

Austria – Fachhochschule Burgenland

Institution	Fachhochschule Burgenland – University of Applied Sciences Burgenland - Austria
Study programs	We offer a range of bachelor, master and PhD programmes. We also offer bridging programmes and further education courses. For information please refer to our homepage: www.fh-burgenland.at .
Skills in German language	German language skills are necessary for admission for most study programs.
Study fees	There are no study fees at the Fachhochschule Burgenland for the bachelor and master courses. A fee may be applicable for other courses. Please refer to the particular course on our website.
Interviewed Person	Validation Professional, Barbara K-H.

Preparation

Mrs. Barbara Klabischnig-Hörl (use of real name was agreed with interviewee), MA, 51 years old, coaches refugees at Bildungsinformation Burgenland (BIB), an education counselling service financed by European Social Fund (ESF) and the federal state Burgenland. In the interview, Barbara and I tried to look at the questions from a refugees' perspective: She tried to give a summary of her view on refugees' experiences with validation.

Awareness

Barbara's clients show a wide range of awareness when they turn to her for advice. They have a high motivation to take any opportunity to "just get out of here" for a change because many of them have a lot of time at their hands and nourish a hope of achieving something – unless they are traumatised and demoralised.

Barbara encourages translators to spread the word about the service of education counselling to the refugees' community because they have a high credibility among their peers and act as "bridge personalities". The BIB team also present their services in German courses and leave their folders at the refugees' homes. There also exists a network of loosely organised volunteers, private people who take an individual initiative to coach a refugee, and who Barbara can contact via facebook groups and other social networks.

Many of her service's target group consider it their first priority to find a job. Those who seek education counselling show different levels of awareness of their capacities. For the less informed and aware clients, Barbara's team needs to provide basic descriptions of typical professions in Austria. Aspirants toward Higher Education, on the other hand, have very concrete and detailed questions, e.g. "Where can I take the entrance examination for XXX...?" She explains this phenomenon by the different cultures of self-reflective thinking and how they vary in each country. While many competence oriented validation approaches (like the German Profilpass) pertain to European standards, Arab citizens for example may not even know what the concept of "hobbies" or "leisure time" refers to – they consider leisure time as a luxury first-world problem.

Starting up

BIB's standard education counselling service is organised in one-to-one settings. In the initial interview, the counsellor collects data on the education biography and the client's educational ambitions. They prepare a report and recommendations to follow-up interviews

with partner institutions, training institutes. If required, a client can have multiple coaching sessions and get individual support for CV writing, job profiling, etc. One “case” may take up to 5-6 single sessions.

Barbara describes the atmosphere of the initial interview as very trustful and empathic. She meets her clients with respect and actively listens to them. She encourages them to tell the story of their life stations in a very personal style. This is called the biography-oriented approach and can be contrasted against the competence-oriented approach. Each initial interview takes about 2 – 2,5 hours.

The interviewer follows factual questions listed on a data entry form, but instead of filling in the form with the client, all the information is distilled out of a semi-structured biographical interview. The interview covers formal facts, like if there are certificates or degrees, but mainly focuses on the client's own interpretation of their experiences. As the refugees describe their experience in education and training, the interviewer would ask in-depth questions like “Why do you think you were successful at...”, “Are you good at ...?”, “Why did you change...?” and thereby elicit the client's deeply-rooted beliefs about their own capacities and personal interests. This indirect approach allows the interviewer to reconstruct the development and ripening of certain skills over time and in repeating situations from the client's own words. Barbara calls this “narrative method – use the stories to get to the notion”. She believes it captures a more realistic picture than a grid of competences that can hardly be adequately translated by the interpreter.

Most clients signal that they enjoy the initial counselling session and they feel at ease. There are some cases, however, when refugees are sceptical about the interviewer's note-taking, or they misinterpret the situation. One refugee was anxious if he was being questioned for the asylum-interview. Therefore, it is essential that the counsellors build trust by explaining the setting and what to expect in the counselling.

Documentation and support

In the BIB counselling sessions, validation and documentation are not the primary aims. Nevertheless, Barbara encourages her clients to collect photos of their workpieces at home, and ask their network of former colleagues to support them with such photos. This is a viable approach only for tangible results. She deplores the fact that refugees who have lost the documents of their educational stations have next to no chance to get them replaced (as it would require them to appear in person at their former university). The only possibility is, and only in case of loss of (primary or secondary) school (leaving) certificates, to apply for confirmation at the ministry of education – which could be granted under special circumstances.

As described earlier, the most viable counselling setting is one-to-one, following a biographical approach. Upon request, refugees are offered to participate in “competence workshops”. Barbara and her team have gone through trainings for a variety of internationally established competence and portfolio approaches. From her experience, it takes a homogenous group to work with these approaches. The small number of refugees in Burgenland with the required language skills in German or English makes it very unrealistic to establish such a group.

The most important problem is that A1 and A2 language skills do not suffice to reflect on strengths and weaknesses in a group. Talking about personal information is possible only from B1 level onwards, because essential grammar forms like tenses and conjunctives can entirely change the meaning of an expression. Most of BIB's clients are not entitled to language courses of higher levels. Therefore, the only reasonable format is one-to-one counselling with the aid of an interpreter. Sometimes the client's peers or family accompany them.

If the refugees speak English, BIB counsellors sometimes do the Europass assessment with them. Not all of the clients have a laptop, so they are dependent on publicly available working stations where they can write their documentations. Sometimes volunteers offer help and a temporary computer workplace.

Assessment

The one-to-one interview described in section III can be characterised as an open assessment with no pre-judgment, addressing the specific needs of each coachee. It is considered as the most valuable and important assessment tool within the range of BIB's services. They actively try to be very transparent about the aims of the interview. The biographical approach, as described earlier, relies on a dialogue at eye level which is directed at finding out the individual's capacities and recommend further steps for (mainly) education or work activities.

BIB cooperates with interpreters who are native speakers of the respective language. This entails the problem that the ethnic constellation between interviewee and interpreter can massively influence the outcome of the interview. For example, some dialects are rejected because they remind the listener of an ethnicity who harmed their family in war. Bringing Afghan and Iran together in a conversation would require a high level of tolerance from both parties, because Afghans are seen as inferior ethnicity by Iranians. Barbara has to decide carefully how to organise each setting and how to handle intercultural issues like respect for female interpreters, or for dialects which signal a lower social standing. In one case, she overheard a conversation in an Arab dialect and wondered why the Somalian refugee continuously giggled. She then found out that while the interviewee spoke Modern Standard Arabic, a sign of good education, her Syrian interpreter spoke a less evolved dialect. The situation must have been ridiculous for both of them.

Barbara concluded that as an effect of these intercultural constellations and pre-judgments, there was always a risk that the interpreter would (consciously or not) give an interview the twist of their own cultural attitude. Two interviews conducted with different interpreters might bring two entirely different results.

Impact

The outcome of the BIB counselling is generally a document “translating” the client’s experiences and biographical stations into competences. The client can take this document to the next level of consulting, depending on their personal interest. BIB also provides contacts to more specific counselling institutions, like “Österreichische Hochschülerschaft (ÖH)” (Austrian Student Union), which most had not heard of before. They also give advice which documents to submit to the nostrification authorities.

Barbara’s team can only rarely follow up on the progress of their clients if they do not come back of their own account. Every client is offered further guidance free of charge if requested. She could give two examples of successful cases which she monitored over a longer period of time and several counselling sessions:

- 1) A young man aged 22 from Afghanistan wanted to become a cook. Barbara researched seven job offers for apprenticeships in the Northern Burgenland, offered her client a template for a job application and CV, and he was offered a computer workplace at a volunteer’s home. The employer invited him for an interview and he became an apprentice at the firm.
- 2) A refugee aged 38 had work experience with foodstuffs and had “worked with Americans”. His formal education was roughly at A-levels (Matura, in Austria), and his chances of getting asylum were low. His personal goal was to earn as much money as possible to send home to his family while he was waiting for his official declining letter. Barbara supported him by researching the legal options to take on a seasonal employment, a loophole which is not known to many counselling institutions. This information got the man a seasonal job for a limited time period, but with a respectable income.

96% of refugees registered in Burgenland move to the capital, Vienna, within a few weeks’ or months’ time from the initial interview, so the BIB loses track of them and cannot evaluate the success of their interventions. This may change as a new law will come into place in autumn 2017 which will oblige refugees not to leave an assigned place of residence.

SPECIAL SECTION ONLY FOR VALIDATION PROFESSIONALS**Job profile and training needs**

Barbara studied business administration and management and has a degree in andragogy. Before beginning her career as an education counsellor in 2012, she built many years of professional experience in HR development. Barbara has a genuine passion for her job. She specialised in biography-oriented approaches and identified empathy, language sensitivity and intercultural communication skills as the key success components of counselling refugees.

She strongly believes that those qualities cannot be “trained” but go along with an open mindset and awareness of intercultural contexts. She acknowledges that life experience and senior age earn the assessor a higher authority and credibility in the eyes of their clients. Didactics of encouragement and resource management influence the attitude of a counsellor in a positive way.

Aside from these very personal qualities, Barbara mentioned the crucial role of networking with policy makers and education institutions. She defines one of the main tasks of an education counselling expert to be constantly updating their knowledge on courses, training offers, legal framework, and policy issues. In her opinion, cooperation with existing networks and other counselling institutions is an important factor for successful validation and education counselling – although an open-minded non-judgmental approach towards refugees is not a matter of course in all institutions.

Practically speaking, the BIB team would welcome a larger variety of folders and handouts in the native languages of their clients.

Policy context

Barbara considers the political framework as rather hindering to inclusion of new citizens in higher education. If they have the duty to reside e.g. in the country Burgenland, and they only receive € 320,- primary provision by the regional government per month, they cannot afford to commute to Vienna University. A lot of courses cost money which refugees cannot afford. Although Barbara concedes there is positive development in the “Vorstudienlehrgänge” (pre-study preparation courses) offered by universities, she says newcomers can only enrol if they have B2+ language skills. However, they can get only free-of-charge access to A1 courses while A2 and B1 are not financed for them. There was also a problem with acceptance of the ÖSD (Austrian Language Diploma) certificate by Universities; while it was allegedly accepted by some Universities in 2015 and early 2016, it was later

stipulated that only courses held by the Austrian Integration Fund (ÖIF) can be accepted. This causes uncertainty among refugees and institutions.

Other positive factors are the MORE initiatives

<https://uniko.ac.at/projekte/more/index.php?lang=EN> and the Online Linguistic Support (OLS) courses by Erasmus+ <https://erasmusplusols.eu/ols4refugees/>.

At the time of the interview, my interviewee stated that she is not aware of the existence of any alternative methods of validation (other than formal confirmation of lost documents), and that it would be more than reasonable to find alternative methods: “Currently, people have to act as if they didn’t have any multiple-semester-studies, completed education, or qualifications acquired in some other ways – and thus can only work in jobs for which they are overqualified”.