



Possible ways forward – routes towards the recognition of informally acquired competences

► Employability skills are to a considerable extent acquired within informal learning processes, meaning via dealing directly with occupational requirements. This takes place in a context related manner and depends on the characteristics of the work activity, the scope of action and the complexity of the requirements. Acquisition of competences tends to occur in an implicit, incidental and uncontrolled way and without didactic support. Although this leads to the gaining of know-how which can be verbalised only to a limited extent, it is very likely to have its basis in a reflective approach. For this reason, this pathway enables the acquisition of complex skills and cognitive competences rather than merely reduced skills.

The fostering of the measurement, validation, recognition or crediting of informally acquired competences has now become part of the educational policy repertoire. There is no doubt that this is justified. Practically related learning in the world of work and employment or within the family and social environment ought to be upgraded as part of lifelong learning and should be more closely linked with formal learning processes. The aim should be for this to make transitions easier and enable better use to be made of periods of education.

Notwithstanding this, such demands usually remain non-committal and are seldom couched in specific terms. No precise stipulation exists as to the target groups at which recognition of informal learning should be aimed and the instruments and procedures which should be used to realise such an objective. For this reason, evidence of benefits is only available in general rather than in specific form, and there is insufficient clarity as to the requirements for educational policy action which exist. In the absence of

specification of this nature, however, demands will largely be unaccompanied by follow-up action. Although everyone is capable of taking ownership of these demands, everyone also interprets them in a different way. Neither does any clarity exist in respect of what the competences should relate to, the rights with which they should be associated or who should undertake competence assessment. In which direction are we then moving? Reviewing the debate enables at least four functions and action areas to be differentiated: competence measurement as a feedback instrument, as a prerequisite for admission to educational courses and final examinations and as a basis for the crediting of competences to educational courses.

Individual feedback

A competence analysis initially makes sense as a feedback instrument for the purpose of providing the individual with information on strengths and on areas where development is required. With regard to developmental and career planning, such an approach enables important indications to be given on how to establish a better basis for individual decisions. Not the least of the areas where action is required are phases of vocational reorientation, such as resumption of employment after a period of family life or prior to vocational retraining. Competence analyses are currently being deployed in the form of so-called profiling, especially within the scope of training measures pursuant to German Social Security Code III (SGB III).

Competence analyses are undertaken by special service providers. Results are primarily of significance to the individuals themselves and are not associated with any kind of entitlement. In other countries, this instrument is used much more extensively as a part of an advisory concept for individual occupational development rather than merely being deployed for the reorientation of the unemployed. In the light of discontinuous occupational careers, such a model could also act as a template for relevant initiatives in this country.



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Access to educational courses

Generally speaking, certain formal requirements apply to access to educational courses. These are achieved via qualifications and certificates which claim to act as the guarantor of a standardised and largely uniform evaluation of level of achievement. Although this is a claim which remains unfulfilled in many cases, they serve as an indicator and evidence of apprenticeship entry maturity and the ability to enter higher education or demonstrate a qualification to pursue academic work. Only in exceptional cases are practical experiences accorded equivalent recognition or at least included as part of evidence of competence in selection procedures.

Trial periods of higher education represent one possibility of according due consideration to practical experiences and achieving access to higher education without formal evidence of qualification. Experiences in some federal states are not, however, encouraging in terms of recommending the trial higher education model generally. The selection procedures conducted by the management of institutes of higher education are a more promising option. Individual institutes of higher education, especially Universities of Applied Sciences, have developed relevant instruments and procedures for this purpose. The result of this is that a chance is given to those who have gained practical experience within their occupations but who do not have formal university entrance qualifications. The records show that those with such practical experience are perfectly able to successfully complete a course of higher education at a University of Applied Sciences. This applies all the more in cases when the institute of higher education facilitates transition to the general specialist foundations of study by providing targeted bridging courses. In the light of the shortage of engineers, such models should be expanded and experiences gained should be evaluated.

Credit towards educational courses

The European Qualifications Framework has established an educational policy perspective for a learning outcomes oriented evaluation of educational qualifications. Any decision in respect of the crediting of informally acquired competences is ultimately one which can only be made by the recipient educational establishment itself, which is the only party capable of evaluating whether the competences displayed by a person interested in entering the establishment are likely to result in a successful educational process.

A series of content overlaps exists between educational courses and courses of higher education at Universities of Applied Sciences in particular. For this reason, the usual practice as far as dual courses of study are concerned is for task assignments from company practice to be directly included in seminars and examination work or for indivi-

dual units of study to be completed entirely within company practice. In a reversal of this process, specialists from company practice take part in teaching by acting as lecturers. The systematic integration of initial and advanced vocational education and training qualifications ensures systematic recognition of competences acquired in company practice. The functionality of this approach has been acknowledged in dual courses of study and should be transferred to higher education courses of study generally.

Recognition of informally acquired competences would also provide an instrument for shortening duration of participation with regard to advanced vocational training. Not least of the prerequisites involved here would be a modularisation of courses of advanced training. Although consensus on this issue has in principle been in place for decades, very little implementation has been forthcoming.

Access to examinations

The recognition of informally acquired competences does not represent anything new in vocational education and training. The acquisition of practical experiences constitutes a systematic component of in-company training. And in advanced vocational training relevant practical experiences represent a condition for admission to advanced training examinations rather than participation in certain educational courses. In addition to this, there is the possibility of external examinations, an opportunity of which around 30,000 people avail themselves every year. This represents a proportion of just over seven percent of all examination candidates.

In general terms, the competent bodies have considerable discretion in facilitating applicant participation in an external final examination for a training occupation or in an advanced training occupation. Although this regulation allowing the use of discretion enables flexibility to be applied, it also means that those interested in training are often unable to evaluate whether their prior educational and occupational experience will constitute a basis for admission to an examination. Neither is the practice of the chambers necessarily uniform. For this reason, a simple, standardised and transparent procedure could be of assistance in enabling evidence to be provided of competences acquired in practice.

Notwithstanding this, competences acquired during occupational practice will not always be structured in such a manner so as to permit a complete occupational field to be covered. This gives rise to the policy challenge of certifying partial qualifications where appropriate. Training and qualification modules show possible routes in this direction. ■