

Austria – Fachhochschule Burgenland

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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.
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Interviewed Person	Omar, Asylum seeker from Afghanistan

Preparation

Mr. Omar Ahmadi (name was changed by request of interviewee), 22, lived most of his life in Kabul, Afghanistan, and came to Austria in August 2015, leaving his family behind. He was accommodated in the refugee camp of Traiskirchen in his first few weeks, and later got an accommodation in Vienna. Omar always wanted to study civil engineering or information technology, in his home country he closely missed the necessary points in his school leaving exam for this discipline. Instead, he completed a BA in business management in Kabul in 2014. He is preparing to enrol in information technology starting in autumn 2018; meanwhile, he has started the BA in business management at Vienna Economic University, to bridge this year. The interview was held in German, as he managed to acquire a skill level of B1/B2.

Awareness

Omar knew when he came to Austria that he was an exceptionally gifted student in mathematics, since he skipped two school years at grammar school (he attended it in Pakistan) and worked as a tutor to teach 18-year-old students when he was as young as 20 years old. He was aware from the arrival in his host country that his ability to establish relationships with people will help him to integrate. He describes himself as not caring about religion, philanthropy is what counts for him. He can get to know people easily and quickly, and he likes to assist others with advice and learning support. The first opportunity for him to make use of these abilities was his application for a German course, which he eventually got. Omar considers his ability to keep his money together and monitor his expenditures a major prerequisite for integration because he lives off € 5,50 a day. He also proved high motivation in searching for the relevant contacts at University (student point, Austrian Student Union (ÖH)). He received guidance there, but was not informed about validation opportunities. Working in Austria is not relevant for him at the moment because he has not had his asylum interview yet and thus is not allowed to work in this country.

Starting up

Since Omar could not refer to any specific “validation” situation, the interview focused on two aspects that could be seen as close to validation experience: in this section, the counselling at the student points is described. In section V, the portfolio activities in the German course of the University’s preparatory curriculum are addressed.

His first contact with an education counsellor was in his first weeks in the refugee camp. A volunteer talked to him and found that Omar's German skills were above average already before his first language training, so he advised him to take the qualifying examination for the A2 German course and thus skip the basic training. On successfully passing this exam, Omar was allowed to take his A2 course at the adult training centre. The qualifying exam was run in a respectful and trustful atmosphere.

Having acquired the "white card" (allowing the right to residence), Omar got access to the consultation services of Austrian Student Union and the university's study point. He went there personally for the first time with his initial questions and was told exactly what documentation of his prior learning experiences he needed to submit for assessment. At the second counselling session, he was informed that he could apply for a scholarship of up to €450,- per year. He learned later from an informal source that some other student from Afghanistan was not eligible for this scholarship because they were ranked by age, and this student was too old at 30 to qualify for a scholarship.

Documentation and support

Omar's documentation efforts were divided into 1) the collection of formal documents, for which he received counselling from the student point and the student union, and 2) the creation of a portfolio in the course of his German training at University's preparatory curriculum, although he does not consider the latter as important or relevant to his success in starting higher education.

1) By the aid of the written list he received from the two counselling stations, Omar was able to collect all formal documents that were required. He asked his family, who were at that time still in contact with him and living at their home in Kabul (they have lost track of each other since then), to send him the originals, and it was done without a problem. Omar says it is not typical of a student to be as well-organised as he is, and that he was glad he kept such a tidy system of documents, although he regrets he lost the evidence by the finance ministry in Kabul that proves his 3-month internship. For the 6 months during which he worked as a tutor in a school, he never got any official evidence, though he was never asked for it since he came to Austria. He had his BA certificate that was issued in Persian/Dari/Pashdu/English translated to German by an Iranian translator in Vienna.

Omar explained two difficulties with the acceptance of translated originals from Afghanistan in Austria. Firstly, documents in Afghanistan sometimes state the father's name instead of the family name. Secondly, there is often confusion about the birth date. In Afghanistan, during the past 40 years of constant war, nobody cares about when children are born. Omar's birthday is in September 1373, according to the Islamic calendar. The local authorities usually calculate "+621" and set this down in the translated document. However, they do it with varying accuracy, and since the cycle of months is also counted differently in

Islamic calendar, Omar's registered year of birth varies between 1994 to 1995, depending on the certificate-issuing authority. Austrian authorities get confused by this, but so far, Omar has always succeeded in explaining the situation to them.

2) When the interview came to informal validation of experiences, Omar said he never had it, but later mentioned a portfolio approach practised in his German course at University. It is described in Section V.

Assessment

He had not prepared anything because he thought he would just tell the counsellor his life story, and "one does not need to prepare for that".

Omar also witnessed a less pleasant experience that happened to his friend. The young man from Afghanistan came to the student point to submit all the required documents. When the counsellor, a girl from Iran, saw him enter the office, she sent him away brusquely, shouting "what are you doing here, I do not want to see you again". The interviewee mentioned this example to illustrate how intercultural conflicts and prejudice may thwart the outcome of counselling and validation. In this case, the young man waited until he got the written scholarship confirmation (with a new counsellor), then went the official path to complain at the customer service about the ill-usage he experienced.

Ad 2) In Omar's B2 German course at university, the teacher of German literature encouraged all international students (refugees, exchange students and migrants all in one) to join the buddy system that involves excursions to historical or recreational sites in Vienna and that is organised by local students. These excursions were the only chance for Omar to get to know the city and other people apart from his immediate surrounding at the refugees' home. He felt that the preparatory course delivered high didactical quality and stands above any other German course he attended before. In this course, all students had to create a "folder". They had to do several written tasks throughout the semester, like a description of their hobbies, a report of their excursions, a written self-presentation, and a reflection of differences they experienced in Austria vs. Afghanistan. They received a "KomPASS" certificate (see figure 1). This indicates a certain systematic competence oriented validation approach intended by the professor although this was not recognised as such by the student.

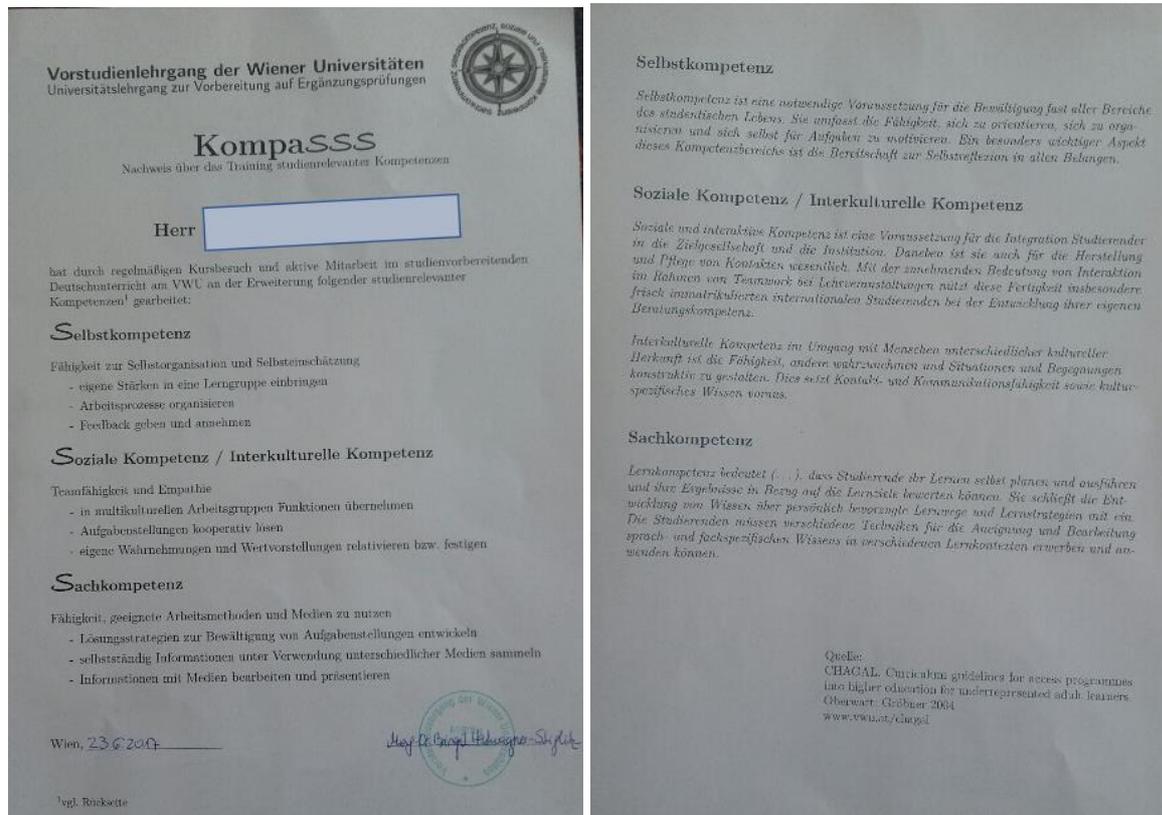


Figure 1: KOMPASS certificate awarded by pre-study preparation course of Vienna University

Impact

When I asked Omar about the impact of the KOMPASS certificate, he said that he learned new vocabulary during the excursions because he had to ask information from passers-by. He could practice to talk fluently about everyday activities, and he got to know the Austrian culture and places of interest. He even got to meet the Austrian political parties. He referred to the self-presentation exercise as “just telling a story”. This tells me that he values the certificate mainly from a language training point of view.

Considering his whole journey through the University counselling landscape and his encounters with several volunteers or friends who gave him informal advice, Omar was satisfied so far, as every step of the counselling got him nearer to his aim, studying a business or information technology subject at a Viennese university.

One of his friends suggested that since Omar had obtained his BA already in Kabul, he might take the master’s degree right away. Omar acknowledged that he could still learn something if he did the BA in business administration all over again in German, firstly because it would allow him more free capacity to improve his language skills, secondly because he considers

Austrian studies to be more demanding and higher quality as compared to Afghanistan. One important learning for Omar was that in Austria, everything is done on the computer – while in Kabul, all the deliverables are submitted personally, for lack of constant electricity supply.

Therefore, Omar enrolled for the BA in business administration in study year 2017/18 and might later, when he understands German even better, switch to (or additionally enrol in) information technology. This had been his dream for several years, and he is confidently pursuing this dream.

About 1,5 years have passed since Omar took his first steps in the jungle of testing/validating. He did not comment explicitly on the personal value of knowing more about his strengths and weaknesses, but his tone throughout the interview can be interpreted so as Omar made all the progress he had hoped for towards realising his academic vision. The improvement of German skills had the foremost importance to him and the peer learning experience in the University's German course widened his horizon and allowed him to enlarge his network.