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Recognition of non-formal and informal learning within vocational education and training and with regard to access to tertiary education

Analysis of European approaches and relevance for Austria

The present report deals with the recognition of skills and knowledge acquired outside the traditional routes of formalised education and training. In the United States as well as in other English-speaking countries this topic has been a cultural matter of course for a long time. This is on the one hand due to the fact of a comparatively low relevance of institutionalised vocational education and training, especially in the field of crafts and trade, which in itself involve a whole lot of learning by experience. On the other hand there is a high degree of regional and occupational mobility as well as immigration within these countries. For the German-speaking countries the subject of recognition of non-formal and informal learning is a relatively new one but nevertheless a challenge especially in the light of changes structure towards a knowledge-based economy, high growth rates in the service sector and last but not least significant demographic changes.

Judging on the evidence of numerous respective reports it is estimated that only about 30 percent of our learning takes place within formalised institutional routes.¹ Additionally many people accumulate valuable knowledge outside the educational institutions (and therefore without formal recognition) in work- or life-related contexts. Communication between work place colleagues is a well known resource of qualification and the support and optimization of these communication processes is a challenge for the human resources development. What people learn and whether personal skills and knowledge are relevant and worthy of recognition is one of the most important vocational education and training related questions within a knowledge-based economy with an increasing service sector for the human resources development, the research sector and the policy makers.

The topic of recognition of experience and learning outside the formal education system is complex. On the one hand, it is part of the comprehensive economic-political strategy of the European Union in the sense of the Lisbon Aims to qualify the labour force by increased motiva-

tion for life-long learning.² Under this political and programmatic meta-layer one can identify growing relevance of acknowledging work experience and fostering of informal learning

- ↗ on the company level (growing density of computers, knowledge based work, demands of being customer-oriented and being able to do team work), and
- ↗ for regions and business locations (mobility, immigration, cross-regional recruiting).

Interlocking of informal and course-based learning: paying attention to informal learning processes does not lower the importance of course-based continuing education and training, but creates new and additional chances for training institutions and providers

As mentioned above exchange of knowledge and experience on the workplace is one of the most significant sources of learning and should be assisted through course-based continuing education. Not all companies are

¹ Edgar Faure, Felipe Herrera, Abdul-Razzak Kaddoura, Henri Lopes, Arthur V. Petrovsky, Majid Rahnema, Frederick Champion Ward: Learning to Be. The World of Education Today and Tomorrow, UNESCO, Paris, 1972.

² Entschließung des Rates zum lebensbegleitenden Lernen vom 27.6.2002, C 163/2, http://europa.eu.int/urlex/pri/de/oj/dat/2002/c_163/c_16320020709de00010003.pdf

aware of the importance and the promotion of informal learning sufficiently. Informal learning entirely without company-related or institutional support though will not yield the results envisaged. This is where the providers of education and training come into play.

A percentage of 68 per cent of all employed persons who participated in work-related courses in Austria in the year 2002/2003, said that they practice “knowledge exchange with colleagues” as a means of learning; among the non-active in adult training employed persons only 55 percent answered positively. As regards the study of technical literature as well as internet based learning, those who participate in adult training courses list relevant learning activities far more frequently. Thus, informal learning and course-based organised adult training are no antagonism; much more, they complement and reinforce each other.

Closely linked to this is the fact that informal learning could and should be promoted in companies not only via knowledge carriers who bring additional knowledge into the company by attending external courses, but that it also takes elaborate written resources which have to be looked for externally or created internally. Here, the following have to be listed:

- ↗ instructions
- ↗ technical literature
- ↗ internet links
- ↗ probably also people in charge inside the company who are competent in methods and instructional matters.

To suppose that the necessary skills and knowledge within a company would only be gathered through informal learning processes would be a false estimation. In the wake of course-based education and training considerable amounts of new skills and knowledge are introduced. To estimate and coordinate formal, non-formal and informal learning correctly poses a great challenge for human resources development and training departments. Thereby specific new possibilities for external education and training providers regarding educational consulting, detecting gaps in qualification and identifying qualification needs and provision of training courses will arise.

Catalysts and areas of informal qualification processes

The job-related formation of occupation specific qualifications requires not only skills and knowledge, but also personal and technical competencies in a wider sense and therefore is strongly related to informal learning.

This has always been the case but due to increasing service sector jobs, the widespread use of computers and the trend towards a knowledge-based economy the

need for informal learning increased considerably. Today it is important to stimulate and to support informal learning as well as to recognize existent knowledge gained through informal learning processes (which constitutes an important learning motivation). International findings show the high interest in certification of informally acquired skills, knowledge and wider personal and/or vocational competencies on the part of the employees. Amongst lower qualified persons this interest is not surprisingly even higher.

Interviews with human resource experts show that informal learning is especially important in the following areas:

- ↗ generally speaking in relation to job-specific and add-on knowledge
- ↗ related to communication skills and social competencies in order to secure customer orientation and capacity for teamwork which can not be achieved through organised forms of education and training alone
- ↗ within the field of computer applications
- ↗ within knowledge intensive occupations
- ↗ within health care occupations.³

Selected countries as examples for recognition of experiential learning

In the USA and in some European countries, there exist models both on the level of the vocational training systems (VET) and on university level whose goal it is to review, to validate or if possible even the curricular related recognition of informally acquired knowledge. Among these models and institutions are the following:

- The US *Council for Adult and Experiential Learning* (CAEL), which was founded in Princeton in 1974. It provides support, documentation, training and other services with a view to the recognition of informal learning in the field of colleges and universities.
- The *Assessment of Prior Experiential Learning* (APEL), which has been used in parts of the university sector especially in Great Britain since the 1980s. It enables people without traditional educational pathways access to university studies.
- Moreover, Great Britain has developed *National Vocational Qualifications* (NVQ) in the field of vocational education and training since 1989. It is an utterly dif-

³ Brigitte Stieler-Lorenz: Informelles Lernen beim Übergang in die Informations-/ Wissensgesellschaft: Konsequenzen für die Unternehmensgestaltung, in: Matthias Rohs (Hrsg.): Arbeitsprozessintegriertes Lernen: Neue Ansätze für die berufliche Bildung. Münster, 2002.

ferentiated, nationwide system of formal recognition of competences that were informally acquired.

- The French *Bilan de Compétence* was introduced in 1991 with the aim to make it possible for the labour force (employed, unemployed, self-employed, etc.) to assess their vocational and personal competences; be it to reposition themselves on the labour market, or to initiate a phase of further education and training.
- The Swiss *Qualifikationshandbuch CH-Q* is a portfolio model that has been in use since the year 2000. Among other things, it promotes individual development both in education and profession, and aims at promoting job flexibility and mobility.
- Regarding university access for occupationally experienced persons, Germany does not have neither an overall model on the federal level, nor a quantitative relevant model on a provincial basis. Provinces have their own rules regarding access to the Fachhochschulen (Universities of applied science) and universities. Here, vocational education and work experience, preparation courses and admission procedures play a role.

Even though all the above described models have their specific pros and cons, we shall still try to briefly outline some of the central questions and problems that arise in connection with models for the recognition of informal learning.

The mobilisation of learning motivation as an argument for formal recognition of work and life experience

Undoubtedly, one of the pros of these procedures of recognition is the mobilisation of intellectual resources that the people concerned either do not use or are not even aware of. The learner becomes the centre of attention – which is one of the declared aims of the European education project termed “lifelong learning”. Furthermore, these models may be used to initiate a process of awareness-raising which would remind the people involved of the omnipresence (or ubiquity) of learning processes outside official education institutions, and which would underline the possibility or necessity of permanent accumulation of knowledge.⁴

Last but not least, the recognition of informally acquired knowledge can be economically meaningful in times of limited financial resources: training and study periods could be reduced (as well as the related costs), as certain study parts of the curriculum, which are based on

already informally acquired competences, could be dropped.

Possible problems with the implementation of recognition procedures for non-formal or informal learning

However, the point last mentioned is based on the assumption that the costs arising from the implementation of the recognition procedure do not exceed the respective savings – yet, this could be the case in practice. Putting into practice such accrediting processes (no matter whether in vocational training or at universities) has shown that these are partly *very cost intensive* as regards both finances and staff. Moreover, fundamental organisational and administrative changes may often be necessary, which provoke resistance within the respective institutions and organisations. It is for some reason, thus, that literature refers to the importance of support from recognized personalities and institutions, as well as fundamental communication and transparency of these processes of change, when it comes to implementing the former.

In the university sector, friction may also arise in the course of these changes, as it all comes down to an equation of informal or practical knowledge and academic knowledge. At least, the people in charge frequently perceive it in this way. This goes hand in hand with the fear of losing academic standards of quality and the possible inflationary spread of academic degrees.

It is in the nature of the matter that the recognition of informally acquired life and work experience in university admission easily causes a disproportionate concentration towards subjects that can easily be studied without profound mathematical and/or scientific knowledge. This would pose no problem per se, if a corresponding demand on the labour market is given. Yet, shortages and additional chances of employment can be expected in the fields of technology and science. Especially because there exist respective cases (Great Britain, for example), we have to take precautions and find possibilities to prevent subject fields from becoming too disproportionate. This would include training of the work-experienced in the fields of technology or crafts and trades, so that access to colleges or universities would not only be formally possible, but also well prepared and linked to quite a high probability of success.⁵

Adequate answers to general challenges for recognition of work and life experience are to be developed in the national and sector-

⁴ Günther Dohmen: Das informelle Lernen. Die internationale Erschließung einer bisher vernachlässigten Grundform menschlichen Lernens für das lebenslange Lernen aller, hrsg. vom Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung, Bonn, 2001.

⁵ Peter Alheit, Dorothea Piening (Publ.): Assessment of prior experiential learning as a key to lifelong learning, Evaluating European Practices. Contributions to the European Conference Bremen, 5-6 June 1998, Collected Papers, Universität Bremen, 1999.

specific context of formal qualification structures

Recognition of non-formal and informal learning is important for all highly developed, knowledge based societies. Putting it into practice is, however, determined and limited by the – often highly segmented – structures of a country's formal education system and the vocational qualification structure linked to it. Adapted to the respective situation, the recognition of experiential learning is mainly about crediting competences on a qualified personnel level (being more or less internally differentiated). In addition to this, the question of access to tertiary education (universities, colleges, etc.) plays a role, too.

Considerations concerning the Austrian case: Apprenticeship leave exam for adults and access to tertiary education via work-experience as main focus of recognition of non-formal and informal learning

Due to the highly formalised educational routes, the mostly high quality of formal (vocational) education and training as well as high educational participation rates of the population in Austria the necessity for models of recognition of non-formal and informal learning was (beside for instance the exceptional admission to the apprenticeship leave exam) till the early 90s not as highly important as it was the case in other countries (such as in the United States or the United Kingdom⁶). However this topic will also play a stronger role within the Austrian discussion in the near future, especially in form of the afore mentioned exceptional admission to the apprenticeship leave exam via work experience and also in form of possible reductions of exams.

The notion that all of the youth in Austria *complete* an education or training turned out to be a false estimation. Fact is that nearly all of the juveniles start an education or training whether it is school-based, an apprenticeship training or an AMS-course (a course provided by the Public Employment Service). Within the age group of the 20- to 24-year old however there are quite a few individuals without completed upper secondary education; in Vienna this share amounted to 26 percent in 2001. Nevertheless most of the young people within this age group are employed and therefore have gathered work experience and certain qualifications. Amongst the 20- to 24-year old without Austrian citizenship the share of individuals without completed education amounts to about 50 percent. Given the continuing structural change of the economy and demographic changes achieving a well

acknowledged occupational qualification will be important for growing shares of the labour force.

For the companies it is important to obtain reliable information about formal or non-formal achieved qualifications for not being forced to use time consuming and often inconclusive screening procedures. New tasks could arise for the providers of adult education and training within the course of the implementation of a National Qualifications Framework (which should be compatible to the EQF), such as assessment of competencies, consulting and exam preparation. Trainings could be modified in a modern way using modularisation in the framework of the so-called “intensive training for skilled workers” or the special forms of intermediate vocational colleges to attract more persons.

But there will also be changes due to the Bologna-architecture of tertiary education degrees, f. i. there will be a level below the Bachelor degree, the so called “First Cycle”, which can be achieved after about a year. This should open possibilities for employed persons to obtain a first tertiary degree via work experience in Austria too. Both learning respectively mobility pathways hold great potential for adult learning providers. Linked to this is an increasing access to tertiary institutions for experienced employed persons. This is not to be seen as rivalry but as an alternative to the Berufsmaturität (job maturity examination; an examination providing general access to higher education for skilled workers and graduates of three- to four-year full-time VET schools), and could be provided by the Fachhochschulen in form of field specific preparation courses and models of accreditation f. i. for employed persons with an apprenticeship degree or an intermediate technical and vocational college certificate. This advantage is reflected already in the new FH-development plan.⁷

The unabridged text of the study (120 pages; German version only) can be obtained from the *ibw*, where it was recently published as *ibw-research report No. 128 [ibw-Forschungsbericht Nr. 129]*, ISBN 3-902358-25-4.

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⁶ Bernd Käßlinger: Anerkennung von Kompetenzen: Definitionen, Kontexte und Praxiserfahrung in Europa, Deutsches Institut für Erwachsenenbildung, November 2002, http://www.die-bonn.de/esprid/dokumente/doc-2002/kaepflinger02_01.pdf

⁷ Im 2004 vorgelegten Fachhochschul-Entwicklungs- und Finanzierungsplan III für den Zeitraum 2005/06-2009/10 wird die verstärkte Anerkennung von non-formal erworbenen fach einschlägigen Qualifikationen Berufstätiger als Ziel genannt; Bundesministerium für Bildung, Wissenschaft und Kultur: Allgemeine und berufliche Bildung 2010. Österreichischer Zwischenbericht über die erzielten Fortschritte bei der Umsetzung des EU-Arbeitsprogramms, 20. April 2005, S. 11.