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Berufsreifeprüfung: Educational and Professional Career of the Graduates

Since its introduction in 1997, more than 12,000 people have completed the *Berufsreifeprüfung* (BRP - examination providing general access to higher education for skilled workers and graduates of three- to four-year full-time VET schools) and thus obtained general access to higher education. Approximately one third of these graduates come from Upper Austria. Within the framework of an evaluation study, the ibw also examined for the first time the current situation of the graduates after completing all the partial examinations, their representation in courses of further education, and their experiences with professional life and in courses of further education. After completing the BRP, more than half of the graduates began further education at a university, university of applied science, academy or the like. The majority of the graduates also remain with the same employer after completing all the partial examinations.

BRP Preparatory Courses and Participants

During the winter semester 2005/06 there were a total of 114 locations throughout Austria that offered preparatory courses for the *Berufsreifeprüfung*. In addition to adult education centers and regional branches of the *Berufsförderungsinstitute* (bfi – Vocational Training Institute) and the *Wirtschaftsförderungsinstitute* (WIFI - Institute for Economic Promotion of the Austrian Federal Economic Chamber), secondary schools, provincial vocational schools and upper secondary schools also offered preparatory courses for the *Berufsreifeprüfung*. The structure and scope of the courses offered varies among the individual provinces.

A total of 9,586 people prepared for partial examinations of the *Berufsreifeprüfung* during the winter semester 2005/06 at the *Berufsförderungsinstitute* (bfi), *Wirtschaftsförderungsinstitute* (WIFI), various adult education centers and other institutions. These 9,586 participants attended a total of 18,489 courses during the winter semester 2005/06 (equal to course participants), which means that the participants attended an average of two preparatory courses simultaneously.

The largest number of participants, both relative (23.7%) and absolute (2,271) were in Upper Austria.

The average attendance fees for the BRP preparatory courses (value calculated for all four subjects including examination fees) for all the courses offered in the winter

semester 2005/06 in the federal territory were EUR 3,081.82. The average fees were the lowest in Vienna (EUR 2,548.30), and the highest in Vorarlberg (EUR 3,358.50). Financial aid is available in all the provinces, however it varies, to an extent greatly, in terms of the amount and who is eligible. Based on pure calculation, the financial aid covers between 30% and 100% of the course fees depending on the province.

The BRP Graduates

Since the *Bildungsdokumentationsgesetzes* (education documentation law) went into effect, Austrian schools are required to report the number of students and graduates for their school in accordance with the legal guidelines. Documentation of the *Berufsreifeprüfung* is particularly troublesome due to transition difficulties. There is still no consistent statistical information available on the *Berufsreifeprüfung* graduates.

Therefore, the graduate numbers for the academic year 2001/02 up to and including the academic year 2004/05 for the individual secondary schools with a BRP examination committee were used for this study. The graduate numbers up to and including the academic year 2000/01 could be determined based on previous ibw research conducted in 2001. The external examination committees do not document the gender and age of the graduates, nor do they record which subjects and foreign languages the examinees select. This and other information could be supplemented by extrapolating the data collected in

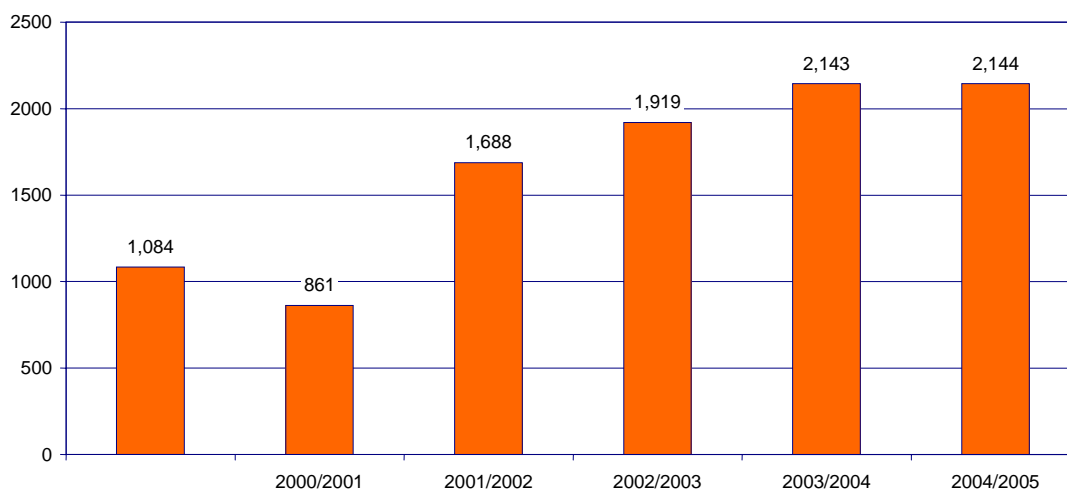
the graduate survey. The data provides a status-quo analysis and thus does not replace the need for continuous documentation.

Since the introduction of the *Berufsreifeprüfung* in 1997 up to and including the academic year 2004/05, a total of already 9,839 people have completed all the required partial examinations for the *Berufsreifeprüfung* and been awarded a *Berufsreifeprüfung* certificate and VET diploma. A clear increase in the number of graduates can be determined up to and including the academic year 2003/04. In the following academic year 2004/05, the

number of graduates was approximately as high as in the previous year.

The number of graduates per academic year for the academic years 2003/04 and 2004/05 was roughly 2,140 people. Based on this it can be assumed that alone in the academic year 2005/06 at least another 2,000 people received a *Berufsreifeprüfung* certificate, whereby the total number of graduates must now be more than 12,000. The most *Berufsreifeprüfung* certificates were awarded in the province of Upper Austria (approx. 34.6%), substantially ahead of the second ranking Vienna (19.3%), followed by Styria (10.1%).

Illustration 1: BRP Certificates Awarded According to Academic Year



* ... Cumulative number of graduates from the time the BRP was introduced in 1997 up to and including the *Reifeprüfung* exam date June/July 2000. It is not possible to differentiate according to academic year due to a lack of data.

Source: ibw survey in BRP examination schools in the provinces, Regional Education Boards, Regional Education Board for Vienna

The majority of the BRP graduates are people who have completed an apprenticeship (61.7%), substantially ahead of graduates of VET schools (29.5%). In the latter group, the majority of the graduates came from business schools. Approximately 6.3% completed a nursing school or a school for healthcare and nursing before beginning the *Berufsreifeprüfung*. As to be expected, graduates from the apprenticeship fields were dominated by the areas, of office/administration/organization as well as business administration, followed by metal technology/engineering/automotive and other transportation means as well as electrical engineering/electronics.

During the course of discussions regarding the transparency of the Austrian educational system focusing in particular on the transition from an apprenticeship to post secondary education, demands were also made for increased integration and to thereby at least increase to some extent the ability to simultaneously complete an

apprenticeship and the *Berufsreifeprüfung*. An amendment to the BRP law that went into force on March 1st, 2006 and in the area of 4-year apprenticeships lays out exceptions with relation to completing partial exams ahead of time already takes steps to accommodate these demands.

6,067 or 61.7% of the BRP graduates attained access to the *Berufsreifeprüfung* by completing an apprenticeship. Almost 20% of these BRP graduates who completed an apprenticeship (1,157) already became interested in the *Berufsreifeprüfung* during their apprenticeship. Only 318 of them however were actually able to already prepare for parts of the *Berufsreifeprüfung* during this time. A mere 187 of them Austria-wide were able to complete the first partial examination of the *Berufsreifeprüfung* before completing their apprenticeship. This data shows preparation and respectively completion of the *Berufsrei-*

feprüfung during or immediately after completing an apprenticeship is by no means a reality.

Admission and Completion of Partial Examinations

In total, more than three quarters of the graduates completed all four of the designated partial examinations. Less than one fourth of the BRP graduates only had to complete 3 or less partial examinations. In most cases the completion of a master craftsman examination or a diploma examination in accordance with the healthcare or healthcare and nursing law led to the omission of the partial examination in the subject.

The subjects selected are dominated by business administration, accounting and economics in various combinations and according to different programs, economic technology/computer science and in media and technology, followed by EDP/computer science.

The subjects in which the graduates are to complete a partial examination in the course of the *Berufsreifeprüfung* should be selected according to the BRP law from the vocational field of the candidate. This vocational field does not always have to correspond to the training completed before beginning the *Berufsreifeprüfung*. The chairman of the external examination committee decides on the admission and thus the related choice of subjects.

Upon completion of the required partial examinations the committee also awards the BRP certificate.

Particularly in the area of apprenticeship training, it appears that some examination candidates are still not able to find a suitable subject. Either the accessible adult education centers do not offer suitable subjects for their vocational field due to a lack of interest, or the candidates cannot find a suitable examination school in which they can complete the partial examinations for their subject. It is currently not possible for graduates from a few apprenticeships who are also active in the same vocational field to select a subject from their vocational field (e.g. precision optician, hairdresser and wig maker, refuse and recycling experts, graduates of the vocational fields of glass, paper, and music instruments among others).

Due to the lack of subjects offered, many BRP candidates fall back on the subjects in business administration in a variety of combinations as well as EDP/computer science with various emphases. Particularly in the technical fields, the number of apprenticeship graduates that select these “fall-back” subjects is very high, while the apprenticeship fields of office/administration/organization or retail could most certainly be considered appropriate or related subjects for their field.

Table 1: The subjects selected by graduates of the five largest apprenticeship groups according to subject relevance:

Apprenticeship Group	Appropriate/ Related Subject	Business Admin./ Accounting/ Economics in Various Combinations	Information Technology /EDP/Computer Sci- ence/ Business Information Systems	Subjects Outside the Vocational Field
Office, Administration, Organization	41.3% (Business Administration etc.) + 51.7% (EDP etc.)			7.0%
Retail	43.7%		43.7%	12.6%
Metal Technology, Machines, Automotive & Other Transportation Means	38.0%	16.8%	38.6%	6.6%
Electrical Engineering, Electronics	27.3%	20.7%	40.5%	11.5%
Building Trades	26.1%	22.6%	35.6%	15.7%

Source: ibw survey

A total of 597 or 13.6% of the graduates surveyed had to repeat one or more partial examinations. The failure rate is highest for mathematics, followed by German. Foreign languages and special subjects have a markedly lower failure rate. The majority of the graduates passed the respective partial exam on their second attempt, however in math in particular it was necessary for some graduates to attempt the exam three times before being awarded the partial examination certificate.

Vocational Changes and Further Education after Completion of the BRP

A clear majority of the graduates still remained with the same employer after completing the *Berufsreifeprüfung*, almost a third changed their employer, and a few became self employed or unemployed. Completion of the *Berufsreifeprüfung* was however only the sole cause (16.2%) or partial cause (35.1%) of the change in just over half of the cases. 42.7% of the graduates stated that

the change of employer had absolutely nothing to do with completing the *Berufsreifeprüfung*.

Upon completion of the *Berufsreifeprüfung* somewhat more than 25% of the graduates were given new duties with more responsibility than they had had before, 20.3% took up a whole new career direction or completely changed their profession, 7% took on new duties with the same amount of responsibility as before and the majority, 47.1%, continued to perform the same duties as before.

Despite changes in their profession, the wages for approximately two thirds of the graduates remained the same after completing the *Berufsreifeprüfung*. Graduates of (health care and) nursing schools in particular can hardly expect a pay raise after completing the *Berufsreifeprüfung* without further education. The reason for this is often the pay scale for public services in public hospitals which does not provide for a different pay rate for graduates of the *Berufsreifeprüfung*.

Between 25% and 35% of the graduates in all the other vocational fields received a pay raise after completing the *Berufsreifeprüfung*. To an extent they received more than a 15% pay raise, whereby graduates of VET schools received such pay raises much more often than apprenticeship graduates. Business school graduates enjoyed the largest pay raises.

After completing the *Berufsreifeprüfung*, more than half of the graduates (57.8%) began further education at a university, university of applied science, academy, or a post-secondary VET-course etc. In total, 46% of those who pursue further education after the *Berufsreifeprüfung* begin a course of study at a university, 23.4% at a university of applied science, 16.3% obtain a degree from a VET college or further training in vocationally relevant courses, 9.9% attend an academy and 4.4% attend a post-secondary VET-course. More than three quarters of the graduates believe that the *Berufsreifeprüfung* provided suitable preparation for their further education.

Apprenticeship graduates and graduates from technical schools more often have a tendency to attend VET colleges, while the graduates from (healthcare and) nursing schools who begin further education considerably more often register to study at universities. Graduates of technical schools and business schools have a higher-than-average preference for vocationally relevant further education (including VET colleges for people in employment). Graduates of technical schools furthermore show a strong preference for post-secondary VET-courses.

Differentiated according to the focus of the content, the courses of further education are dominated by business and tourism, ahead of intellectual-, human- and social professions including foreign language, and in turn ahead of technology. Graduates predominately attend universities of applied science for business training and training in tourism as well as technical training, while they register at universities to study intellectual-, human- and social professions including foreign language. Fourth on the list of selected training are pedagogical professions.

Acceptance of the BRP

Almost half of the graduates experienced that the *Berufsreifeprüfung* was less accepted in their surroundings than other certificates of secondary education granting access to tertiary education. This was generally related to general societal aspects and values, but also to their personal surroundings and the companies in which they are employed. In public services as well, the *Berufsreifeprüfung* is not always accepted as being equal. While graduates of the BRP in federal service are able to perform “higher” B-value (according to the new public services law A 2-value) duties just like graduates of secondary schools (depending on the availability of suitable positions), there is no uniform regulation for provincial services. Acceptance in the provincial services is uniform in the provinces of Carinthia, Upper Austria, Salzburg, Styria, Tyrol and Vorarlberg. In Lower Austria and Vienna however, the *Berufsreifeprüfung* is not accepted as being equal. In Burgenland the acceptance of the *Berufsreifeprüfung* is determined on an individual basis.

Despite all the problems regarding the acceptance of the *Berufsreifeprüfung* and all the difficulties associated with the admission to the BRP and the completion of individual partial examinations, almost 94% of the graduates surveyed claim that the *Berufsreifeprüfung* was the right choice for their professional and personal goals. A virtually equally high number of graduates also feel that the *Berufsreifeprüfung* was well worth the extra effort.

The study was published in a series of materials for adult education, No. 3 / 2006:

Susanne Klimmer, Peter Schlögl, Barbara Neubauer: Die *Berufsreifeprüfung* – Höherqualifizierung für den beruflichen Aufstieg oder für den Umstieg? (The *Berufsreifeprüfung* – Higher Qualification for Career Advancement or Change?)

Free download of the entire study:

http://www.erwachsenenbildung.at/services/publikationen/materialien_zur_eb/nr3_2006_brp.pdf