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Master craftsperson and proof of competence examinations in Austria - graduate survey

A recent **ibw study¹** (graduate survey) commissioned by the Federal Economic Chamber (WKÖ) aimed to analyse the master craftsperson and proof of competence examinations in Austria. The results show that, in Austria, these examinations meet the high requirements made on them to a large extent in terms of specialist competence and managerial skills while the social recognition of these qualifications still shows room for development and improvement.

In Austria, proof of competence exams are required for the independent practice of a small craft or (another) regulated craft or trade. In the case of the small crafts, the master craftsperson examination is the most important form for providing this proof of qualification; in the case of all other regulated crafts or trades, this is the proof of competence examination. In terms of content, there is no fundamental difference between these two types of examination. The designations 'master craftsperson examination' and 'proof of competence examination' result purely from the legal classification (according to §94 of the Trade, Commerce and Industry Regulation Act or *Gewerbeordnung* or *GewO*) of a trade as a small craft (master craftsperson examination) or as another regulated craft or trade (proof of competence examination). Master craftsperson exams consist of five modules, proof of competence exams comprise between two and five. In Austria, master craftsperson and proof of competence examinations can generally be taken from the age of 18, regardless of previous qualifications. At the same time, however, these examinations are associated with high requirements in terms of qualifications acquired: holders should be able to furnish proof of comprehensive specialist competence (according to §20 of the *GewO*), not least in order to be able to take on responsibility in a (future) executive position for carrying out complex tasks, to manage a company independently and to train apprentices.

The results of the present online survey of (more than 1,300) graduates of a master craftsperson or proof of

competence examination from 2019 and 2020, which was conducted in October 2022, show that the examinations largely meet these requirements in practice, although no specific previous qualification/experience is mandatory for taking the examination. However, the results show that in many cases success is based on the fact that candidates have relevant previous qualifications as well as several years of professional experience and have completed a preparation course. Only 1% of the graduates of a master craftsperson or proof of competence examination surveyed had only completed compulsory schooling as their highest prior qualification, while 72% had already obtained a relevant specialist or related more advanced qualification before taking the examination. Around 79% of all (surveyed) graduates had already worked in a relevant specialist or related field before taking their first examination module, almost half of them for more than 10 years.

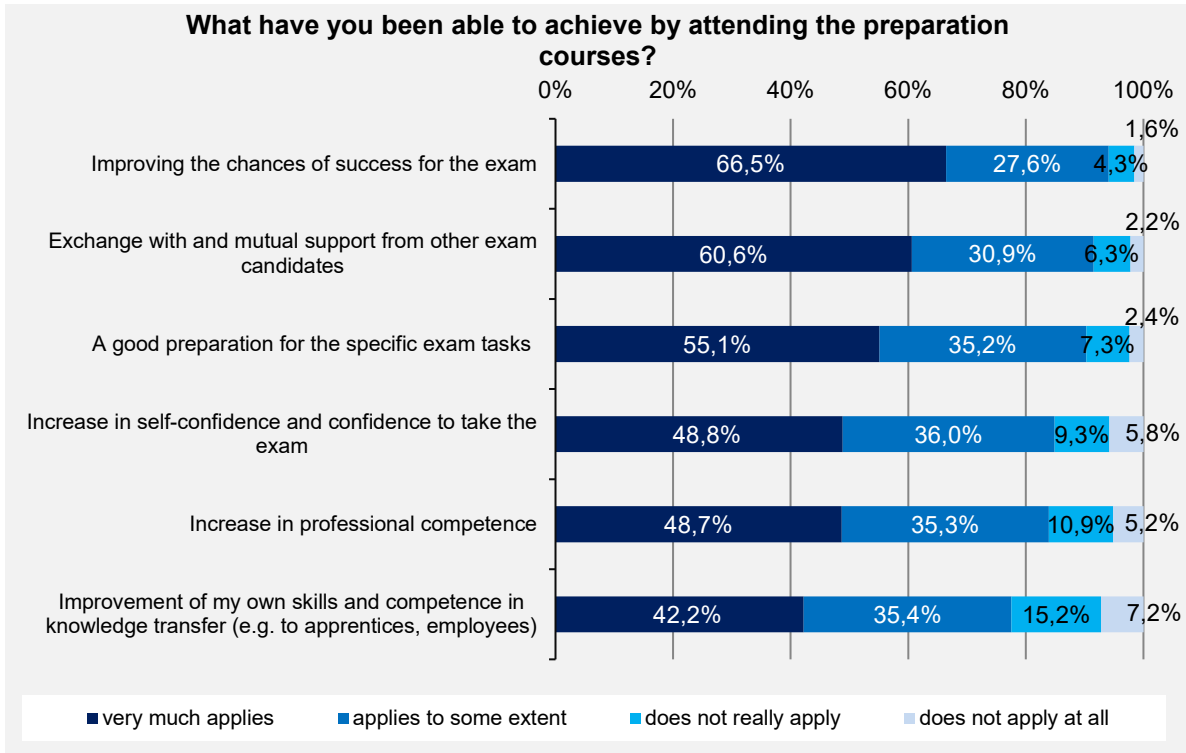
88% of the (surveyed) graduates of a master craftsperson or proof of competence examination have attended a preparation course. With the preparation course, the exam preparation itself has therefore also given a further concrete qualification boost. 84% of the surveyed graduates who have taken part in a preparation course are convinced that attending the preparation courses has also increased their professional competences (applies very much or to some extent) (cf. Diagram 1), and their chances of success in the exam even more so, of course (94%).

¹ Helmut Dornmayr, Birgit Lengauer, Marlis Riepl (2022): Meister- und Befähigungsprüfungen in Österreich – AbsolventInnenbefragung, ibw Research Report No. 213, Vienna

DIAGRAM 1:

Course evaluation: outcome of participation in a preparation course for the master craftsperson or proof of competence examination

(among those n = 1,101 respondents who participated in a preparation course)



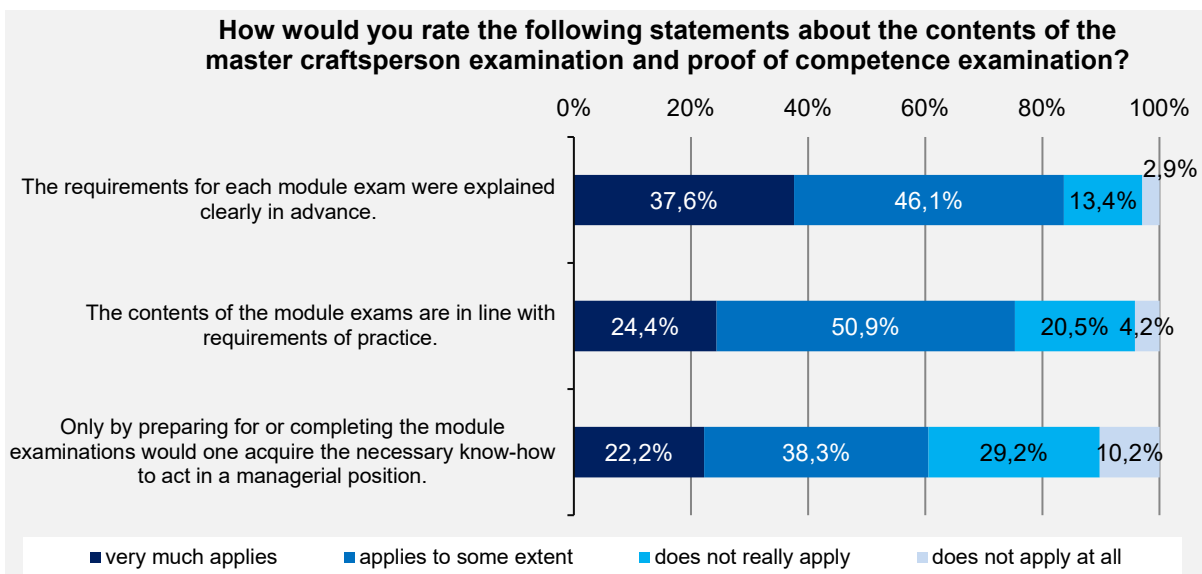
Source: ibw survey among graduates of the master craftsperson and proof of competence examination 2022 (n = 1,326)

The master craftsperson and proof of competence examinations themselves were to a large extent classified as relevant to practice: 75% found the statement “The contents of the module exams are in line with requirements of practice.” to apply very much or to some extent. 61% could

even agree with the statement that only by preparing for or completing the individual module examinations would one acquire the necessary know-how to be able to act in a managerial position (cf. Diagram 2).

DIAGRAM 2:

Assessment of the contents of the master craftsperson and proof of competence examination



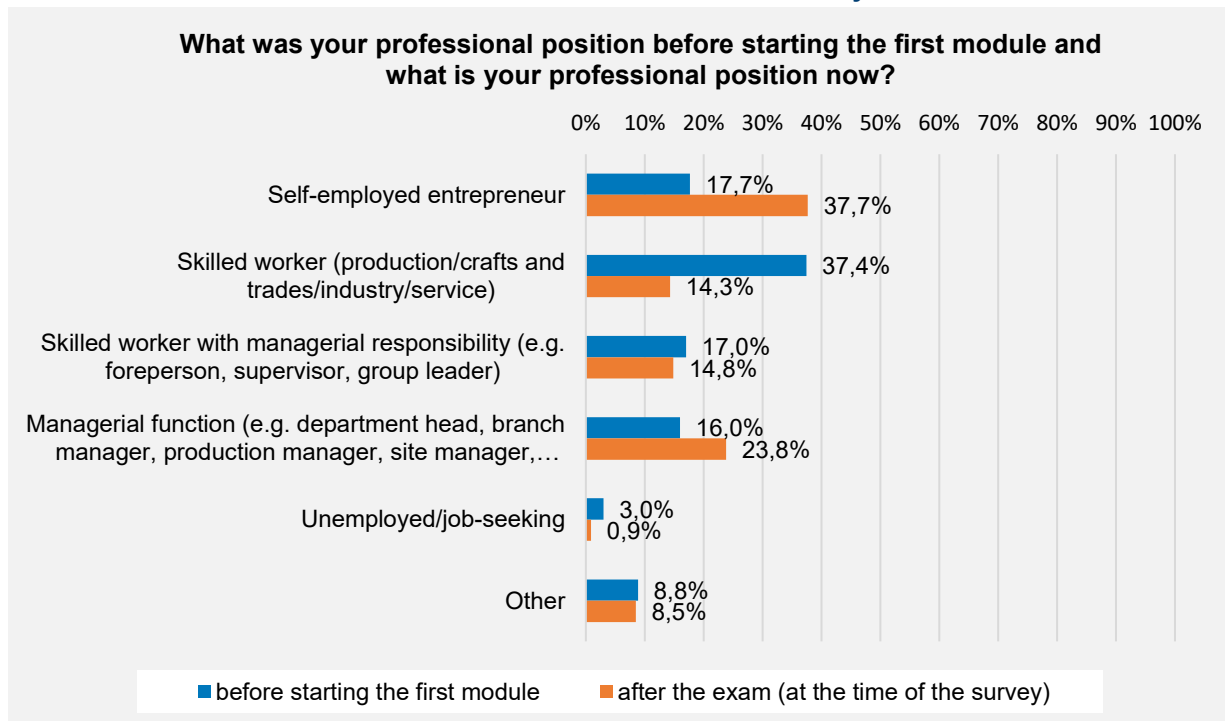
Source: ibw survey among graduates of the master craftsperson and proof of competence examination 2022 (n = 1,326)

The completion of a master craftsperson or proof of competence examination also indicates an increase in leadership competence (especially also for starting one's own business) (cf. Diagram 3): the share of self-employed entrepreneurs had risen to 38% by the time of the survey (i.e. around 2-3 years after completing the master craftsperson or proof of competence examination) (compared to 18% before taking the examination). The proportion of (employed) persons in managerial positions had also increased significantly (from 16% before taking the examination to 24% at the time of the survey). By contrast, the proportion of job seekers had disappeared almost

completely (1% at the time of the survey, 3% before taking the examination). Overall, at the time of the survey (October 2022), 76% of all graduates of a master craftsperson or proof of competence examination in 2019 and 2020 were working in a managerial position (entrepreneur, manager or specialist with management responsibility). Completing a master craftsperson or proof of competence examination therefore has a strong positive effect on the assumption of managerial responsibility or the management/foundation of one's own company, and is to a large extent a prerequisite for founding a company in regulated crafts and trades (including small crafts).

DIAGRAM 3:

Professional position before starting the first module of the master craftsperson or proof of competence examination and at the time of the survey



Source: ibw survey among graduates of the master craftsperson and proof of competence examination 2022 (n = 1,326)

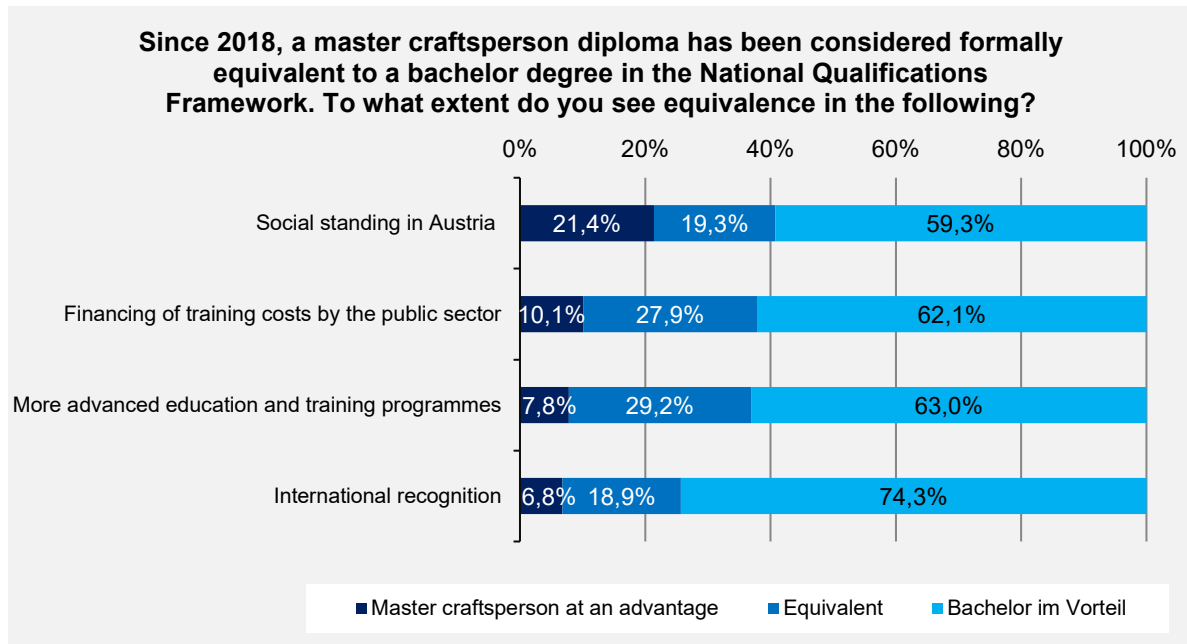
The goals and expectations of the surveyed graduates regarding the master craftsperson or proof of competence examination make it clear that the purpose of the examination is not only to obtain the authorisation (“licensing”) to establish/take over a business, but also to increase/improve one's own professional competences. 91% of the surveyed graduates are of the opinion (61% applies very much, 30% applies to some extent) that the master craftsperson/proof of competence examination has actually increased their professional competence, 70% see themselves in a (correspondingly) better position on the labour market.

There is obviously still a need to catch up when it comes to the social recognition of these qualifications: although since 2018 the master craftsperson diploma has been classified in the National Qualifications Framework on the same level (Level 6) as the (academic) bachelor degree, 59% of the master craftsperson exam graduates surveyed attribute a higher social standing to the latter in Austria, while only 21% see this for a master craftsperson diploma (cf. Diagram 4). The discrepancy is even more pronounced when it comes to issues of public funding as well as perceived international recognition: as for the latter, 74% see a bachelor degree as having an advantage (and only 7% a master craftsperson diploma).

DIAGRAM 4:

Assessment of the equivalence of master craftsman and bachelor qualifications

(among those n = 724 respondents who had taken a master craftsman examination)



Source: ibw survey among graduates of the master craftsman and proof of competence examination 2022 (n = 1,326)

The statements of the surveyed graduates of master craftsman and proof of competence examinations in Austria also reveal further open and partly controversial topics: public funding/support of preparation courses and examination fees, the equivalence (title, NQF allocation) of proof of competence examinations with master craftsman examinations, (formal) connectivity in the sense of access entitlement to master’s programmes at higher education institutions as well as (the reintroduction of) any access requirements (e.g. practical experience) for master craftsman and proof of competence examinations. The very fact that the funding of the costs for preparation courses and examination fees has to be made by the candidates themselves naturally reinforces the image of a systematic disadvantage compared to (bachelor) students.

The graduates of a master craftsman or proof of competence examination in 2019 and 2020 who were interviewed as part of this study were still examined according to the old examination regulations. The process of a learning outcomes-oriented reorganisation of the examination regulations of all master craftsman examinations and

proof of competence examinations in Austria, which was launched in 2018, only became noticeable from 2021 onwards (when the first new examination regulations came into force). The new examination regulations became or will become effective from the year 2021 onwards (until the year 2025).

The entire study can be downloaded in German free of charge from www.ibw.at.

Source:

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