

SABINE ARCHAN

## From the Apprenticeship to Post Secondary Education A Study and Model for the Transparency in the Austrian Educational System

**T**he Bundesministerium für Wirtschaft und Arbeit (BMWA - Federal Ministry of Economics and Labour of the Republic of Austria) commissioned the Institut für Bildungsforschung der Wirtschaft (ibw – Institute for Research on Qualifications and Training of the Austrian Economy) and the Österreichische Institut für Berufsbildungsforschung (öibf – Austrian Institute for Research on Qualifications and Training), to determine options for increasing the transparency in the educational system for people who have completed apprenticeships. The intention behind the study is improve the interface between apprenticeships and post secondary and tertiary education levels and to thus increase the attractiveness of the dual education. Based on an analysis of already existing cooperations between apprenticeships and universities and schools and respectively institutions for further education, the client developed three model proposals that provide for the simultaneous completion of an apprenticeship and a certificate of secondary education and VET diploma granting access to tertiary education. These models were discussed with qualifications and trainings experts between April and November 2006 to solicit their opinions and determine possible directions for further development of this topic. The result: more than two thirds of those questioned see a need for a strong alliance between apprenticeships and the certificate of secondary education and VET diploma granting access to tertiary education. The introduction of a completely new educational track is not favored however, but rather the expansion and optimization of the existing combination possibilities of apprenticeship and *Berufsreifeprüfung* (BRP - examination providing general access to higher education for skilled workers and graduates of three- to four-year full-time VET schools). According to the results of the study, the BRP has gained in acceptance since its implementation and has been established as an important instrument of transparency in terms of life-long learning.

### 1. Starting Position

Austria has a very **differentiated educational system**. After compulsory schooling, the youth are able to choose from a wide selection of possible educational paths. This is to ensure that each individual is able to develop his or her particular preferences and talents to the best extent possible. To make certain that none of the paths chosen lead to a “dead end”, it is necessary to ensure **the highest degree of transparency possible** between the individual educational paths. Thus it should be ensured that it is not only possible to change between the educational offers of an individual level, but also to change to the next higher level right up to completion of a university education.

A significant step in the right direction was already made in 1997 with the **implementation of the BRP**. By completing the BRP, apprentices in particular as well as skilled workers and graduates of VET schools are entitled to attend post secondary and tertiary educational institutions. In addition, the option of the Studienberechtigungsprüfung (SBP - university entrance qualification examination) makes limited entitlement to attend certain courses of study possible.

To further develop these instruments and respectively to determine other paths and possibilities to **improve the transparency** it is necessary to think outside of the box and come up with, develop and evaluate new innovations. Exactly this goal was the focus of the current study.

### 2. Study Design

The study essentially consists of two parts. The first part, the **status quo analysis**, encompasses in addition to the analysis of the existing (legal) transparency options the description of domestic and international models for combining dual vocational learning and forms of certificates of secondary education and VET diplomas respectively granting access to tertiary education. The second part is dedicated to the **expert survey**. The proposed models for the simultaneous completion of an apprenticeship and a certificate of secondary education and VET diploma granting access to tertiary education designed based on the status quo analysis were discussed with stakeholders and experts in a series of workshops. The feedback collected by means of a questionnaire will be presented in the second part of the study.

### 3. Model Development

Since the introduction of the BRP in 1997, numerous cooperations have come into existence in Austria between educational institutions for vocational training and universities and schools and respectively the area of further education which have made it easier for apprentices to complete the BRP during the instruction portion of their dual training. These cooperations formed the **basis for the development of three proposed models** that provide for the simultaneous acquisition of professional qualifications and the right to attend university.

In order to **obtain opinions** about the proposed models and to determine the **principal direction** for further possible development of this topic, a total of **eleven workshops** were held with vocational education experts (trainers), representatives from the Ministry of Education, from secondary and tertiary educational institutions, the social partners, from institutes for further education, and BRP graduates who completed an apprenticeship with a certificate of secondary education and VET diploma granting access to tertiary education. The purpose was not to present models written out in detail that also took legal, financial, and organizational aspects etc. into account. The idea was much more to obtain **basic opinions** concerning the topic of “apprenticeship + certificate of secondary education and VET diploma granting access to tertiary education” and to allow experts as well as those that could be involved and respectively affected by the subject to evaluate the different approaches of the three proposed models.

Based on an **interview guideline**, feedback was collected from the experts concerning the basic need for an integrative solution, the proposed models, and further possible options, and was later evaluated. The following proposed models were discussed:

#### **Proposed Model 1: Tri-ality with Secondary Schools**

- **Places of Study:** In contrast to the “dual” education, this model defines three places of study (“tri” education).
- **BRP-Contents:** The vocational education in the company and the vocational school is complemented by additionally attending a secondary school (continually, in blocks, during the vocational school holiday, on the weekends, evenings etc.). The basic idea is to complete the educational modules required for the BRP during the time of the apprenticeship.
- **Completion:** At the end of the apprenticeship the student would complete both the final apprenticeship examination (LAP) as well as the BRP.
- **Variations:** It would also be possible to extend the duration of the apprenticeship to five years. The educational content for the apprenticeship and the BRP could thus be better distributed during this time. In this case the apprenticeship compensation would be factored over five years. At the end of the apprenticeship both the final apprenticeship examination (LAP) and the BRP could be completed together.

#### **Proposed Model 2: Tri-ality with Institutions for Further Education / Tertiary Institutions**

- **Places of Study:** This model provides for a cooperation with an institution for further education and respectively a tertiary institution.
- **BRP- Contents:** Courses would be offered that in principle fulfill the requirements of the BRP in individual agreements between companies and institutions for further education that are authorized to conduct examinations during the course of the vocational education. These courses could be held either at the institutes for further education or at the companies.
- **Completion:** At the end of the apprenticeship the student would complete both the LAP as well as the BRP (with full entitlement to attend university).
- **Variations:** A possible variation of this model provides that cooperations between companies and **tertiary educational institutions** (e.g. universities of applied science) could be formed. Within the framework of the courses, the apprentices would be instructed in those qualifications that are required for acceptance to these tertiary educational institutions. At the end of the apprenticeship, the students do not only complete the LAP, but also the required additional exams required for acceptance to the university (of applied science). Thus they are entitled in any case, provided they are at least the prescribed minimum age, to begin their studies at the cooperating university (of applied science) (limited entitlement to attend university).

#### **Proposed Model 3 – Dual Vocational School**

- **Places of Study:** A BHS branch specializes in a dual pedagogical form (similar to the dual universities of applied science) and only accepts youth that have the relevant company training and are employed. The phases of the scholastic and company training can be designed such that they can be attended alternately (e.g. in one week intervals).
- **BRP- Contents:** The core curriculum of this dual vocational school is made up of the subjects for the BRP. This curriculum is to be accompanied by company work experience phases in order to gain professional competence.
- **Completion:** Completion of this model is the equivalent of a middle qualification level (apprenticeship or VET school) and the BRP and not that of a certificate of secondary education and VET diploma granting access to tertiary education.
- **Variations:** It would also be possible to alter the distribution of the learning content. For instance, as an alternative, there could be more scholastic education at the beginning of the study program, and this could be decreased as the study program progresses so that at the end more time is spent in company training phases.

## 2. Main Results of the Expert Survey

The evaluation of the 111 submitted interview guidelines lead to the following **main results**:

### **Basic need for an integrative model**

- 68% of those questioned believe there is a basic need for an integrative model in which in addition to vocational qualifications, the entitlement to attend secondary education is also attained within the framework of the apprenticeship. 32% were against such a model.
- The reason given for this need was above all the image improvement that apprenticeships could gain through such a model. An option that would lead to a certificate of secondary education and VET diploma granting access to tertiary education would make the dual education more attractive for youth once again.
- Critics on the other hand believe the current possibility of choosing one or two partial examinations is sufficient. A completely parallel system would only over-tax the youth and prove to be too much of a burden.

### **Evaluation of the proposed models**

- The three proposed models and their variations were judged quite ambivalently. No one model received a purely positive or purely negative evaluation. The evaluations from all the groups were quite varied.
- In general, the model that provided for cooperation with institutions for further education in order to obtain full entitlement to attend a secondary school (variation 1 of model 2) was met with more acceptance than the other models. The possibility of cooperating with secondary schools (model 1) also received quite positive evaluations.
- In contrast, the proposal to cooperate with tertiary institutions to allow apprentices restricted entitlement to attend the same (variation 2 of model 2) met with less acceptance. The majority also rejected the idea of establishing a dual vocational school (model 3).
- Model 1: The majority named the creation of parallelism to the vocational school system as the strength of this model. Critics on the other hand felt that the simultaneity of the model posed too much of a burden for the apprentices. The idea of possibly increasing the duration of the apprenticeship in order to distribute the educational contents better was met with some reservation by a majority of the experts questioned.
- Model 2, Variation 1: The freedom given to the companies in this model was seen as being a positive aspect. Cooperation with institutions of further education would often be much more flexible than with schools that are subject to models with fixed instruction times. This model was criticized in that it would present a great challenge for the apprentices.
- Model 2, Variation 2: The idea of aiming for a limited entitlement to attend a secondary school met primar-

ily with negative reactions from the interview partners. This would limit the apprentices in their choice of possible options for further education. On the other hand, this focusing was also seen as positive in the sense that it would make it possible to obtain detailed knowledge.

- Model 3, Variations 1 and 2: Both variations were judged very similarly. The good combination of theory and practice and of school and company hours was seen as positive. The majority of those questioned however held a negative opinion of this model. Primary criticisms were that this model would make apprenticeships too much like a “school” as well as create a lack of transparency for the youth by introducing of a new form of school at the upper secondary level II.

### **Further options / general comments**

- Overall, many of the interview partners wish for continued discussions on this topic to lead to a solution that does not require a completely new system to be established. Much more, the existing possibilities should be optimized and work should be done to increase the awareness level of the target group.
- There were several demands to enhance and strengthen the vocational schools. According to the survey that was conducted, instead of building up a third place of study, the expansion of the BRP to all the vocational schools should take place.
- According to the opinions of the experts questioned, it would also be important to improve the starting qualifications of compulsory school graduates. Only in this way will it be possible to attain a certain broad effect with an apprenticeship + certificate of secondary education and VET diploma granting access to tertiary education program.

## 3. Recommendations & Suggestions for a Course of Action

Based on the results of the expert survey it is possible to derive eleven **recommendations and suggestions for a course of action** that can be drawn upon as the basis for further decisions and possible implementation steps.

1. The fact that the idea of establishing an integrative model met with such **positive resonance** underlines the **general need** for such an educational option in the area of the dual education. Furthermore, the cooperation models between apprenticeship institutions and universities and schools and respectively institutions for further education that have already proven themselves in practice show that the demands of the apprentices as well as the willingness of the companies to support increasing the qualifications of their apprentices are most certainly given. It is therefore recommended to give the topic of transparency a suitable **position on the educational political agenda** and to further force discussions on the topic with various actors.

2. The ever increasing number of graduates of the BRP, the continual increase of the number of students with BRP entitlement to attend universities and universities of applied science as well as the positive feedback of the experts questioned shows that the BRP has gained in **acceptance** since it was implemented and has become accordingly **anchored** in the Austrian educational system. It has thus played an important role in **increasing the transparency** in terms of life-long learning as well as helping general education and vocational education to be **recognized as equivalents**. This should be **considered** in further discussions on this topic.
3. It can be determined from the feedback provided by the interview partners that the need for an integrative apprenticeship + certificate of secondary education and VET diploma granting access to tertiary education model is primarily not combined with the desire to introduce a completely new educational path, but rather much more with the **expansion and optimization of existing possibilities**. Instead of establishing a new educational track that would lead to a greater lack of transparency at the upper secondary level, the existing options should be improved qualitatively and expanded in the direction of more/complete parallelism.
4. The **strengths and weaknesses analysis** of the three synchronous models discussed offered indications of which aspects were met with acceptance and which in contrast were believed to be in need of change or improvement. It is recommended to **incorporate this in further decision processes**.
5. Reference was made particularly often to **strengthening the role of the vocational schools**. In order to counteract the extra organizational effort of introducing a third place of study, the appropriate instruction for attaining the certificate of secondary education and VET diploma granting access to tertiary education should take place at the vocational schools. The teacher teams would have to be developed accordingly, for example by drawing upon teachers from secondary schools and VET colleges. It would also be conceivable to allow vocational school teachers as to work as instructors and respectively examiners. This would however require a **change of the current legal situation**. Thus, for instance, it could be made possible to attain the L1 through the implementation of additional qualification modules at pedagogical universities.
6. The need to take action can be determined from the feedback provided by those questioned also concerning the simplification of the BRP process with regard to **administrative and organizational aspects**. It is recommended in cooperation with the Ministry of Education to set appropriate **measures** e.g. for supporting the organization of bilateral cooperations with schools or institutions for further education, the flexible organization of course times, the examination process etc.
7. Parallel to promoting a further interlacing of apprenticeships and a certificate of secondary education and VET diploma granting access to tertiary education, steps should be taken to generally **raise the starting qualifications of youth** that are beginning an apprenticeship. Otherwise, no matter how ambitious the integration model, it will not be very effective. An improvement of the level of education would increase the chances of attracting and reaching more apprentices with this option.
8. The experts questioned also often criticized the **primarily private financing of preparation courses for the BRP**. Equal treatment with regard to financing with publicly financed scholastic educational courses to prepare for the certificate of secondary education and VET diploma granting access to tertiary education would not only be “logical in terms of the system” but would also be recommendable with regard to increased equality in terms of chances.
9. **“Upgrading” existing graduation requirements** could be a further step for increasing transparency. It could be strived to make four-year apprenticeships exactly equivalent to four-year VET schools with regard to the **replacement of the vocationally-specific examination**. It would be conceivable against the background of a national qualification framework, and it would be logical in terms of the system, for those completing the **master craftsman examination** to at the same time be entitled to attend tertiary education.
10. Overall, it is recommended to **advertise** the BRP itself as well as the possibilities that already exist today for the “semi-parallel” completion of the apprenticeship and the certificate of secondary education and VET diploma granting access to tertiary education by taking partial examinations during the apprenticeship period **more intensively** and to **work on increasing awareness** of these programs.
11. The work that is currently starting on a **national qualifications framework** should be used concerning the potential for the question of transparency regarding the post secondary and tertiary sectors. This could offer the opportunity to once again take up the educational political discourse within the framework of the broad interfaces and transitions that are pending anyway during the course of the development work.

This research letter is a summary of the following study:

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ibw – Institut für Bildungsforschung der Wirtschaft

Rainergasse 38, A-1050 Vienna

Tel.: +43/1/545 16 71-0, Fax: +43/1/545 16 71-22

E-Mail: [info@ibw.at](mailto:info@ibw.at), Homepage: [www.ibw.at](http://www.ibw.at)