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## Recognition at the interface between HTL/HLFS – tertiary sector

**A**ustria does not have a strong tradition in the recognition of qualifications between different places/institutions/levels of learning. This also applies to the transfer of learning outcomes where an educational career decision continues the previous area specialisation. This study aimed to examine the interfaces between the college of engineering (HTL) and the technically oriented tertiary sector (technical Fachhochschulen, technical universities). In addition, analogous analyses were also conducted for the college of agriculture and forestry (HLFS).

The following **questions** were at the focus of this study: What scope and what forms of current recognition practices exist between these education levels? What are the reasons that recognition/credit transfer cooperation schemes have not materialised to date? What are the expectations of the involved actors of such cooperation schemes and what are their experiences? Which options are there to extend and deepen recognition/credit transfer cooperation schemes?

### Structure of the interface

Every year some 8,000 students complete an *HTL* and another 700 people an *HLFS*. Around half of these graduates continue their educational career at a tertiary establishment. Among *HTL* graduates, about one in three take up a technically oriented study programme (18% at technical universities, 14% at technical *Fachhochschulen* [*FHs*]) – among *HLFS* graduates the share of those who opt for an agriculturally oriented study is only 16%<sup>2</sup>. Although it is not possible empirically to specify exactly to what extent the study programme chosen matches previous qualifications, relevant figures are not negligible, especially for *HTL* graduates and technically oriented studies. This is because *HTL* makes up one third of all study beginners at a technically oriented *Fachhochschule* or university. In absolute figures, this is around 3,400 people a year<sup>3</sup>. Assuming that only half of them continue their educational career in the previous field of specialisation, **recognition/credit transfer is relevant** for an estimated **1,500 to 2,000 graduates a year**.

In Austria, the interface between colleges for higher vocational education and training (*BHS*, to which *HTL* and *HLFS* belong) and the tertiary sector is traditionally

structured through the qualification logic linked with the matriculation exam<sup>4</sup>, which provides general access to higher education (HE) studies. Following admission to a study, there is the option to have exams recognised that were taken at other educational institutions if they are equivalent to those laid down in the curriculum. **The tertiary institutions decide autonomously** about this and **about the extent of credits**. Therefore students also have to individually submit related applications for recognition/credit transfer. Only for *Fachhochschulen* is there the option and also the reality of certain partly formalised (location-specific) recognitions.

### Extent and forms of recognitions<sup>5</sup>

Against this background it comes as a surprise that many *HTL* locations of area specialisations maintain bilateral recognition cooperation schemes (*RCs*) with tertiary institutions. These *RCs* have the following characteristics:

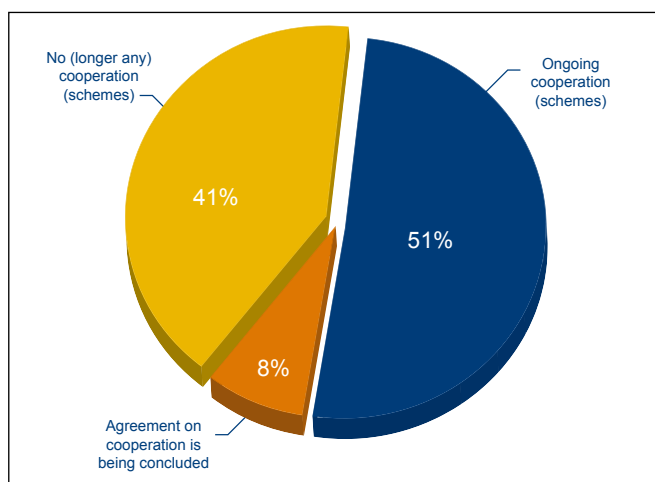
- **About 60% of all *HTL* locations of area specialisations are maintaining at least one bilateral *RC*<sup>6</sup> with an HE institution (HEI)** (Fig. 1). Only two *HTL* area specialisations are not maintaining any such cooperation. In the online survey which was carried out specifically for this study, overall 36 different HEIs were named with which *RCs* have been set up. Overall, these are currently 123 cooperation ventures. By contrast, no *RCs* have been set up at the majority of *HLFS* locations and area specialisations<sup>7</sup>.

Characteristics of recognition cooperation schemes:

- Most often, credit transfer takes place in cooperation with *FHs*, clearly less often with universities; but there are also *RCs* with foreign HEIs.

- Typically, one *HTL* location of area specialisations has 1 to 2 *RCs* with tertiary institutions: Around half of the *HTL* locations of area specialisations have one *RC* – the others more (mostly 2). Many of these *RCs* (~70%) have existed for over 4 years already.
- These bilateral agreements are mostly informal.
- The geographical proximity between the locations of *HTLs* and *HEIs* (as well as, of course, the matching of area specialisations) is a decisive factor for bilateral *RCs*.
- There exists a surprisingly high extent of credit transfers for entire semesters: Two thirds of all *RCs* specify credit transfers of 1 to 2 semesters – 1/3 of *RCs* only relate to individual courses. Semester credits are granted almost exclusively at *Fachhochschulen* (as well as foreign *HEIs*) – at Austrian universities, credit transfer is mostly possible only for individual courses.

Fig. 1: Distribution of *HTL* locations of area specialisations by recognition cooperation schemes



Source: *HTL* online survey of ibw 2014

- ***HTL* locations of area specialisations without *RCs* (~40%):** Several of them already had *RCs* or cooperate with *HEIs* in other fields. Half of them had made active efforts themselves to establish *RCs* but “failed” due to insufficient matching of content or lack of willingness to cooperate on the part of the tertiary institution. For the remaining *HTLs* *RCs* are often not relevant because of their self-conception (“this is not our task as an *HTL*” or “not important for our graduates”).

### The actors’ view

The empirical findings revealed a surprisingly high extent of bilateral recognition cooperation schemes between *HTLs* and tertiary education institutions. By comparison, such cooperation schemes are clearly less frequent among *HLFS* area specialisations.

How do the respective actors themselves assess these bilateral cooperation schemes? What experiences have they had so far and what are their intentions? The following picture can be drawn based on the interviews with the experts<sup>8</sup>:

- Essential for bilateral *RCs* to be concluded is the **establishment of mutual trust** through talks between specific *HTL* locations/area specialisations and their *HE* counterparts. Attempts to set up *RCs* at institutional or political level are counterproductive (there are strong reservations on the part of *HEIs* in particular).
- A **wide range of credit transfer practices** can be observed when it comes to examining equivalence of content. Although credit transfers are always based on individual applications (“examination on a case-by-case basis”), they can also have a more formal character (mainly because of long and positive experience with a specific *HTL* location (= institution-related individual recognition)).
- The **decision on credit transfer must be made by the host *HEI***. This is not put into question by *HTLs*. Higher education institutions insist on their final decision-making competence.
- All actors state they have had **mostly good experiences with the study success of students** who have been granted credits. This means that no subject-specific “integration” problems or deficits in study progress can be observed.
- ***HTLs* would like to have credit transfer schemes more formalised**, particularly on a regional/area specialisation basis. There are two ideal types of positions on this:
  - **Recognition logic (criteria-based):** These *HTLs* perceive a large area where content and quality overlap with *FHs* and therefore advocate more formalised (i.e. criteria-based<sup>9</sup>) credit transfer processes and credits of 1 to 2 semesters where area specialisations match<sup>10</sup>.
  - **Examination logic (test-based):** These *HTLs* argue that credit transfer only makes sense for their graduates in certain fields/subjects. Therefore they do not see any need for “wide/global” recognition (i.e. on a semester basis) but only recognition of individual courses (credits for practical content such as laboratory exercises, technical design tutorials, etc.). It would be possible, for example, to test the fundamentals, without prescribing prior attendance of *HE* courses, during the entry phase.
- **From the perspective of *HEIs*, however, current regulations are sufficient** – in their view, the deci-

sion about credit transfer must by all means be reserved to them. But some are open to doing some preliminary work, such as clarifying content in advance, mapping, screening as well as recognition procedures for international students. Such expert opinions might be drawn up by external (non-market-oriented) partners.

This shows that a similar perspective and appraisal prevails about many aspects among representatives of HTL (and HLFS) as well as the tertiary institutions. Nevertheless some problems or questions are still open:

- 1) **Different self-conceptions, expectations and interests of actors in the field of education:** On the one hand, these are based on the differing tasks and roles of these educational institutions. Thus they are a necessary expression of defining profile and orientation. On the other hand, this also reflects the traditional low degree of coordination at the interfaces **as well as “lack of institutional trust”**<sup>11</sup>. Thus, for example, HTLs mostly see the *Fachhochschule* as their first point of contact/cooperation partner, but not universities. They state as reasons that subject matters/content and quality overlap between their graduates and FH study beginners, particularly where they continue the previous area specialisation. But *Fachhochschulen* themselves also see the need of positioning themselves, especially by differentiating their own institution somewhat from HTL, while sticking to their orientation as academically/research-based institutions (which makes it necessary for them to orient themselves towards the university environment). It is also striking to note the way the terms “ability to take part in HE study programmes” and “general HE entrance qualification” are used, mostly without defining them in detail. The attributes of responsibility for VET versus scientifically-based/academic education and “positioning in the education system” at secondary level versus the HE sector overlap here in a complex manner. Stereotypical attributes and a certain stereotypical thinking can therefore still be observed although these have been clearly watered down, especially in longer cooperation schemes. Therefore the establishment of trust and a basis of discussions is primarily based on individual initiatives in an environment of institutional reservations.
- 2) **Diversity of educational programmes** and the trend towards an enhanced development of profiles on the part of schools and HEIs (particularly at FHs): This leads to increased heterogeneity of programmes and consequently heightens **transparency problems in the identification/specification of the extent to which the study programme chosen by students matches previous qualifications.**
- 3) Closely linked with this is that the establishment of recognition cooperation ventures and particularly **the validation/coordination process related to content requires time, personnel and therefore ultimately also financial resources** which must not be underestimated. In this regard, the actors criticise lacking or insufficient public support. The actors’ own educational institutions are consequently not, or only insufficiently, able to back and finance these processes by themselves. Against this background, there are thus not really sufficient incentives to embark on such demanding development and cooperation processes.
- 4) The situation is characterised by apparently **insufficient systemic knowledge** or an only rudimentary level of knowledge **about already existing recognition cooperation schemes** and credit transfer modes. This is also a consequence of the mostly informal nature of agreements. For educational institutions this implies costly self-learning/development processes. For future students this is connected with considerable transparency deficits and consequently costly ways of procuring information as well as a low degree of reliability and planning security regarding educational pathways continuing the previous area specialisation.
- 5) **Instruments and concepts which could support the development of recognition cooperation schemes are not known widely** (BHS education standards, modularisation of the upper cycle, establishment of ECVET and/or ECTS). In particular where they concern the “other” educational institution<sup>12</sup>. Thus, for example, the level of knowledge at tertiary establishments about BHS educational standards must be rated as rather rudimentary. Furthermore, actors often arrive at very different assessments regarding these instruments<sup>13</sup>. In all fairness it needs to be borne in mind, however, that these instruments are either only in their establishment phase or are only considered conceptually to date anyway.

### Options for action

What recommendations and options can (could) be derived from the existing findings, leading to an extension and deepening of the practice of recognitions where an educational career decision continues the previous area specialisation?

The following aspects need to be considered for a promising implementation<sup>14</sup>:

- establishment of trust by promoting bilateral contacts among the actors involved,
- raising the level of information about existing recognition cooperation schemes and the experiences gathered with them.

- organisational, content-specific and financial support for educational establishments when setting up new recognition cooperation schemes.

The study outlines a wide range of activities. A **longer-term perspective** is essential because the establishment of trust, the dissemination of information about existing *RCs* and the launching of specific new cooperation ventures require time. One starting point here links to the **potential of already existing bilateral *RCs***. These could be used as **catalysts** for the dissemination of information and thus an increase in the degree of information about existing recognition cooperation schemes. Particularly the exchange of experiences about existing *RCs* could also lead to deepening regional *RCs* and especially *RCs* where an educational career decision continues the previous area specialisation. The core idea is that educational establishments from the same field – such as *HTL* locations of area specialisations among themselves or *Fachhochschule* and university programme locations among themselves – are more open or, due to similar interests and views, more prepared to recognise and accept the views of the others.

It would also be possible to link to **examples of good practice**. This is because these examples represent concrete and well-proven forms of recognition cooperation schemes and credit transfer modes. In addition, they frequently have an innovative nature. The establishment of an **(online) information platform** could also be helpful. It would pursue three objectives: A centralised collection of information about existing *RCs* (and therefore also system monitoring); information tool for educational institutions which are interested in setting up or disseminating and modifying/perfecting cooperation schemes; and an information tool for students who are interested in recognition options where an educational career decision continues the previous area specialisation (thus contributing to enhancing transparency for students).

The establishment of recognition cooperation schemes and credit transfer procedures requires a high degree of coordination of contents. The very staff-intensive process which therefore ties up financial resources could be supported in two ways: On the one hand, by manifold **activities of the public**, such as the already mentioned initiation of forums for experience exchange, the establishment of the central information platform, the financial support of specific work to identify the extent to which subject specialisations match and content overlaps. On the other hand, **additional external expert opinions** could enable a mapping or preliminary screening of cur-

ricula, training objectives, competence descriptions, overlaps and interfaces in competences by external parties.

The entire study can be obtained from ibw in printed form (ibw research report no. 179) or [online](#).

- 1 The study was commissioned by BMBWF.
- 2 It goes without saying that the choice of studies is also influenced by the specific study programmes offered. In this context there are more options for technical than for agricultural focus areas. Opportunities of entry to the labour market also play a major role for *BHS* graduates.
- 3 In terms of decisions for agriculturally oriented study programmes by *HLFS* graduates, figures are clearly lower: Around 100 *HLFS* graduates are study entrants at agriculturally oriented HEIs (a share of 5-7% of new students).
- 4 The exams *Berufsreifepfprüfung* and *Studienberechtigungsprüfung* are alternative access pathways to HE studies. But for certain studies, supplementary/additional exams are necessary. In recent years, a trend could additionally be observed which grants HEIs more options for influencing access by means of admission processes. Professional activities are an option for being admitted to a study programme (continuing the previous area specialisation) only in the *Fachhochschule* but not in the university sector. The recognition of non-formally or informally acquired competences for admission to an HE study programme is not the subject of this study.
- 5 This information comes from a specifically conducted online survey among *HTL/HLFS* locations of area specialisations about their bilateral recognition practices with tertiary educational institutions. The survey was held from March to April 2014. Around three quarters of all *HTL* and two thirds of all *HLFS* area specialisations took part.
- 6 There are only two *HTL* area specialisations (of 21 overall) which are not maintaining any *RC*. At one quarter of all *HTL* locations there is no *RC*.
- 7 Therefore the situation of *HLFS* locations is only covered marginally. Basically the analysis produced very similar findings in terms of content as for *HTLs*.
- 8 To get more in-depth findings related to the online survey, interview guideline-supported expert interviews were conducted in July/August 2014: 11 with *HTL* and 3 with *HLFS* department heads, 8 with (vice) rectors of tertiary educational establishments (6 *FHs*, 2 universities).
- 9 Such as by means of admission talks/clarifying discussions, portfolio approaches, competence profiles, marks.
- 10 Credit transfer at universities: Here *HTLs* see no need for “wide/global” recognition (i.e. on a semester basis) but only of individual courses.
- 11 The Austrian country background report on the OECD Review (see Schneeberger/Schmid/Petanovitsch 2013) refers to this weakness of the current system in that it refers, among other factors, to the “pronounced segmentation of the post-secondary sector in the special forms of VET college, adult education on the one hand and the HE sector on the other” (ibid., p. 84). Therefore, “low willingness to recognise qualifications and, in particular, to enable their accumulation can be observed in Austria. This concerns the interfaces between VET colleges, *FHs* and universities.”
- 12 The reason is, not least, the combination of the low degree of systemic knowledge about established recognition cooperation schemes and the strong segmentation of education levels.
- 13 Thus, for example, *HTLs* advocate that ECTS points be awarded for the 5th grade of *HTL* – the view of HEIs is between clear opposition to this suggestion and tending to approve of it.
- 14 Every option should consider or fulfil these three fundamental aspects as they address central obstacles (expressed by the actors).