VNFIL COUNTRY FICHE: AUSTRIA
General description of the system

National terminology: "*Validierung nicht-formalen und informellen Lernens*"

There is an educational policy commitment agreed by all the social partners to promote validation in accordance to the Council recommendation from 2012 (including the development of summative and formative approaches), the actual implementation has not yet gained momentum. A VNFIL strategy for Austria is currently in preparation. This should lead to a more coherent and coordinated approach in the future, spanning, if possible, the whole educational system.

As of now, there is no over-arching system for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning. Instead the system is highly fragmented:

- There are legal regulations allowing recognition of non-formal and informal learning in the formal educational system to either give access to formal education or to allow for shortening of participation (school, university). The traditional pathway for validating non-formal and informal learning are external exams esp. e.g. for the apprenticeship leave examination, for access to higher education (Studienberechtigungsprüfung, Berufsreifeprüfung) or other legally regulated educational programmes. New legal opportunities exist for the development of recognition procedures of non-formal and informal vocationally relevant competences, thereby replacing the final apprenticeship examination, either wholly or in part, through initiatives like "Du kannst was". Other procedures lead to the acquisition of qualifications that are not part of the formal system (e.g. Weiterbildungsakademie) or give entitlement to pursue a regulated trade. For the majority of these procedures, the possibility of validation of NFIL is regulated by law, but scope and form of process and methods used for validation can vary considerably. So far, there have been no efforts at alignment of these various methods of recognition.

- There are also quite a number of innovative initiatives and projects carried out that offer formative validation, esp. for very low-skilled and vulnerable target groups, with strong focus on enhancing employability (e.g. "Kompetenz mit System"), but also for general empowerment of these target groups in terms of personal development (mainly developed in fragmented and time-limited projects).

- Validation is also becoming an issue for higher education in terms of giving access or recognising prior learning in order to shorten programmes. Implementation is very fragmented, a common approach does not exist.

Austria published its National Validation Strategy in Nov. 2017. It is embedded in the Austrian Lifefong Learning Strategy.

Process and vocabulary

Identification

Summative approaches: Identification starts with submission of documents by applicants and a first analysis by the validating institution (this is e.g. the case in the Academy of Continuing Education („Weiterbildungsakadamie" – wba). At this stage there can also be contact with the candidates to clarify open questions. In the Weiterbildungsakademie, the accreditation council takes a decision on the application and issues an official response ("Standortbestimmung").
*Formative approaches***:** When lower-skilled target groups are involved, identification is usually supported in a workshop, coaching or training setting or is carried out at the beginning of a training (e.g. Frauenstiftung Steyr).

Documentation

Summative approaches (Weiterbildungsakademie – wba - validation of professionals in the field of adult learning): The documentation made by the wba includes the collection of all documents in a portfolio. This portfolio comprises an online and an offline version. As the „Standortbestimmung" (= identification) the wba will confirm the status quo by answering the questions „What is going to be admitted?" an „What is still open?". Phase 1 and 2 are not clearly

separated respectively form a cycle. The documentation starts with the portfolio and leads to the „Standortbestimmung" (identification of competences).

Formative approaches: In the documentation phase, formative approaches also use portfolio approaches. Documents (self-assessments/reflections, work examples etc.) are also generated during the process, in the case of low-skilled target groups with the support of counsellors. Different tools can be used, e.g. the ProfilPass.

Assessment

Summative approaches (wba): Several procedures for assessment („Feststellungsverfahren") can be used. The „Feststellungsverfahren" either results in a wba-certificate (basic level) or a wba-diploma (advanced level – reaching this level requires some academic production – writing a diploma thesis and presenting it to a jury of experts). The assessment for the „wba-certificate" is carried out through the „Zertifizierungswerkstatt" (three-day mandatory assessment, which is conducted by the „Bundesinstitut für Erwachsenenbildung" (bifeb). The assessment includes performing practical tasks in small groups (conduct of a training session, group tasks, tasks in pairs) under observation of an assessor; multiple choice test on educational theory or a compilation of a paper concerning theoretical questions
Formative approaches (e.g. Frauenstiftung Steyr): For the ProfilPass and the Kompetenz-Check the assessment is done by the trainer/coach. For the programme "PC-Start" there is an external online assessment.

Certification

Summative approaches (wba): If the presented documents and the results of the assessment meet the criteria, the certificate is awarded to the professionals in adult learning.

Formative approaches (e.g. Frauenstiftung Steyr): Certification can take the form of a certificate (e.g. ProfilPass), a confirmation of participation (Kompetenz-Check) or an external certificate (PC-Start).

Usage of VNFIL

Target group

There are no specific economic branches or sectors that have started to develop their own validation schemes, perhaps with the exception of the adult education sector which has set up the Weiterbildungsakademie in order to validate the competences of pedagogical personnel in adult education institutions.

Most common targeted diplomas

Validation is currently discussed mainly in the context of the education system, where it is predominantly being developed and used within the vocational training and adult education sectors, to some extent in higher education. The school sector so far has not been very active. Main target groups currently are low-skilled vulnerable groups with education and training needs in the lower levels of the EQF (I – IV).

Quality assurance

The quality assurance/quality development system used depends on the institutional context. Educational sectors -- the school system, higher education, adult education -- e.g. have different quality systems in place which are then also applicable to validation procedures carried out by these institutions. For recognition procedures leading to formal qualification elements of quality assurance are also specified in the pertaining laws. In adult education, common quality assurance systems used are ISO, EFQM, LQW etc.

As of May 2018, a quality criteria catalogue for VNFIL exists in a first version. Is was developed as part of the implementation of the validation strategy and will be piloted in autumn 2018.

Role of Peer review: Peer Review has a potential for Austrian VNFIL because of its orientation towards development. The VNFIL "sector" currently needs exchange of (good) practices and learning from each other both on the national level but also in cooperation with other European countries. With existing quality assurance being geared towards education, Peer Review provides a unique opportunity for assessing VNFIL in a focused manner.

Status of implementation of the CEDEFOP guidelines on VNFIL (2015)

1. Availability of information, guidance and counselling:

Different ways of supporting candidates were developed within different projects and initiatives. Austria has a strong tradition of career guidance and counselling services for different target groups, however, no coherent system of support and information exists for VNFIL.

2. Stakeholders coordination:

Stakeholders are involved in the development of the global LLL strategy, including the development of VNFIL. One of the main drivers of different pilot projects and initiatives are partners traditionally involved in educational policy (Austrian Chamber of Labour, Austrian Economic Chambers, Austrian Federation of Trade Unions, Chamber of Agriculture Austria). Enterprises and the labour market play a minor role in the development of VNFIL, a part from the system of exemptions in apprenticeship.

3. Links to national qualification framework

The validation strategy is closely linked to the National Qualifications Framework (Nationaler Qualifikationsrahmen) which has been established by law on March 15, 2016.

4. Standards and learning outcomes

Learning outcomes are the "common denominator" of the NQF and validation. Learning outcomes recognised through validation of non-formal and informal learning can lead to formal (and in the longer run also non-formal) qualifications which in turn can be attributed to one of the eight NQR-levels.

5. Quality assurance

Quality assurance is determined by different organizational context of organizations involved in the provision of VNFIL in different projects. Currently, there is no national QA system in place.

6. Professional competences of practitioners:

In summative approaches, practitioners usually come from the professional field targeted by the validation. In summative approaches, counsellors come from different fields, mostly adult education, social work etc.

Documents

Strategie zur Validierung nicht-formalen und informellen Lernens in Österreich (Austrian Validation Strategy), Vienna November 2017. https://bildung.bmbwf.gv.at/euint/eubildung/vnfil.PDF

Kriterienkatalog zur Förderung der Qualität von Validierungsverfahren im Bereich der Berufs- und Erwachsenenbildung in Österreich, Vienna May 2017. https://bildung.bmbwf.gv.at/euint/eubildung/vnfil_kritkat.pdf?6fa4z6=