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Exceptional apprenticeship-leave examinations in Austria ('second-chance education')

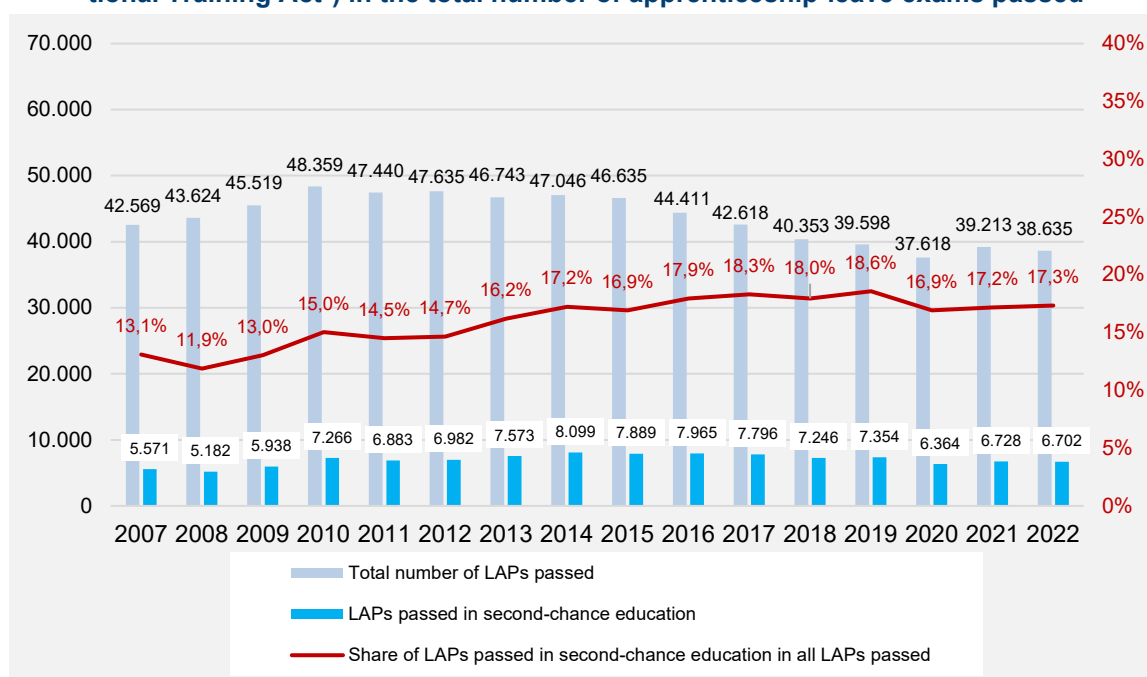
Very little has been known, to date, about the participants in exceptional apprenticeship-leave examinations in Austria, their motives, their previous experience and previous qualifications. A recent ibw study (an online survey of over 1,000 participants) now provides meaningful information about this group for the first time: The majority of people sitting for exceptional apprenticeship-leave exams already have an upper secondary school-leaving certificate (often also another apprenticeship diploma). The strongest motive for taking the apprenticeship-leave exam is career advancement, somewhat less frequently a career change or re-entry (after unemployment or parental leave). Graduates are very satisfied with the effects of the apprenticeship-leave exam.

Almost 7,000 (around 17%) of all successfully completed apprenticeship-leave exams (in German abbreviated to LAPs) in Austria in 2022 were based on 'exceptional' attempts in 'second-chance education' (see Diagram 1), which means candidates did not complete the apprenticeship training in the relevant occupation but acquired the skills and knowledge required in the relevant apprenticeship in another way - for instance by means of a relevant

practical or on-the-job training activity of appropriate length or by attending relevant courses (pursuant to §23 (5a) of the Vocational Training Act or BAG). The possibility of taking an exceptional apprenticeship-leave exam is therefore one of the most important instruments in Austria for the validation of informal skills, non-formal skills or skills acquired abroad.

DIAGRAM 1:

Share of apprenticeship-leave exams passed in 'second-chance education' (pursuant to §23 (5a) of the Vocational Training Act*) in the total number of apprenticeship-leave exams passed



Source: WKO (statistics on apprenticeship-leave exams) + ibw calculations / 2023 Survey of Apprenticeship Training

The core element of this research report¹ is an online survey of n = 1,064 people who took LAPs in 'second-chance education' (§23 (5a) of the BAG) in the years 2020 to 2022.

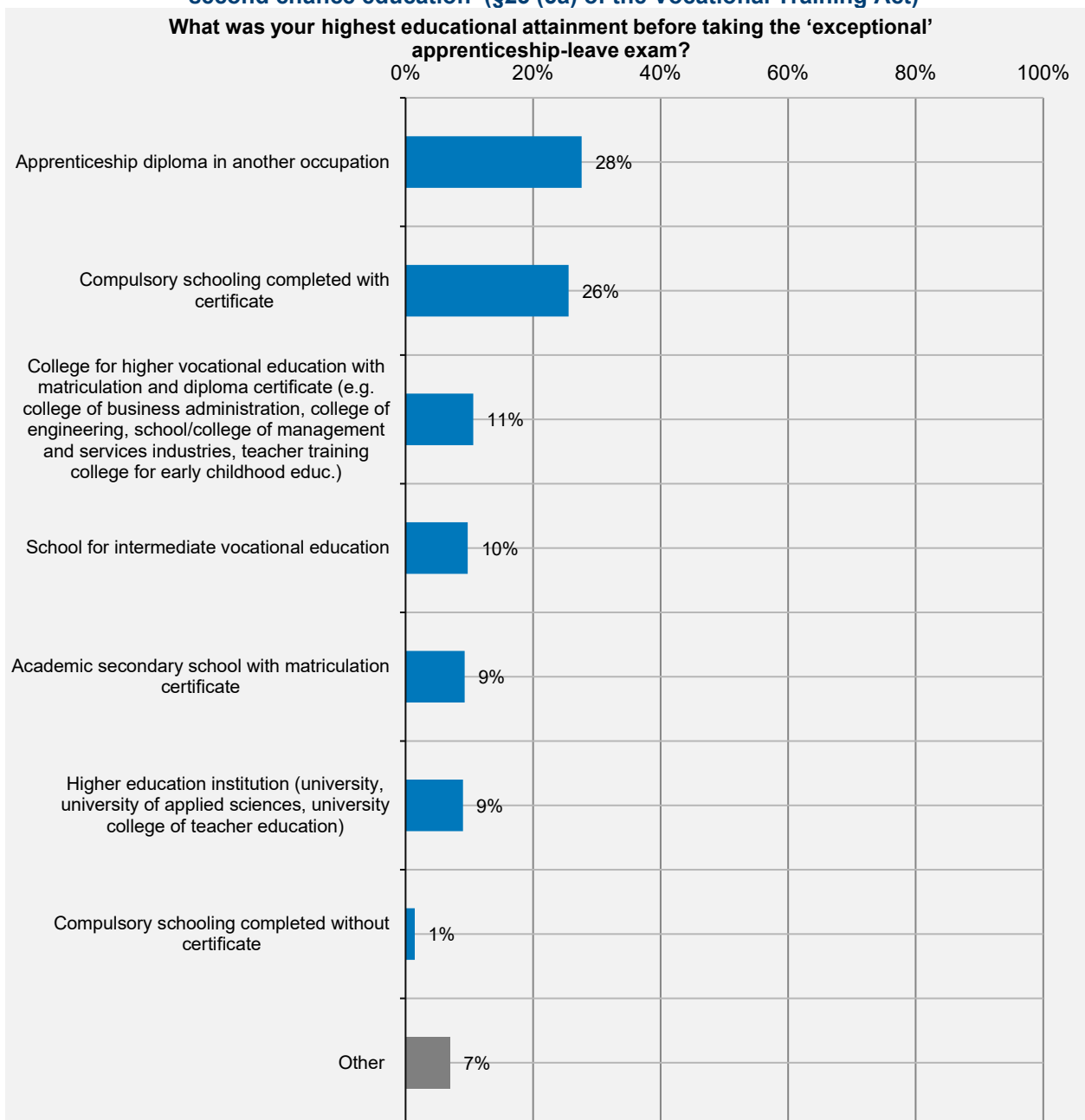
Almost half (48%) of those who took an exceptional apprenticeship-leave exam in Austria in the period 2020-2022 (basic population) were still below 30 years old when they first took the exam (the average age was roughly 32), 55% were male and 45% female. Most of them lived in Vienna (35%) or Upper Austria (21%).

The **majority (73%)** of respondents who took an

exceptional apprenticeship-leave exam **already had an upper secondary school-leaving certificate** (see Diagram 2), while less than a third (27%) only had (at most) a compulsory school-leaving certificate. 28% had already acquired an apprenticeship diploma in another occupation. In most cases, 'second-chance education' in the area of LAPs therefore does not mean catching up on completely missed initial (vocational) education and training but largely supplementing/expanding the existing skills profile (with an 'additional qualification') on the basis of existing upper secondary qualifications.

DIAGRAM 2:

Highest educational attainment before taking the apprenticeship-leave exam in 'second chance education' (§23 (5a) of the Vocational Training Act)



Source: ibw survey of people who took the apprenticeship-leave exam in 'second chance education' (§23 (5a) of the Vocational Training Act) in the period 2020-2022 (n=1,064; conducted in November 2023)

¹ Cf. Dornmayr, Helmut / Lengauer, Birgit (2024): Außerordentliche Lehrabschlussprüfungen in Österreich („Zweiter Bildungsweg“) [Exceptional apprenticeship-leave examinations in Austria ('second-chance education')], ibw Research Report No 218, Vienna

A total of **43%** of respondents stated they had **never worked in the occupation or a related occupation** for which they took the second-chance apprenticeship-leave exam. These are primarily those who are aiming for a career change or career (re-)entry by taking the exceptional apprenticeship-leave exam. However, some of them already had other practical experience in the occupation (e.g. in the form of internships) or, of course, in other professions.

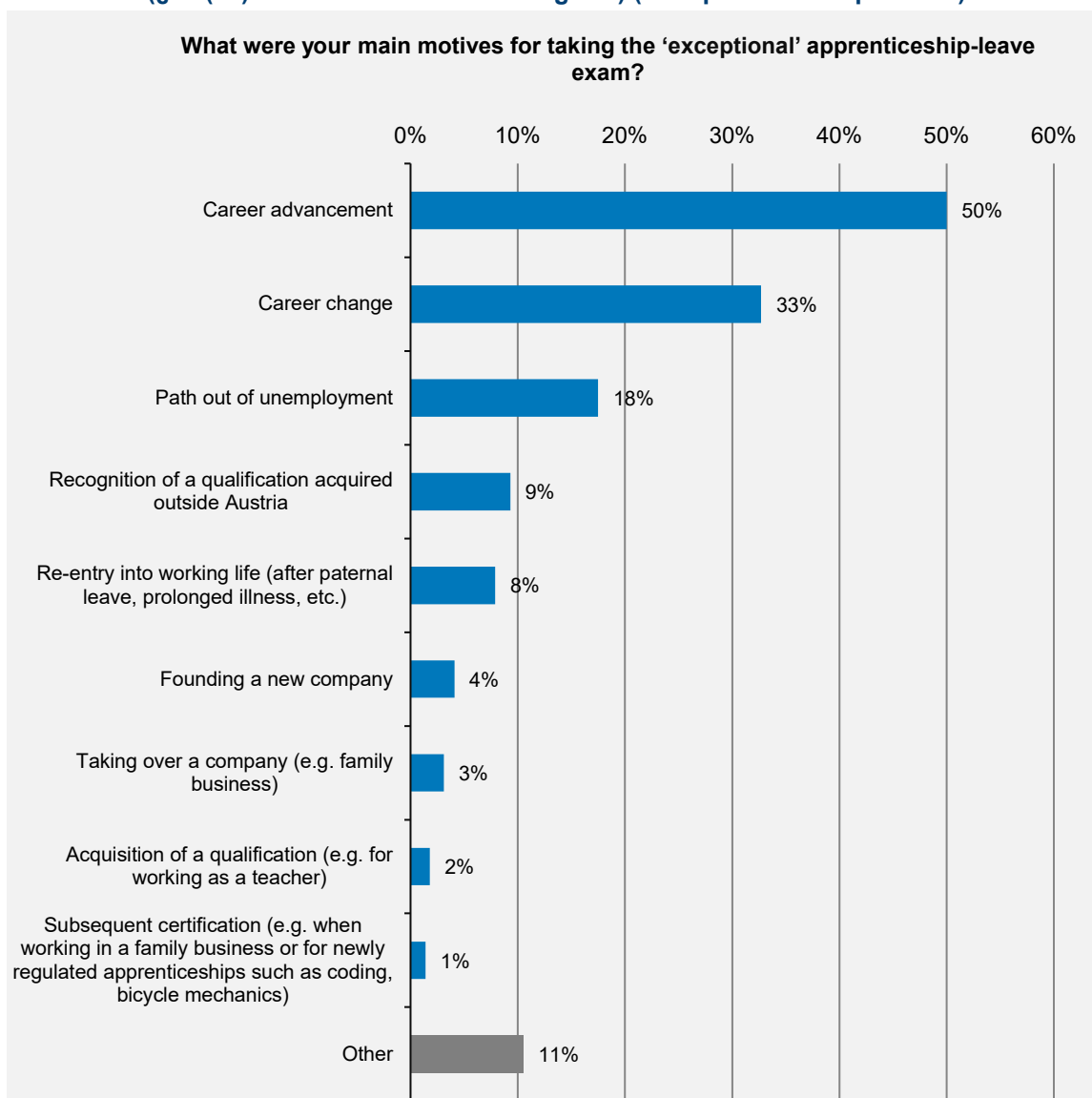
Access to exceptional LAPs is characterised by a high degree of heterogeneity and diversity. Half of the respondents named career advancement as a/the main motive for taking the apprenticeship-leave exam in 'second-chance education' (see Diagram 3). **Career advancement** (50%)

was therefore the **most important motive** in the survey sample for **taking the apprenticeship-leave exam in 'second-chance education', followed by career change** (33%), the **path out of unemployment** (18%), recognition of a qualification acquired outside Austria (9%) and re-entry into working life after parental leave or prolonged illness (8%).

There are therefore **three main motives** for taking the exceptional apprenticeship-leave exam, which in some cases also overlap: **career advancement** (around half of those surveyed), **career change** (around a third) and **(re-)entry** after unemployment or parental leave (around a quarter).

DIAGRAM 3:

Main motives for taking the apprenticeship-leave exam in 'second-chance education' (§23 (5a) of the Vocational Training Act) (multiple answers possible)



Source: ibw survey of people who took the apprenticeship-leave examination in 'second chance education' (§23 (5a) of the Vocational Training Act) in the period 2020-2022 (n=1,064; conducted in November 2023)
 N.B.: Due to multiple answers, the percentages add up to more than 100%.

Their **main source of motivation** was **their own desire** to take the apprenticeship-leave exam in second-chance education. Thus, for example, 78% of respondents stated that their own desire had motivated them to take the apprenticeship-leave exam, but employers (16%), family (13%), the Public Employment Service (or AMS) (13%) and training providers (e.g. as part of qualification projects) (8%) also played a certain role.

Around half (52%) of those surveyed stated they had received some form of **support from the AMS** (unemployment benefit or payment of course and training costs) when preparing for or taking the apprenticeship-leave exam in 'second-chance education'. The support of the AMS played a role above all for those who were planning a career change or (re-)entry; those who were primarily aiming for a career advancement by taking the exceptional apprenticeship-leave exam were less likely to need the support of the AMS.

Not only were the majority (95%) of respondents who took an apprenticeship-leave exam in 'second-chance education' (§23 (5a) of the BAG) in the period 2020-2022 able to pass the exam with positive results and thus obtain an important qualification for the labour market, but they also noted, **on a subjective level, a high level of satisfaction with their career to date (after taking the exam)**: Overall, 84% are very or 97% are very or rather satisfied with their decision to take the exam in 'second-chance education'. Similarly, 97% are very or rather satisfied with the fact that it is possible in Austria to take the exam in 'second-chance education' and thus 'exceptionally'. 94% are very or rather satisfied with their career to date after taking the exam. The **comparison of the occupational status before/at the start of the apprenticeship-leave exam in 'second-chance education' and at the time of the survey after taking the exam** (see Diagram 4) among the respondents who took the exam in the years 2020-2022 shows impressively that the exam in 'second-chance education' (§23 (5a) of the BAG) acts as a stepping stone towards the labour market. Specifically, the proportion of respondents employed as skilled workers increased from 36% before/at the time they took the exam to 65% at the time of the survey (measured in terms of respondents who had successfully completed the exam at the time of the survey). The share of executives rose from 5% to 12%. By contrast, the share of unskilled workers fell from 18% to 2% and unemployment from 14% to 4%. These figures show very impressively that passing the apprenticeship-leave exam in 'second-chance education' is accompanied

by a gain in qualifications, which is conducive to labour market integration and career advancement.

Overall, at the time of the survey in November 2023, the majority (57%) of respondents with a positive apprenticeship-leave exam in 'second-chance education' (§23 (5a) of the BAG) who had taken the exam in the years 2020-2022 were working precisely in the occupation for which they had taken the exam. Another 21% of respondents with positive exam results were employed in a similar/related field or occupation. 12% worked in a completely different field/occupation, 10% were not employed at the time of the survey (e.g. due to unemployment, training periods, paternal leave, etc.).

According to their self-assessment (see Diagram 5), the people surveyed who had (successfully) completed the exam in 'second-chance education' in the years 2020-2022 were able to increase their professional skills (89% very much applies or applies to some extent), gain a better position on the labour market (82%), fulfil a (new) career aspiration (70%) or earn a higher salary (68%) by taking the apprenticeship-leave exam.

Options for action and for further development of the 'exceptional' LAPs in Austria are seen, for example, in relation to the greater involvement of part-time vocational schools in the preparation (cf. the little-known possibility of participating as an 'extraordinary student') and in relation to the availability of and information on learning materials and exam content for all (even 'small') apprenticeship occupations. In general, advice, guidance and support could be intensified in a variety of ways, especially for adults who are less likely to access education ('difficult to reach') on their way to the 'exceptional' LAPs.

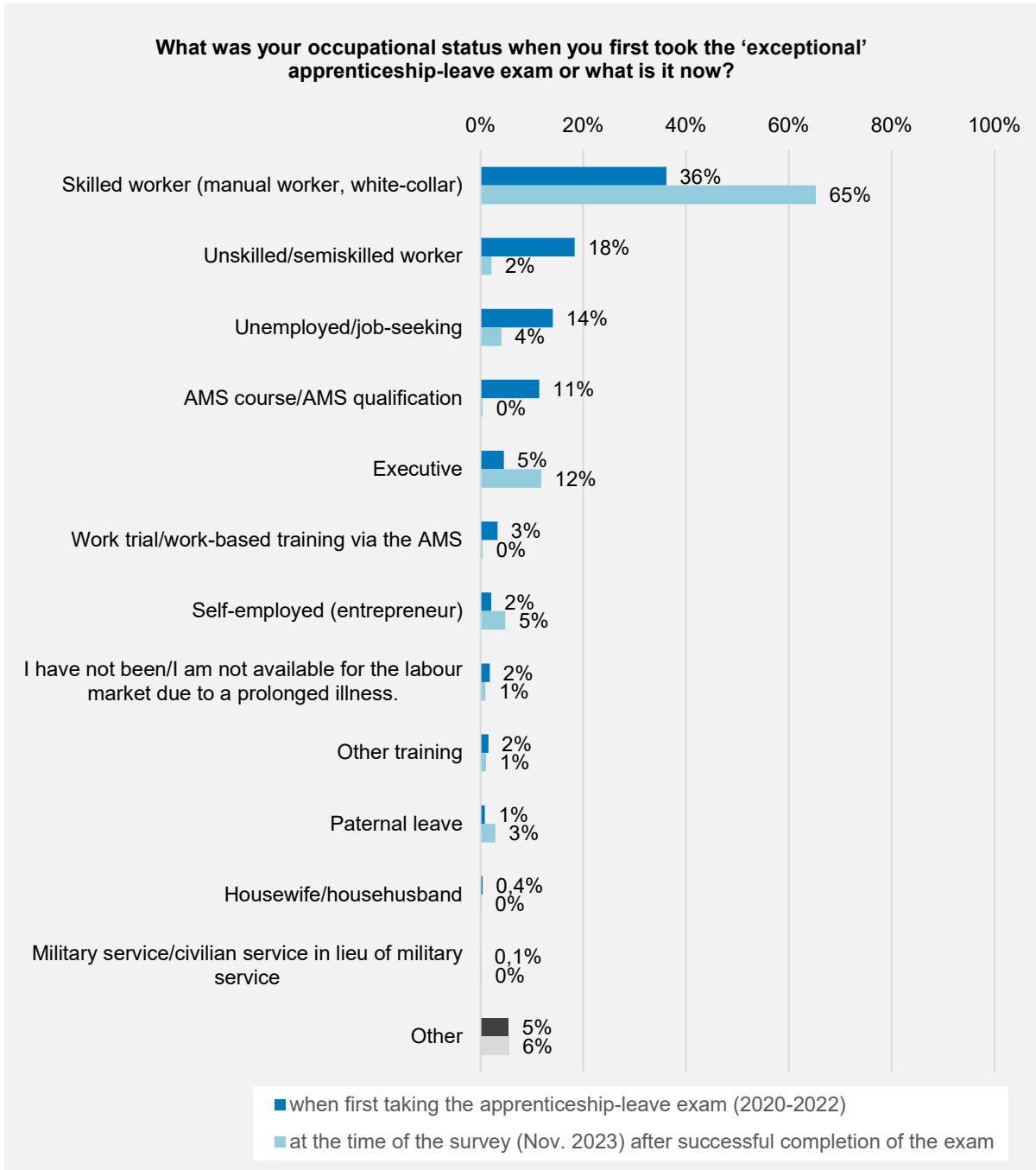
An important and complex topic that should perhaps be given even more attention is the possibilities for recognition/credit transfer and requirements for admission to the 'exceptional' apprenticeship-leave exam. In this respect, an analysis of 'exceptional' LAPs in Austria leads to many fundamental questions regarding the recognition and validation of previous knowledge, such as whether the requirements for admission to the exceptional apprenticeship-leave exam are sufficiently specified in the Vocational Training Act (e.g. with the wording "for example, by means of a relevant on-the-job training activity of appropriate length"), whether a higher degree of formalisation and standardisation would perhaps be useful in practice or in what way or to what extent access to the apprenticeship-leave exam should be regulated at all - for example, in comparison with and in its positioning vis-à-vis (de facto

'higher-ranking') master craftsperson and proof of competence exams, where no access restrictions apply. However, these questions go far beyond the objectives of the present study, which had its focus on analysing the access

routes and prior qualifications of the exam candidates and the effects of exceptional LAPs.

DIAGRAM 4:

Occupational status before and after taking the apprenticeship-leave exam in 'second-chance education' (§23 (5a) of the Vocational Training Act)



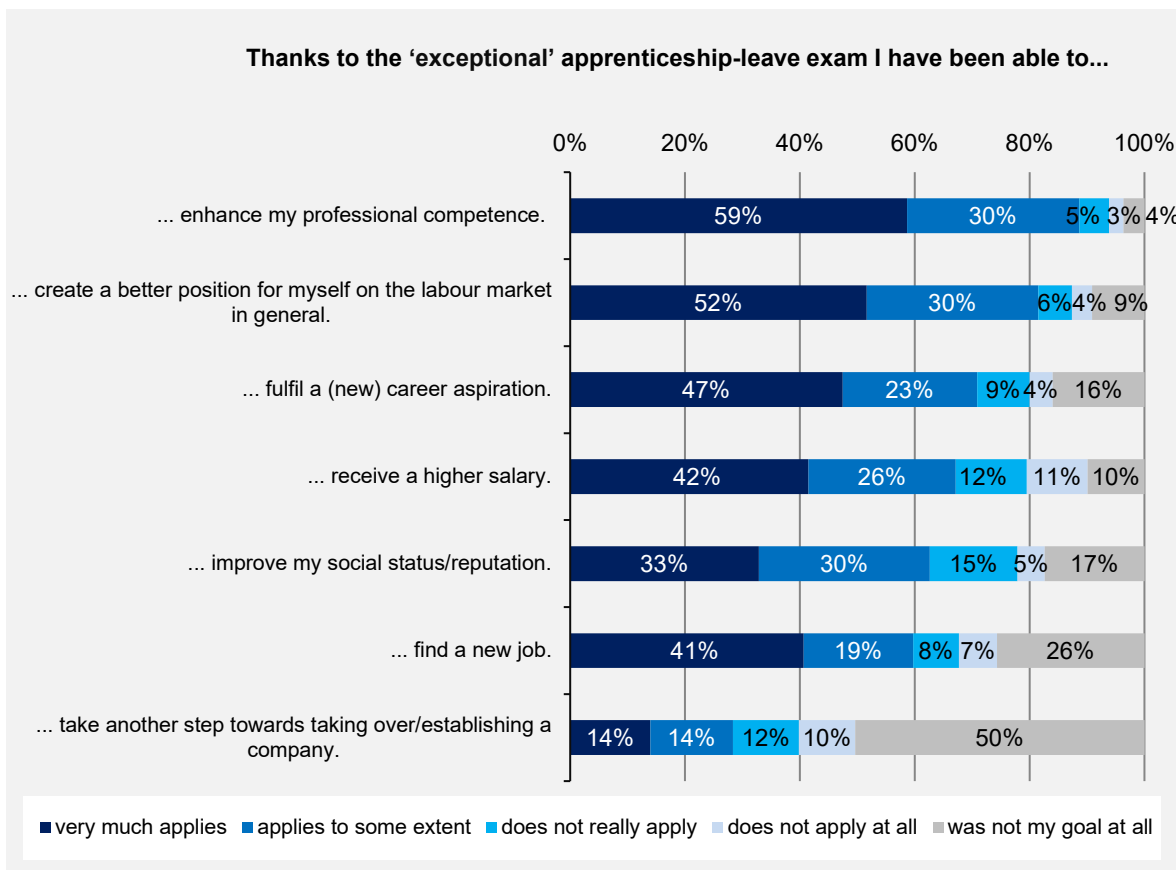
Source: ibw survey of people who took the apprenticeship-leave exam in 'second chance education' (§23 (5a) of the Vocational Training Act) in the period 2020-2022 (n=1,064; conducted in November 2023)

N.B.: The percentages relating to the occupational status "after taking the exam" refer to those n = 930 respondents who had taken an apprenticeship-leave exam by the time of the survey and passed it. The question related to the most applicable answer category.

DIAGRAM 5:

Effect of positive completion of the apprenticeship-leave exam in 'second-chance education' (§23 (5a) of the Vocational Training Act)

(among those n = 930 respondents who stated that they had passed an apprenticeship-leave exam by the time of the survey)



Source: ibw survey of people who took the apprenticeship-leave exam in 'second chance education' (§23 (5a) of the Vocational Training Act) in the period 2020-2022 (n=1,064; conducted in November 2023)

The entire study (commissioned by the WKO)² can be downloaded free of charge from www.ibw.at.

² Source: Dornmayr, Helmut / Lengauer, Birgit (2024): Außerordentliche Lehrabschlussprüfungen in Österreich („Zweiter Bildungsweg“) [Exceptional apprenticeship-leave examinations in Austria ('second-chance education')], ibw Research Report No 218, Vienna