campaign;

People were simply informed by the worker's union, chambers and persons responsible for the personnel in companies. Counselling took place mostly with the counsellors from the workers' chambers. People were chosen who had several years of professional experience and only a few knowledge gaps that could be filled within the project's lifetime. This first decision was based on the counsellors' judgement and experience although only the portfolio and assessment process can show a comprehensive picture of a participant's competences.

All groups have finished the first portfolio phase; four of the five groups have also finished the first performance check. In one case, a participant found out after the first portfolio and competence check that he had all competences needed for his profession, organisers are considering exempting him from the rest of the project.

Now the project seeks to fill the knowledge gaps. In the pilot phase, this is strongly oriented towards the adult education institutions. Further education programmes in the relevant institution are partly modularised, so the participants could attend single modules. There could also be programmes with internal differentiation in courses, indoor-training in companies (this could be organised by the FAV - Firmenausbildungsverband Oberösterreich, Business Training Network Upper Austria) or individual coaching. Experience has shown that participants have a broad professional knowledge but often lack basics from school.

The pilot project has funding for the portfolio process for around 100 persons. To minimize the costs for participants, the project organisation is also considering ways to get grants for the participants further education within the programme.

The first phase for the portfolios in five professions should finish at the end of 2008.

The project is based on stakeholders' goodwill. For example, no legal basis exists for the apprenticeship office (Lehrlingsstelle, official agency for the apprenticeship) to recognise and validate the results of the competence checks and issue the official certificate. Thus, validations depend on confidence and trust.

Future perspectives

At the moment, all sides cooperate because they want the project to succeed. Nevertheless, if the measure is implemented on a large scale, there will probably be competition between the educational institutions involved. Arrangements need to be made as to which of the educational institutions will conduct the portfolio processes and competence checks. Competence checks should probably take place at the FAV (Firmenausbildungsverband Oberösterreich, Business Training Network Upper Austria) because they are closely connected with the apprenticeship office.

Until now, participants of the project decided individually if they wanted to take part. In the future, another means of access could be from companies could be interested in having their workers' skills validated. Recently, a major Upper Austrian industrial firm asked for

cooperation to validate the competences of eight persons in the company. A third way to access the programme could be that the labour market service sends unemployed persons and pays the costs for their clients.

Resources

Bauer, Fritz (2008): DU kannst was! Perspektiven des oberösterreichischen Pilotprojekts zur Anerkennung informell und non-formal erworbener Kompetenzen für den Beruf. Online: http://www.bmukk.gv.at/medienpool/16313/nqr_konf08_bauer.pdf (22.08.2008)

Information zur Pressekonferenz mit Wirtschafts-Landesrat KommR Viktor Sigl, Land Oberösterreich, KommR Ing. Hermann Haslauer, Wirtschaftskammer OÖ, Dr. Fritz Bauer, Arbeiterkammer OÖ, Dr. Wilhelm Achleitner, Erwachsenenbildungs-Forum OÖ, am 17. September 2007 zum Thema: Hauptsache Arbeit: Pilotprojekt 'DU kannst was!' Online: http://www.ooe.gv.at/cps/rde/xbcr/SID-3DCFCFC3-12250F85/ooe/PK_Sigl_17.9.internet.pdf (22.08.2008)

Tritscher-Archan, Sabine (2007): Thematic Overview. The Austrian vocational education and training system. Online: http://www.refernet.at/_TCgi_Images/refernet/20080620163719_Thematic%20Overview%20-%202007.pdf (22.08.2008)