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Certifying acquired work qualifications: some aspects

What you have got in black and white, you may well carry home (Goethe). Education does not end with the successful completion of one's first formal qualification; thus, times like these, oriented towards mobility and characterized by large numbers of 'patchwork job biographies', witness an increase in the need for acknowledgment and endorsement of additional qualifications and skills. In this context, the term 'certification' comes up most often. Yet, what does certification mean in connection with acknowledging qualifications not earned formally, and in which contexts can one speak of certification? How are non-formal work qualifications assessed in Austria? The study 'certifying acquired work qualifications' tries to shed some light.

Acknowledging work qualifications not formally acquired: the case of Austria

in many other countries, vocational educational systems are highly oriented towards output and emphasize modularisation, and questions regarding acknowledgement and assessment are thus inherent in the system. However, these problems only played a marginal role in Austria for a long period of time¹. The reasons for this lie in the Austrian educational system which can be characterized as follows²:

- **Strong focus on first vocational training;** outside the formal system there is little tradition of alternative paths of learning.
- **Gearing towards career profiles** that dictate qualifications and competences that are neatly defined.

Therefore, the ways of acknowledgment and assessment of work qualifications not acquired in a formal way are not very diverse. Still, the following different structures of certification can be identified:

- **Staff certification** conforming to the **European Standard EN 45013** ('accredited certifications'),
- Certification of **informally acquired work competence** in order to unveil work qualifications and to **achieve formal qualification** (for example, by granting access to an exam of the formal system). In Austria, the irregular apprenticeship finals ('außerordentliche Lehrabschlussprüfung') are part of this.
- **Certification** of knowledge and skills by an institution **not** chosen on the basis of a **statutory accrediting**

procedure, but authorized by a public or private institution to carry out the certification (for example, when the Austrian Computer Society OCG confirms the ECDL – exam). The graduate receives a corresponding certificate that is recognized by the market ('**market certification**').

Common to all three forms above is that a certification can only be carried out by one institution that has been authorized to do so. This **authorization** is termed **accreditation**.

Staff certification according to the EN 45013 standard

The European system of standards as the basis for staff qualifications

The aforementioned accreditation and certification that is regulated according to the European system of standards plays a major role especially in the areas of technical procedures and products. Its origin was the wish to do away with 'non-tariff trade hindrances', which is an essential step towards a fully developed European home market. In order to eliminate the technical obstacles to trade, the European Standardization Organisations (CEN, CENELEC, ETSI) are asked to lay down exact technical regulations in the form of coordinated standards. This is the so-called regulated sector³. The other, non-regulated, areas are subject to national guidelines by the respective member states. To both the regulated and the free area, the **conformity assessment system** applies. It is intended to bring the "institutions of examination, monitoring, certification, calibration, authentication, as well as individuals, to abide by pan-European criteria"⁴. The process of accreditation recognizes that a certifying institution or an individual, for example, "has met the demands for qualification and endowments applying to them respectively, and that they have the competence to carry out certain tasks". By the nomination, the accredited institution becomes a nominated institution (notification) and hence part of the European Conformity Assessment System⁵. The year 1992 saw the implementation of a **law of accreditation (AkkG)** in Austria which controls the accreditation of institutions that examine, monitor, and certify⁶. According to the AkkG, Austria's accrediting institution is the *Federal Ministry of Economy and Employment (BMWA)*⁷. Corresponding to the law of accreditation, cer-

certification is “the formal affirmation of conformity by an objective third party that has been accredited to this task”⁸. The corresponding **European standard for the certification of staff qualification** is the **EN 45013**.

The importance of the EN 45013 and how it is handled in Austria

Certification according to the EN 45013 allows for people to be confirmed to have **sufficient specialist competence** in a **specific area**. Due to the standard being in place all over Europe, proof of the respective certification is a uniform trade mark for those with a knowledge of the subject.

Today, it is mostly personnel in the fields of quality and environmental management, as well as in other specific technical areas (in welding, for example) that receives certification⁹ - mainly because an accredited certification requires the **presence of underlying standards or other normative foundations**¹⁰. In all the other areas certification is difficult: it has to be proved that there exists an **international standard for the particular qualification** and that the **certification is acknowledged internationally**, in order for the BMWA to grant accreditation¹¹.

institutions are **granted** certifying status **by decree**. Only institutions that can expect **international recognition** of its certificates are to be accredited with certifying status¹².

Figure 1 shows the accredited institutions as well as the notified institutes that certify staff qualifications in Austria¹³.

In **Germany** and **Switzerland**, the **number of certified qualifications** is **higher** already. Still, the staff certification after EN 45013 is not expected to play a key role, aside from very neatly specified areas. Yet, it remains to be observed whether the modularisation of the further education system in Switzerland will lead to higher demand.

The BMWA believes that the **future** will see an **increase in staff certifications**. Reasons for this are, among other ones, the liberalisation of the trade and industry laws, which may bring about a stronger call for visible, and internationally recognised, proof of qualification¹⁴. Besides the accreditation of the certification of ‘heat pump installers’, accreditation petitions can be expected for the certification of motor vehicle specialists, real estate assessment specialists, electronic testing technicians etc. – all in the wake of the German trend.

*Bfi-CERT*¹⁵ estimates that certification will

FIGURE 1: Accredited staff certification institutions and areas of certification	
Organisation	Areas of certification
CIS – Certification & Information Security Services Plc, Vienna	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ ISMS-managers and ▪ ISMS-auditors after the ISO 10011-2 standard
TÜV-Austria, Vienna	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ people in the field of welding and soldering ▪ people with a knowledge of the subject according to the ÖNORM F 1053 standard
Central Institute of Welding Technique, Vienna	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ people in the field of welding ▪ people with a knowledge of the subject according to the ÖNORM F 1053
Certifying Post of the Austrian Fire Safety Organization (ÖBV-Cert), Vienna	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ people with a knowledge of regular testing and maintenance of portable fire extinguishers according to the ÖNORM F 1053 ▪ Fire safety official according to § 43 of the workplace decree
Austrian Union of gas and water matters (ÖVGW), Vienna	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Water officer according to the ÖVGW-guideline W 10
Institute of Production Technique, department of Exchange Engineering and Gauging Technique of the Technical University of Vienna	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ People in the field of quality management, especially quality auditors and quality managers
Certifying post of the Institute for Career Support (bfi-CERT), Leoben	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ TQM-managers ▪ people in the field of welding
Austrian Union for Quality Preservation (ÖVQ), Vienna	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ people in the area of quality management, mainly quality auditors, quality managers, quality officers, quality technicians, quality assistants, quality testers ▪ people in the field of environmental management, especially environment auditors, environment managers ▪ people in charge of work safety, mainly security personnel
Wifi-Austria, Vienna	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ quality officers in small and middle-sized companies and internal auditors ▪ people in the field of welding
Austrian Society for Devastation-Free Examination without Devastation (ÖGfZP), Vienna	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ people in the area of examination without devastation
INDUZERT, industry certifying branch of the VOEST-ALPINE STEEL LINZ Plc, Linz	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ people in the area of welding

play an increasing role in all areas, as it provides companies with **exact proof of qualification**.

Due to the fact that all **certification is subject to temporal limitation** (certificates are valid for three to five years), the holder of such a certificate finds herself, on the one hand, motivated (or forced) to continuously do further training¹⁶; on the other hand, however, a certificate is –unlike a diploma for example– **not permanently valid proof of competence**. This, according to *Bfi-CERT*, adds to the potential customers' **sceptical attitude** towards staff certifications outside the areas where the latter is essential¹⁷.

What is more, the **demand for staff certification** develops much like a **snowball** grows. In the Netherlands, for instance, a certification for high voltage technicians was developed for *TenneT*, a network provider; as a result, the latter now demands all its suppliers certify their staff¹⁸.

The certification of non-formally acquired work competence: making on-the-job qualification apparent and gaining a formal qualification

A further option to make previously acquired qualifications apparent and assessable is to certify non-formally acquired competence so as to bring it to a formal completion. The two options that are of major importance in Austria are the **'Berufsreifeprüfung'** (job maturity examination, in the sense of a bridge to higher education) on the one hand, and the possibility of taking the apprenticeship exams as a mature student on the other hand.

Extracurricular apprenticeship examination

The **law for on-the-job education (BAG)** gives people who did not go through a formal education, i.e., an apprenticeship or school, access to the apprenticeship finals and thus the opportunity to acquire a formal work qualification.

The percentage of apprenticeship finals taken in the course of the **alternative path of education ('zweiter Bildungsweg')**, as part of **additional examinations** and other permission prerequisites (acc. to §§ 23 (5)a and b, 27 (1) and 29 of the BAG), has been rising over the last ten years. In 1990, it made up 8.6% of all apprenticeship finals, by 1995 it had already reached 14.5%, and constituted 14.3% in 2001 (this accounts for 7,277 out of a total of 50,770 exams successfully taken)¹⁹.

Recognition of non-formally acquired work qualifications does not happen according to specially developed criteria, but **alongside a nationally agreed frame of reference** for work competence - especially with those candidates that indeed take the exam on the basis of their work experience rather than having gone through corresponding schooling: "Even though the exam for externals is important, it nonetheless merely offers taking an exam and **no independent or special method** for finding out about, as well as assessing work experience. In this sense, the exam for externals is carried out with respect to contents, fundamentals, and structures of formal education²⁰."

Unlike similar approaches in other European countries, **Austria does not draw on alternative ways of assessment** to find out about work competence.

The necessary amendment of **trade and industry laws (GewO)** also brought about a modernization of the **sys-**

tem to prove competence. In connection with the certification of non-formally acquired on-the-job qualifications, it is mainly the recognition of alternative proof of competence and the new (modular) master craftsperson examination that is of importance²¹, the only accessing condition of the latter being the age of 18 or over.

'Berufsreifeprüfung' (job maturity examination) and 'Externistenprüfung' (external candidate examination)

The 'Berufsreifeprüfung' was introduced in 1997 with a view to putting practical knowledge acquired at work on a level with theory-centred knowledge gained at school. It offers people who have completed an apprenticeship, graduated from a secondary TVE school or a health and nursing school, the opportunity to **take the Certificate of Secondary Education** ('Reifeprüfung'-certificate) and therefore gain **general access to university**.

The BRP has grown to be a significant alternative to the already long-existing **'Studienberechtigungsprüfung'** (study permit exam (SBP) which grants only **limited access to universities**. In the school year 2000/2001, 1,084 people took the 'Berufsreifeprüfung'²².

Another way to have non-formally acquired qualifications acknowledged with a formal degree is the possibility of the so-called **'Externistenprüfung'** (external candidate exam)²³ one can take at vocational (high) schools and general high schools. The examination earns **the same rights** one gets by passing **diploma and maturity exams**, or other final examinations.

Marketwise certification

In a globalized economy, these certificates serve two purposes: First, they meet the interest of trans-national companies which have internationally recognized certificates for staff and thus quality criteria at their disposal; second, they also encourage the mobility of staff who can clearly prove their qualification with the respective certificate.

In **nearly all areas of the Economy**, structures have been developed which integrate institutions that offer further training and examinations into an **internationally shared pattern**. **Especially in the fields of IKT** (ECDL, or Cisco-certificates, for instance), **languages** (Cambridge Certificates, European language certificates, European Language Portfolio, et al.), and increasingly also in management (i.e., project management certificates etc.), the offers meet with wide acceptance, both as regards graduates and on the labour market. The **structures of certification** sometimes **overlap** with those that correspond to the **EN 45013** (for example in the field of quality- and project management). Due to the **absence of national certification structures in the field of further education** and the **wish for simple, trans-national recognition of qualifications**, marketwise certification – consider the "European Warden Certificate", for instance – increases.

Marketwise certifications promise high standards of qualification as well as international recognition to be central to a system of certification. **Qualitative assessment** of the respective structures of certification is **difficult**. As the sheer term renders certificates estimated more highly than other ways of completing further training, the **legitimate orientation towards marketing** of both those who

offer further training and producers (cf. the IT sector) plays a role, too.

The **criteria how to get a certificate** are **highly diverse**.

Assessment of certificates by the HR management²⁴

Interviewees associate certification mainly with the **certification of organisations** as well as typical **market certifications**. It is hardly ever considered by the interviewees that certification could be used as a means to make informally acquired competence apparent, and to maybe come to a formal graduation (or some proof of competence).

Degrees and work experience are decisive criteria when it comes to selecting staff. **Curricula Vitae and work reference from employers** mainly bear proof of these **non-formally acquired competences**, except for assessment procedures. Documented further training is most often regarded as being classes passed or training courses completed (and the **question whether these are certified** merely plays a minor role), and represents an additional criterion of selection. What is important is their being **up to date**, their **individual value** for the company, and their **attested meaningfulness**.

In summation, one can state that, with some delay, the question of certifying work experience and skills has become part of educational policy in Austria, too; the strategies how to assess non-formally acquired competence, however, are still feeble. So far, certification can be seen in the following contexts:

- **Certification as part of staff certification according to the EN 45013** So far, certification has played a major role with welding specialists and quality management personnel. On a medium-term basis, one can expect an **increasing need for certification**.
- **Marketwise Certification** This has been the archetypal area of certification and **is going to increase** as a result of the growing demand for further education.

Staff certification in the sense of recognizing non-formal qualifications as a means of access to formal education or examinations Non-formally acquired qualifications are still being compared with the **reference points of formal qualification**, which means essentially that recognition of informal competence only allows for **access to exams of the formal system**. **To date**, other forms of recognizing and assessing informally acquired competence are of **little importance**. ■

¹ Cf. Bjornavold, J.: 'Determining, assessing, and acknowledging non-formally acquired competence: trends in Europe'. In Cedefop Panorama Series, 48: Agora V, determining, assessing, and acknowledging non-formally acquired competence. Luxembourg 2002:12.

² Cf. Bjornavold, J.: 'Determining, assessing, and acknowledging non-formally acquired competence: trends in Europe'. In Cedefop Panorama Series, 48: Agora V, determining, assessing, and acknowledging non-formally acquired competence. Luxembourg 2002:12.

³ For the products toys, gas appliances, pressure apparatuses, and construction products, for example, such regulations exist. Compare www.bmwa.gv.at.

⁴ Website of the Federal Ministry of Economy and Employment (BMWA), www.bmwa.gv.at.

⁵ Cf. ebda.

⁶ Cf. §1 (1), AkkG

⁷ Cf. §8, AkkG

⁸ §7, AkkG

⁹ Cf. website of the Federal Ministry of Economy and Employment (BMWA), www.bmwa.gv.at

¹⁰ Certification and staff qualification has so far built on ISO and CEN standards; the certification of auditors dates back to an international memorandum (EOQ). Cf. a telephone interview with Ing. Kurt Danzinger, accreditation service of the BMWA, November 11, 2002.

¹¹ Cf. a telephone interview with DI Franz Gruber, director of bif-CERT, November 11, 2002..

¹² Cf. § 17 (2) AkkG

¹³ The composition is based on a data read-out of the Law Information System (RIS) regarding decrees by the Minister for Economy and Employment about accrediting institutions that certify staff, November 9, 2002.

¹⁴ Cf. a telephone interview with Ing. Kurt Danzinger, BMWA, November 11, 2002.

¹⁵ Cf. a telephone interview with DI Franz Gruber, director of bif-CERT, November 11, 2002..

¹⁶ One can usually gain re-certification by providing evidence of relevant work in the respective field in the time of certification (which, for real estate assessment specialists could be documentation of commissions carried out). If this is not the case, classes and/or examinations should taken so as to regain the qualification.

¹⁷ Cf. Telephone conversation with Mr. Jermini, Swiss accreditation institution (SAS), November 12, 2002.

¹⁸ Cf. the website of the certification institute KEMA, www.kemaquality.com.

¹⁹ Cf. the apprenticeship statistics of the Chamber of Economy of Austria as well as ibw calculations.

²⁰ Bjornavold, J.: 'Determining, assessing, and acknowledging non-formally acquired competence: trends in Europe'. In: Cedefop Panorama Series, 48: Agora V, determining, assessing, and acknowledging non-formally acquired competence. Luxembourg 2002:14.

²¹ Cf. GewO 1994, BGBl. I 65/2002 of July 23, 2002.

²² Source: investigation by the ibw

²³ cf. BGBl No. 472/1986, last amended by BGBl I No. 22/1998

²⁴ In the course of the study, qualitative interviews with 15 experts in the field of HR were conducted.

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