



# **Validation of non-formal and informal qualifications in Austria from the perspective of the representation of interest**

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## Has a new dawn broken in Austria?

The first part of the discussion contribution<sup>1</sup> aimed to present the overall strategy for the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) in Austria and reflected on its possible impact on the activities and tasks of the representations of interest. The second part, which has now been completed as part of the Leonardo Da Vinci project PIN<sup>2</sup>, focuses on the Austrian procedure of validating non-formally and informally acquired qualifications. In addition, this part presents a possible linking of validation types with the NQF, illustrated by examples of good practice. In a final step, it also contains reflections on need for action and possible fields of action of the interest groups.

In the beginning it is important to note that there is no comprehensive system of recognising non-formally or informally acquired qualifications in Austria (such as in France<sup>3</sup> and Switzerland<sup>4</sup>) and that this country has some need to catch up in "explicating, developing and disseminating procedures for the recognition and proof of learning outcomes acquired outside the formal education system"<sup>5</sup>. Historically evolved reasons for this have been investigated by Biffel/Pfeffer (2012, 80), stating that

*"the Austrian educational and economic cultures are strongly geared towards initial vocational education and training and oriented towards activity descriptions with defined qualifications, i.e. the recognition of formally acquired qualifications as proof of skills and competences. Certificates which aim to identify or recognise non-formal and informal learning outcomes are therefore viewed rather with scepticism. (...).*

*Another reason for the reluctance is seen in the fact that social partners and economic bodies co-determine training standards in the dual system<sup>6</sup>. They have only moderate interest in procedures to recognise non-formally acquired competences as they fear that their influence will diminish. "*

Nevertheless Zürcher (2007, 115) expresses the opinion that many years ago a large number of activities were already launched in Austria via European initiatives (EQF, NQF, ECVET and NQF consultation process) so that "in a way a new dawn has broken for informal learning in Austria". Gutschow (2010, 33) follows the same lines of thought, according to which Austrian considerations about integrating parts of non-formal learning into the National Qualifications Framework are seen as relatively far advanced, however limited to "non-formal learning programmes which are already now somehow near qualifications". The most recent available Austrian EQF referencing report (bm:ukk/bmwf 2011, 91f) also states that the "first steps" for the sectors of non-formal and informal learning have been taken and for learning outcomes from the non-formal sector a working paper is additionally available in the form of the "Concept" by Schlögl (2009a). At the same time, it is demanded that

<sup>1</sup> Lachmayr, Norbert / Löffler, Roland (2012): Final report on the impact analysis for Austria, [www.eqf-pin.eu](http://www.eqf-pin.eu)

<sup>2</sup> 510698-LLP-1-2010-1-DE-LEONARDO-LNW ([www.eqf-pin.eu](http://www.eqf-pin.eu)). The project network comprises employee representations and education providers in 14 countries; the project aims to raise awareness of the EQF.

<sup>3</sup> Validation des acquis de l'expérience

<sup>4</sup> Assessment of equivalency or *Gleichwertigkeitsprüfung*

<sup>5</sup> cf. Schneeberger/Schlögl/Neubauer 2009, 126f

<sup>6</sup> Trade unions have possibilities of co-shaping this process with their right to express an opinion (for example with regard to school syllabuses) or even by being directly involved in the development stage (for example training regulations for workplace-based training).

"suitable forms have to be developed more to make learning outcomes visible", which means it is assumed there is need for action to work on instruments and procedures to validate informally acquired knowledge, skills and competences<sup>7</sup>.

According to the Austrian NQF terminology, the current report therefore focuses on corridors 2 and 3: In corridor 2 (diametrical to corridor 1) the offered qualifications (such as a course degree in project management, human resource development, sommelier qualification<sup>8</sup>) are not enshrined in law. Private education providers are responsible for designing, teaching and awarding these non-formal qualifications. Often representations of interest and religious communities help actively shape the adult education sector via these large educational establishments (such as bfi, WIFI) and their (umbrella) associations<sup>9</sup>. The representation of interest is also actively involved in the administration of Public Employment Service Austria (AMS) at the federal, provincial and regional levels.

Corridor 3 records the individual status quo of informally acquired competences (such as learning on the job, learning by doing) based on (more or less) standardised instruments. This individuality, however, marks one special position regarding the NQF: Whether and if it is possible to assign informally acquired competences which only relate to the individual has, to date, only been clarified to the extent that validation and certification (and thus the awarding of a proof of qualification from the formal or non-formal sector) must be feasible.

### Sensitive areas

If the goal is now to make non-formally and informally acquired qualifications more visible, it is necessary to take into account both largely differing and evolved institutional competences and responsibilities and also learning arrangements and competence identification procedures which vary significantly between provinces, regions, economic sectors or companies<sup>10</sup>.

On the one hand, Schlögl (2009a, 81) for example speaks of "certificates which can be assigned to the NQF without any difficulty", as they have clear equivalents in the initial vocational education and training system (such as external examinations). On the other hand, he also refers to a large number of other proofs of qualifications which "are relevant in society, the economy and in the education system, but for which separate decisions about assignments to the NQF levels must be made". These socially negotiated and traditionally cultivated qualification structures should not be threatened by a new form of description or validation and should not be deprived of their basis, says Schlögl (2009a, 147). Tritscher-Archan (2012, 11) names the politically agreed aspect in the ongoing NQF

<sup>7</sup> Cf. bm:ukk/bmwf (2011): Austrian EQF Referencing Report

<sup>8</sup> cf. Tritscher-Archan 2012, 11

<sup>9</sup> Cf. bm:ukk; bmwf (2012): Austrian EQF Referencing Report, 41

[http://www.lebenslanges-lernen.at/fileadmin/ll/dateien/lebenslanges\\_lernen\\_pdf\\_word\\_xls/nqr/EQR-Zuordnungsbericht/OEsterreichischer\\_EQR\\_Zuordnungsbericht.pdf](http://www.lebenslanges-lernen.at/fileadmin/ll/dateien/lebenslanges_lernen_pdf_word_xls/nqr/EQR-Zuordnungsbericht/OEsterreichischer_EQR_Zuordnungsbericht.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> As a consequence, issues related to the assignment to the NQF have been implemented in many pilot projects: the construction sector (Tritscher-Archan 2008; Tritscher-Archan 2012), the electrical sector (Tritscher-Archan 2009), business and administrative sector (Tritscher-Archan 2010), tourism (Luomi-Messerer/Lengauer 2009), health professions excluding doctors (Schlögl 2009b), civic competence (Erler 2009), volunteer work (Löffler 2012).

development process as an example, according to which no rights can be derived from the referencing of a qualification to a certain level, neither regarding access to the acquisition of a qualification on the next higher level, nor regarding classification to an employment group according to a collective agreement. Schneeberger/Schlögl/Neubauer (2009, 127) additionally point out that "on certain conditions, evidence which primarily serves to explicate person-related competence (such as formative portfolio approaches) (...) possibly does not ensure a position in an NQF, but this in no way diminishes its importance for the promotion and orientation of individual development".

### **Schedule and implementation steps of the validation strategy in C2**

One finding during preparatory work for integrating learning outcomes into the National Qualifications Framework is that there are starting points and links for how to deal with non-formal and informal learning in all education sectors and the institutions represented there, says Schlögl (2009a). Therefore, he adds, a broad basis for discussions about this strategy is needed. This can be found in the basic objectives of the partial strategy to integrate non-formal learning into the future National Qualifications Framework. Relevant focuses are mainly learning outcome orientation<sup>11</sup>, evidence orientation<sup>12</sup>, participation orientation<sup>13</sup>, purpose orientation<sup>14</sup> and the general lifelong learning orientation.

According to the Austrian 2020 LLL strategy (LLL:2020 2011, 46), which was signed by the four most important ministries, a validation strategy on the recognition of non-formal and informal learning will be implemented in Austria by 2015<sup>15</sup>. Accordingly, since the autumn 2012, a structural concept and process model have been developed to integrate qualifications of C2, with a pilot phase for the relevant processes<sup>16</sup>.

In the meeting of the NQF strategy group for non-formal learning on 28 Sept. 2012 it was agreed that a body responsible for qualifications (one major structural element of the referencing procedure) would be set up "provisionally" as a model in the NQF C2 in order to generate, in a pilot phase, experiences about possible assignments of qualifications which are based on non-formally acquired learning outcomes, document them and derive relevant conclusions for further steps. Applicable reference documents are the manual for the pilot

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<sup>11</sup> Certificates/proofs of qualifications can be positioned in the NQF independent of the learning pathway where they are obtained (formal, non-formal, informal).

<sup>12</sup> Evidence for learning outcomes is needed to provide a reason for assignment to an NQF level (such as curricula, standards).

<sup>13</sup> Institutional actors should be integrated more strongly into implementation.

<sup>14</sup> Enhancement of a cross-sectoral qualification concept and corresponding proofs of qualification.

<sup>15</sup> It is planned that the main federal ministries, provincial governments and social partners are involved in this process. Competence balance schemes to include and recognise earlier learning outcomes and experiences will be implemented. Competences of exam teams will be developed by providing training programmes and creating cross-sectoral quality assurance systems for assessment procedures.

<sup>16</sup> This is the same procedure as in the corridor of formal education. There, the process of assigning qualifications has been going through a trial phase since 2011. In 2013 the trial phase is planned to be completed, with the result that conclusions and recommendations including guidelines and criteria will be drawn up for the body responsible for qualifications.

phase<sup>17</sup>, the partial strategy C2 (Schlögl 2009), and an (unpublished) proposal by the social partners.

In the currently ongoing pilot phase it is planned to use 12 selected qualifications in order to test how the process of recognising non-formal qualifications and the assignment to a qualification level of the National Qualifications Framework can be carried out. One of these qualifications is about the "first aider", whose learning outcome-oriented training plans and competence matrices have been developed jointly by several volunteer organisations of the ambulance service as part of a project commissioned by the Federal Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Consumer Protection with academic support provided by the Austrian Institute for Research on Vocational Training (*öibf*).<sup>18</sup>

### Linking validation with the form of learning outcome achievement

This chapter focuses on how validation of non-formal and informal learning outcomes is currently carried out in Austria and which typing seems helpful for comparison purposes. Schneeberger/Schlögl/Neubauer (2009)<sup>19</sup> distinguish between three ideal types<sup>20</sup> of validations, which are substantiated in the separate document "Austrian examples of good practice"<sup>21</sup>. In their selection, the authors took into consideration that there was a sufficient quantity available in Austria and that they "will, with high probability, require an assignment (or a related decision) to the future NQF sooner or later".

#### Acquisition of certificates/qualifications of the formal education system (formal):

*The formal recognition procedures (...) all have a legal basis and result in certificates and qualifications of the formal education system or in certificates and qualifications which are equivalent to formal proofs of qualifications. Therefore the assignment of the recognition results of type 1 would be connected with the same challenges as the referencing of formal proofs of qualifications in the NQF.*

Typical relevant examples are the "exceptional admission to the final apprenticeship exam" and the "acquisition of lower secondary school qualifications by adults". Regarding the recognition of qualifications which have been obtained as part of volunteer work but are subject to legal regulations, the Health Ministry is currently examining the recognition of training programmes for paramedics which are conducted by volunteer organisations but the content of which is based on the Paramedics Training Regulation (*Sanitätsausbildungsverordnung*) and the assignment of this qualification to the NQF in C1.

Acquisition of certificates without any equivalents in the formal education system (summative): *The summative approaches of competence identification (...) relate (...) to the current state of competences (...). The competences identified in this way are (...) less cross-functional and transversal than in the first mentioned type, therefore*

<sup>17</sup> [http://www.oead.at/fileadmin/lll/dateien/lebenslanges\\_lernen\\_pdf\\_word\\_xls/nqr/EQR-Zuordnungsbericht/Anhang\\_4\\_Handbuch\\_Simulation](http://www.oead.at/fileadmin/lll/dateien/lebenslanges_lernen_pdf_word_xls/nqr/EQR-Zuordnungsbericht/Anhang_4_Handbuch_Simulation)

<sup>18</sup> A more detailed description can be found in Löffler (2012)

<sup>19</sup> according to Bjornavold (2004)

<sup>20</sup> The description of the three types is a shortened presentation of Schneeberger/Schlögl/Neubauer (2009, 113ff)

<sup>21</sup> Lachmayr, Norbert / Löffler, Roland (2013): Austrian collection of good practice for the validation of non-formal and informal skills and abilities, can be retrieved at [www.eqf-pin.eu](http://www.eqf-pin.eu)

*some (...) are even slightly better defined and have stronger predictive power regarding the acquisition of the certified competences. In the course of the development of an NQF it will fundamentally have to be clarified whether – and on what conditions – an assignment of partial and/or additional qualifications will be possible.*

This category includes the title *HTL-IngenieurIn*, access conditions to regulated professions and the certification of individuals, for example.

*Procedures to identify and validate informal learning (formative): Formative procedures of competence identification are more strongly oriented towards input factors and geared towards the procedures and standards inherent in the education system. (...) Due to their focus on individual development processes, these formative approaches can in practice more likely be found in the education sector, especially in adult education and guidance concepts. Most questions regarding integration into a future NQF (...) still need to be answered in connection with these procedures to identify and validate informal learning, as the logic of proofs of qualifications with different levels does not directly apply here.*

By way of an example, reference frameworks for linguistic competence and ICT competences as well as competence identification by applying portfolio methods can be mentioned. As part of the youth strategy of the Federal Ministry of Economy, Family and Youth (BMWFJ), much attention is paid to the recognition of non-formal and informal education. As part of this initiative, various proofs of informally acquired qualifications, such as the "badge of achievement for honorary work" of the rural youth organisation Landjugend Österreich or the Youthpass certificate, which can be acquired as part of the EU's Youth in Action programme for non-formal education, have been presented and discussed.<sup>22</sup>

Similar to all typical ideal presentations, a number of special cases are also coming to light here, which are identified and focused on precisely during the pilot phase. This is illustrated by the example of the Academy of Continuing Education or *wba* (cf. Schneeberger/Schlögl/Neubauer 2009, 124): Here competences for individuals are certified by a publicly accredited body, where already existing competences are identified and recognised in a "certification workshop". *wba* certifies and issues diplomas to adult educators by specifying standards in the form of a curriculum (including ECTS points). People who work in adult education can submit the competences and practical periods they have acquired in manifold ways. This evidence is assessed and recognised based on the curriculum. The competences which are still outstanding can be furnished by attending courses or providing other evidence. Graduates are awarded a recognised certificate or diploma.

For assignment to the three above types this means there are several assignment options, even though the focus can be seen in type 2: The preceding identification of the status corresponds to the third type, the certification overall corresponds to type 2, with an assignment to type 1 also seeming to be justified due to ECTS credits for master's programmes at higher education establishments.

<sup>22</sup> BMWFJ, Institute for Strategic Analyses: Minutes of round-table discussion on the youth strategy "Non-formal and informal education" on 10.09.2012, at 1pm, at BMWFJ.

### **Numerous options to act and link exist for the representations of interest**

Even if the (technical) procedure of a validation of learning outcomes in line with a national strategy is planned to be clarified by 2015, the corresponding practical implementation still requires a great amount of awareness-raising and preparations among the relevant target groups (such as employees, representations of interest, human resource managers, educational providers) outside the NQF expert groups.

The European cooperation project "Guidance Dialogue – Better Education and Career Opportunities through Counselling" ([www.guidance-dialogue.eu](http://www.guidance-dialogue.eu)) identifies need for action on the part of trade unions to create programme structures for the implementation of European instruments (such as EQF, ECVET, recognition of non-formally and informally acquired competences). For this field, Schlögl (2012, 33f) draws the following conclusions for relevant starting points of the employees' representation of interest in company-based qualifications processes and strategies:

*These opportunities for jointly shaping policy arise between the conflicting priorities of business management action logic (workplace and company-specific qualification), technical and interdisciplinary competence development as well as individual interests and perspectives. An additional difficulty is provided by the fact that training matters are just one among numerous other tasks requiring attention in the representation of workplace interests.*

*Accordingly, these, depending on the economic situation of the company or the current challenges works councils are dealing with, are competing to gain attention and priority as they represent only a partial task for workplace co-determination (...). The first thing to be done in such cases is to clarify the concerns or also to seek clarification with regard to the role expected of staff representatives, but also as regards whether such a role can and should be occupied in a realistic fashion. In this regard, forms of roles with real differences can be identified, such as being an initial contact person, disseminator, promoter and - even if more rarely - actually an adviser. Each of these roles is, however, then linked to different requirements and ways of working. These different tasks require - in turn derived from the challenge that this does not represent the core activity - being certain that the level of information is adequate to ensure the dissemination of correct details, competent further referrals or also the application of already existing instruments to provide the person seeking advice with guidance in a rapid and focused way. It is here that initiatives and services which are already actually offered by trade unions come into effect in order to provide support for stakeholders at a local level: internet portals, instruments for identifying skills, advice services which can be accessed and much else besides."*

Also according to Linderkamp (2007, 113f), direct guidance on continuing education and training (CET) is not seen as the primary field of action and interest of shop stewards and the trade union<sup>23</sup>, even though it is undisputed that every validation of acquired

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<sup>23</sup> Individual continuing education and training guidance to tackle subjective demands of CET participation (such as by employees who are difficult to reach) can to date take advantage of a large number of practice-oriented action aids. Comprehensive handouts are made available by the Research Institute for Vocational Education and Training (<http://www.f-bb.de/materialien/instrumente.html>), for example. As another example, the Learning Mentor project ([www.learningmentor.eu](http://www.learningmentor.eu)) developed a qualification for learning mentors, who act as points of contact in companies and

competences will always presuppose the active participation of stakeholders (such as cooperation in procedures comprising external and self-assessments or other forms of competence identification) and therefore also a sufficient amount of information. Ultimately, a nationwide structure and comprehensive concept is needed in issues of validation for the tasks and roles of representations of interest, in the form of disseminators and promoters who support, foster and develop practice-oriented, universally usable validation structures which are economical for all parties involved.

Triggered by debates concerning the implementation of the NQF, the Federal Advisory Board on Apprenticeship<sup>24</sup> is currently discussing the introduction of competence-oriented training regulations in the apprenticeship sector. The outcome of this discussion process is still open with the first strategic decisions expected by late 2013.

This should always be done with the big picture in mind: Validation is merely one part of the EQF "jigsaw puzzle". For example, the use of active verbs for formulating learning outcomes seems to be already well under way (see, e.g., Grün/Tritscher-Archan/Weiß 2009, Zücher 2012, 29), which also plays a key role in the formulation of the assessment criteria. At the same time, the topic of the European Credit system for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET) entails additional (to date ignored) tasks for the representations of interest: In the Council Recommendation (2012, 4) for example, one of the principles for the validation of non-formal and informal learning is that in validation activities there should also be synergies with the credit transfer systems applied in the formal education and training systems such as ECTS and ECVET. Relevant ECVET guidelines (Luomi-Messerer/Tritscher-Archan 2012) and trials (Sperle et al 2012) are already being implemented but with unclear participation by the representations of interest.

There is, at all events, willingness on the part of the social partners in Austria to take on an active role, according to their most recent official proposal<sup>25</sup> about educational reforms:

*"The LLL strategy adopted by the Council of Ministers and the establishment of the national LLL:2020 platform represent the first concrete measures taken in Austria to break through the segmentations and limitations prevailing to date. The social partners have expressed their interest and willingness to cooperate in the respective working groups actively and constructively. From the perspective of the social partners, a clearly more intensive involvement of the social partners in the advisory bodies would be desirable. (...) The recommendation to the Member States about a comprehensive validation strategy as it is currently being negotiated at the European level should be used as an opportunity to set up a joint Austrian approach and put innovative projects in the field of dual vocational training ("You have competences" in Upper Austria, "Competence with a system" of Public Employment Service Austria or AMS) on a broader basis and extend them to other educational areas."*

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are in a position to motivate their colleagues to participate in on-the-job professional development and encourage them to take part in Lifelong Learning (cf. Habenicht 2012, 31).

<sup>24</sup> The Federal Advisory Board on Apprenticeship is appointed by the Federal Minister of the Economy on the proposal of the social partners (§31 of the Vocational Training Act, *Berufsausbildungsgesetz*).

<sup>25</sup> Bildungsfundamente. Ziele und Maßnahmen für eine zukunftsorientierte Bildungsreform, Version 27.02.2013, [www.arbeiterkammer.at/bilder/d188/Sozialpartner-Vorschlaege.pdf](http://www.arbeiterkammer.at/bilder/d188/Sozialpartner-Vorschlaege.pdf), p11

## Opinion on details of the Council Recommendation of 20 December 2012

The introduction of arrangements for the validation of non-formal and informal learning by 2018 at the latest (cf. Recommendation p3, 1.1) is seen as a conceivable option by the representatives of the Chamber of Labour (AK) and the Austrian Trade Union Federation (ÖGB) but they do not view complete and nationwide implementation as realistic in practice. The reasons given are complex responsibility issues (both between provinces and ministries), but also with reference to the LLL:2020 strategy, which has existed for years and where it is planned to reach this objective two years afterwards, viz. in 2020. However, the best practice model of the Continuing Training Academy is undoubtedly already in place, where validations are carried out successfully in the adult education sector. Regarding the possibility of the Member States to "prioritise certain areas and/or sectors within their validation arrangements in accordance with their needs" (cf. Recommendation p3, 1.1) it is suggested to start out from quantitatively relevant areas with good chances of success without any high costs for the people concerned.

Regarding the obtainment of "a full qualification, or, where applicable, part qualification" on the basis of validation as specified in item 1.1.b, partial obtainment is rated as problematic. In addition it has been pointed out that a clear distinction must be made regarding whether the (non-formally or informally acquired) qualification can be proven by means of an exam (such as the exceptional admission to the final apprenticeship exam and master craftsperson exam) or if validation replaces an exam in the way that the required knowledge and skills are proven in another way during validation. This would point towards a standardised and therefore comparable competence balance.

The respective national status of implementation of the EQF is seen as especially important: Whereas the process of implementing an NQF is already very advanced in other member states, the NQF has not yet been implemented in Austria even though a large number of pilot projects and trials are being and have been conducted. Accordingly, the personal "value" of the NQF for the individual employees can at present be identified only with difficulty and it is unsurprising that this topic is largely unknown outside expert groups. Therefore the social partner representatives on the employee side see their task less in informing their members about the NQF but rather in informing and supporting the process of making qualifications visible. The role played by the representations of interest, which are also represented in the influential bodies (two of these representatives were members of the focus group) is therefore in the cooperation and steering of the overall Austrian processes related to the NQF, which unlike other member states are organised with broad participation of stakeholders (rather than being "decreed" as in Poland, for example). From the perspective of the employee representatives, the NQF does not constitute an instrument to solve existing problems of the education system, but can help reveal problematic situations and weaknesses, thus producing a "pressure to act". The assignment of certain education programmes of different providers which cover the same contents but are offered at different prices, for example, has a market-regulating effect.

It is even more important not to lose sight of the NQF's fundamental objectives: The goal of the NQF is to assign provable qualifications, assignment is not conducted at the level of

individuals or competences. In addition, international translation (translation tool) and comparability are in the foreground.

Respective considerations about validation are not necessarily connected with the NQF *per se*. It can indeed be the outcome of the evaluation of experiences that no assignment in the NQF is possible. Nevertheless an individual can derive benefit from this because his/her qualifications and competences have been made visible.

In the Austrian NQF, the discussion process about the final assignment of formal qualifications, above all in vocational education and training, has not yet been completed. Whereas far-reaching agreement could already be reached regarding the catalogue of criteria for the referencing of qualifications to the NQF and a manual for the assessment procedure has also been prepared, the procedure itself has not yet been clarified. Responsibility for assigning qualifications in corridor 1 (formal education sector) rests with the respective, legally responsible ministries. The pilot phase for the recognition of formal qualifications is currently still ongoing, but some major procedural issues are still open.

In corridor 2 (non-formal education), the issue of responsibility for dealing with applications for referencing is not regulated via legal competences. Therefore bodies responsible for qualifications (*QVS*) are required. It has not yet been clarified how these bodies will be defined, which institutions will have a right of nomination, and how members of the individual *QVS* (which should be selected with reference to specialist areas) will actually be appointed. In the course of 2013 it is planned to test the setting up of *QVS*, the procedural flow and the awarding of assignments for a total of twelve selected qualifications (such as "first aid/advanced first aid") as part of a pilot phase. For corridor 3 (informal education) not even the procedural issue has been clarified. Nevertheless it seems important and useful to document informal competences. A standardisation of the description of informal qualifications is supported but will not always be possible. Independent of whether these qualifications are compatible with the NQF and/or can be referenced to it, it is useful to make them visible. Already existing standardised instruments for demonstrating competences (EUROPASS CV) could be supplemented by such standardised descriptions.

The four-stage model according to the Council Recommendation (identification-documentation-assessment-certification) is considered as fundamentally useful. Regarding implementation, the experts of the Austrian employee representations recommend taking a differentiated approach. It will not always be possible to **identify** non-formal and informal qualifications merely through "dialogue", for example, above all practice-oriented qualifications will have to be demonstrated in different ways.

Existing qualifications must be **documented** in a standardised way to ensure comparability. This should also include partial competences or partially completed qualifications (even if employee representatives are critical of an assignment of part qualifications to the NQF). One key element here is the conversion of training plans and qualification descriptions to learning outcome-oriented curriculum development using the specifications on the EQF, such as regarding the use of active verbs. This will, as a rule, require fairly long adaptation processes, and it will not suffice to merely "copy" specifications, but rather it will be necessary to adjust teaching and learning methods. The key stakeholders (*AMS*, support

institutions, major educational providers, social partners) play a major role in this connection to establish these processes in practice. Thus, for example, if the learning outcome-oriented formulation of training plans for qualification schemes that are commissioned and promoted by *AMS* is compulsory, this could have a normative effect in the entire field of CET and adult education. This contributes essentially to establishing minimum standards of quality assurance and can strengthen the strategy (which has already been adopted by many funding bodies in the accreditation and certification of educational establishments) of standardising the non-formal education sector. Thus, for example, *AK* now only funds courses with a learning outcome-oriented design, in addition a number of certification procedures have been introduced for educational providers at the regional level in recent years which can be gradually converted to Austria-wide certification.

For **assessment/validation** it is necessary to develop instruments and procedures which make it easier to compare qualifications of different provenance. This applies both to the national level (comparison of programmes of different educational providers in the individual provinces) and the international context. In this connection, experiences related to the nostrification of study courses in the formal tertiary sector should be used. Here validation is carried out in the form of an expert review procedure, which however does not automatically have a binding, official character. Approaches towards developing standardised recognition procedures for qualifications within their scopes of responsibility can be identified both at the Federal Ministry for Education, the Arts and Culture or *BMUKK* (formal school sector) and the Federal Ministry of Economy, Family and Youth or *BMWFJ* (dual training). It is essential, however, that these validation procedures are not limited to examining the submitted certificates. For high-quality validation of foreign qualifications, relevant background knowledge (about the education systems but also about the training establishments that have issued the submitted certificates) is required. This makes it necessary for the validating bodies to set up networks. In connection with the validation of foreign qualifications, it is also vital to identify which Austria-specific qualification elements still need to be acquired to reach equivalence of programmes.

For the development of validation systems, the issue of referencing to the NQF (and EQF) is not in the foreground. It is essential to develop national standards on the description and validation of educational programmes and establish them in practice. Any referencing of the qualification to the NQF is conducted in the second step. This referencing will be difficult in many cases, mainly small courses or very narrow qualifications (fork-lift truck driving licence) or very general qualifications (driving licence), and cannot always be solved. But this should not be an obstacle to keeping the development process for a validation system on track.

**Certification** should not be considered equivalent to an "examination" but should also include other assessment procedures. On the one hand, formal and formalised qualifications with related certificates are highly relevant for the Austrian labour market and, for example, have a classification function according to collective agreements, on the other hand, core competences can frequently only be identified in a personal analysis or dialogue. For that reason it is vital to make qualifications and competences visible. Therefore it should be

considered to create an "electronic education file" (comparable with the electronic patient file), in which authorised bodies (educational providers, *AMS*, companies) can enter or retrieve the obtained qualifications and partial qualifications in a standardised form. This could considerably enhance the efficiency of guidance activities and teaching, for example.

**Therefore the Austrian representations of interest on the employee side recommend the following in the international context:**

- to bear in mind and acknowledge the heterogeneity of the education and labour markets;
- to give much weight to the aspect of quality assurance;
- to understand the EQF and NQF as food for thought helping to identify areas needing improvement;
- to focus the activities of the representations of interest increasingly on the cooperation and steering of NQF processes;
- to strengthen information activities for members only when there is specific benefit (established recognition procedures, the question of recognition bodies clarified);
- to bear in mind different mentalities (trust in descriptive procedures versus the necessity of formal certificates).

## Experts workshop 14.3.2013



### Austrian Federation of Trade Unions

Ing. Alexander Prischl	Head of Department for Labour Market, Education and Training Policies, member of the NQF body
Mag. Marcus Strohmeier	International secretary, ÖGB
Michael Trinko	Secretary of the federal youth organisation <i>Bundesjugend</i>

### Chamber of Labour

Mag. Silvia Hofbauer	Labour market policy
Mag. Bernhard Horak	Education and training policy, member of the NQF body
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