Arrangements for the validation of non-formal and informal learning

According to the National Coordination Point of the National Qualification framework (Koordinierungsstelle für den Nationalen Qualitätsrahmen), Austria is currently working on developing a national strategy for validating non-formal and informal learning based on the recommendation of the European Council of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning. The Council recommends that member states establish national regulations for validating competencies acquired through non-formal and informal methods by 2018.

The general aim is to record competencies acquired through non-formal and informal methods and give them visibility. This should give people who have acquired competencies outside of the formal qualifications system better educational and professional opportunities.

The Accreditation Austria, responsible for quality assurance in Higher Education, issued recommendations for the validation of non-formally and informally acquired competences in Austria in December 2016.

In 2012, the Agency for Quality Assurance and Accreditation Austria (AQ Austria) was established as an agency for quality assurance for Austrian higher education institutions on the basis of the Act on Quality Assurance in Higher Education.

According to AQ Austria's legal remit, AQ Austria is responsible for the entire higher education sector in Austria (with the exception of university colleges of teacher education). In carrying out its responsibilities, AQ Austria follows these basic principles:

- The higher education institutions (HEIs) bear the main responsibility for the quality of their
activities and for quality assurance and improvement.

- AQ Austria understands its procedures as supplementary to an HEI's internal quality assurance. It is independent in what it does and not bound by any instructions. Decisions in quality assurance procedures are made exclusively in accordance with quality criteria.

LLL-Strategy

The needs-driven implementation of appropriate models for validation of non-formal learning is an objective of the broad-based opinion-forming process in the project.

The development of an Austrian validation strategy for recognition of non-formal and informally-acquired knowledge is an objective that was supposed to be implemented by 2016. It will be developed by an inter-institutional working group as part of the Austrian Lifelong Learning Strategy LLL:2020. The results of this project will be included in the plan.

Pilot projects based on the results of this process will help to raise awareness and boost acceptance and willingness to recognise non-formal learning in Austria. For example, workshops will be organised with institutions and associations that work with disadvantaged people, in which results from the process will be used for discussion and supplemented by experiences and knowledge gained from those events. The aim is to develop a plan for a validation strategy which is coordinated as broadly as possible, and takes into account motives, benefits and all target groups and responds flexibly to needs and requirements.

Validation of non-formal and informal learning on the federal state level

As many initiatives and measures are part of duties of the federal states, it is possible to validate non-formally gained skills in some federal states. A good practice example is the Viennese Validation System “My Chance, I am able to do this!” (Wiener Anerkennungssystem “Meine Chance, ich kann das!”).

With this Viennese recognition system developed by the social partners, the Viennese vocational schools, the public employment system (AMS) and the Vienna Employment Promotion Fund (Wiener ArbeitnehmerInnen Förderungsfonds, waff) the city of Vienna offers a new way to the extraordinary apprenticeship diploma since May 2015. The Viennese recognition system is another milestone in the scope of the Qualification Plan Vienna 2020.

Validation of non-formal and informal learning in higher education

Validation of informal and non-formal learning is not yet common in Austrian Higher Education. At the moment, VNIL in Austria cannot lead to a complete award of a higher education qualification. Still, it is possible to obtain admission to some Austrian HE institutions or to receive credits for prior learning within study programmes. Examples of VNIL initiatives in Austria:

- Limited Higher Education Entrance Examination (Studienberechtigungsprüfung, SBP)
- Secondary School Vocational Examination (Berufsreifeprüfung, BRP): The General Higher Education Entrance Examination is for people who went through apprenticeship training or vocational education schools but did not take an examination entitling them to study at higher education level.
- Admission without final exams (Reifeprüfung/Matura, SBP or BRP: Under certain conditions, higher education institutions admit applicants who have not taken the final exams (Reifeprüfung/Matura) or any other exam mentioned above.

Youthpass
Youthpass is an official, European certificate for the recognition and documentation of non-formal and informal learning experiences in the extracurricular youth sector. The Youthpass is issued for Erasmus+: Youth in action projects. With the Youthpass the participants of these projects can collect their experiences and document their gained knowledge.

**Information and guidance**

**Austrian Academy of Continuing Education (Weiterbildungsakademie Österreich, wba)**

The Austrian Academy of Continuing Education is a validation system for the qualification and recognition of adult educators. Adult educators` qualifications are recognised according to set standards based on qualification profiles.

Launched in 2007 wba acknowledges prior learning results and offers guidance and counselling as far as the acquisition of missing skills is concerned.

**Target Groups**

The wba is directed towards individuals who are actively involved in adult education in Austria and beyond and want to take part in a certification process.

Appropriate areas of work would be

- managerial positions in institutes of vocational and non-vocational adult education, responsibility for educational matters, the planning, organization and support of learning processes
- teaching/training
- (career) guidance and counselling or
- librarianship.

To cause a consciousness for the value of the competence acquired non-formally and informally as an essential supplement to the education at school, measures with professional experts are compiled in the Department for Families and Youth at the Federal Chancellery taking the national qualification frame (NQR) into account:

**WIK:I – What I can do through informal learning** ([1](#))

The initiative WIK:I allows young people to collate and present their informally acquired skills. The focus is on informal learning among peers, at leisure, within their families, in sports, in their voluntary and/or honorary activities, in their hobbies, in the context of jobs, etc.

Qualified WIK:I portfolio counsellors assist the young people in systematically documenting their informal learning experiences. Starting with collecting and describing personally significant activities (“what I do”), young people are eventually able to identify and describe the skills they gained in the process (“what I can do”). The description of skills is always linked to specific activities (“I can do this because ...”).

The benefit of compiling a portfolio is that young people gain an awareness of their informally acquired skills and a sense of direction for their subsequent education and career planning; above all, it empowers them when they are required to describe and present their skills (e.g. in the context of job interviews).
The principles of the WIK:I method are:

- to focus on strengths and resources,
- to promote empowerment and initiative,
- to encourage self-reflection,
- to focus on dialogue and group processes (peer learning) as well as a biographical approach to learning.

With respect to the validity of the results, the WIK:I method is a guided self-assessment for young people.

**aufZAQ**

aufZAQ certifies non-formal courses for people who work in the extracurricular child and youth work in Austria and South Tirol.

**Competence Checks**

The Austrian Public Employment Service offers “competence checks” for asylum seekers. These checks include the validation informal learning.

**Quality assurance**

Since many procedures and initiatives for validating non-formally or informally acquired competencies belong to the formal education system and/or aim at a qualification equivalent to one of the formal systems, the same quality assurance activities as in the formal system are relevant. Due to the wide distribution of responsibilities across various ministries, there is no overall quality assurance framework for the validation of non-formal and informal learning. However, the consultation document for the development of the Austrian validation strategy refers to the introduction of measures for ensuring the quality of validation arrangements.

No overall framework for the evaluation of the arrangements exists for the evaluation of the validation of non-formal and informal learning. Evaluation is carried out in different ways and with a different frequency (if at all) for the different measures, projects, or initiatives. Evaluation studies are usually carried out by independent experts or by researchers from universities and are usually commissioned by the institution providing the validation measure or by the responsible ministry.