



Agentur für
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*Recognition of non-formally
and informally acquired
competences*

Recommendations for recognition and
crediting procedures

2016

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Hopbach, 1010 Vienna, Rengasse 5

Authors: Barbara Birke, Anke Hanft

Editing: Barbara Mitterauer

office@aq.ac.at

www.aq.ac.at

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1 Introduction

„The acquisition of knowledge in classic education institutions such as schools and higher education institutions is complemented by learning at non-formally organised learning facilities. Acquired skills and competences are recognised and certified as qualifications regardless of where they were obtained, and are equal to non-formally and informal education processes.

The consistent orientation towards learning results provides people who have acquired important competences outside of school and higher education institutions with greater possibilities in education and their careers and lead to the permeability of the education and further education system.“

Vision of the 10th action line of the Austrian Lifelong Learning Strategy¹.

The vision of the National Lifelong Learning Strategy to consider non-formal and informal education processes as equal to formal education is confronted with the Austrian reality: In the higher education system, the recognition of achievements is limited to those competences that can be proven through formal certificates. Access to higher education is typically and especially gained through the general university entrance qualification. Previous achievements are recognised by proof of certificates acquired in the formal education system.

This circumstance reflects in essence the Austrian legal framework. Against the backdrop of international developments and the increasing importance of lifelong learning it is necessary, though, to make society realise the added value of recognising experiences which were gained outside the formal education system and to promote permeability between non-academic and higher education.

Over the past decades, measures were taken to promote permeability, for example through the establishment of non-traditional access paths such as the university entrance qualification examination and the TVE diploma examination as well as by opening the higher education sector to those holding vocational qualifications by introducing appropriate regulations for the sector of universities of applied sciences. These, though, have only limited significance from a

¹ LLL:2020, Strategie zum lebensbegleitenden Lernen in Österreich; Bundesministerium für Unterricht, Kunst und Kultur; Bundesministerium für Wissenschaft und Forschung; Bundesministerium für Arbeit, Soziales und Konsumentenschutz; Bundesministerium für Wirtschaft, Familie und Jugend; July 2011, p. 44 f.
https://bildung.bmbwf.gv.at/ministerium/vp/2011/lll-arbeitspapier_ebook_gross_20916.pdf?4dtiae= (in German only), accessed on 26 July 2016.

quantitative point of view.² Further academic training, which has become a well established sector among the higher education institutions, contributes notably to the promotion of permeability by generally stipulating a first academic degree as a requirement for admission to master programmes. But many higher education institutions also allow highly qualified people who do not hold a first academic degree to access university programmes for further education. This circumstance raises the question of how competences acquired outside of the higher education sector can be considered as adequate to a bachelor's degree and can be recognised upon admission to such.

Crediting already acquired competences towards study periods is still the main focus of higher education institutions when it comes to recognising competences that were acquired in formal education processes (e.g. at colleges of higher educational vocation). Higher education institutions are still cautious to recognise experience gained through advanced vocational training or competences acquired through vocational training or in daily life (e.g. through volunteering) as adequate performances which do not have to be repeated in the degree programme.

Some higher education institutions have already become aware of the added value that experienced and highly qualified people bring to higher education institutions which is also due to internationalisation and the necessity to gain a competitive advantage. The institutions take measures to address these target groups and develop appropriate course offerings. The aim for institutions is to make use of their experience while pointing out the responsibility of higher education institutions particularly in terms of assuring quality of these programmes. The recognition of non-formally and informally acquired competences challenges higher education institutions to show that competences acquired outside of the higher education sector are equally valued and to develop transparent procedures for doing so. This publication was put together in order to support and promote such initiatives of higher education institutions with the aim to ensure quality standards in higher education.

² Approximately 3% of first-time students at public universities hold a TVE diploma certificate or university entrance qualification certificate: https://oravm13.noc-science.at/apex/f?p=103:6:0::NO::P6_OPEN:N, accessed on 25 July 2016. About 4% of first-year students at universities of applied sciences met the admission requirements in the academic year 2014/2015 through vocational qualifications; Source: AQ Austria, own analysis of data supplied by universities of applied sciences.

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This endeavour requires an apparent political will to promote permeability of the higher education system for the purpose of improving equal opportunities, without, however, questioning the current qualitative standards. All parties in the higher education system are required to support this endeavour.

Against this backdrop, the AQ Austria initiated a project in cooperation with eleven Austrian higher education institutions to encourage permeability by recognising non-formally and informally acquired competences.

This project focuses on the promotion of permeability in two ways:

- by considering competences acquired outside the formal, tiered educational systems **when accessing higher education**; this refers to people who do not have a traditional higher education entrance qualification;
- by considering prior knowledge and performances through **crediting** these towards the study programme itself resulting in the replacement of parts of a degree programme. This may lead to shorter study periods, or at least to a reduction in examinations to be taken.

The results of this project, which was financed by the Federal Ministry of Science, Research and Economy, are recommendations which were compiled by the project group in cooperation with experts of higher education institutions outside of Austria. They constitute examples of good practice, and they are the result of a discursive process which took place in several workshops.

The representatives of the higher education institutions contributed substantially to the development of these recommendations. Although there is consensus on the phrasing of the majority of the recommendations, the publication remains the sole responsibility of the AQ Austria. The AQ Austria would like to thank the representatives of the higher education institutions for their continuous and productive involvement in this project.

2 Project framework data

In order to ensure feasibility and relevance of the project's results and for them to be of use, a joint concept was developed and implemented in cooperation with the higher education institutions, their stakeholders, and experts in the field of recognition.

In a discussion of the concept³ of the AQ Austria's project proposal together with experts as well as stakeholders, the framework of the concept and the methodical questions were agreed. It was presented to and further developed with the invited higher education institutions in the course of a half-day information event in the winter of 2014.

When choosing the higher education institutions to join the information event and subsequently the project itself, the following criteria were applied:

- Experience in the recognition of non-formally and informally acquired competences or special relevance of the topic to the higher education institution,
- diversification with regard to the higher education institutions' speciality and location
- representation of all higher education sectors (public universities, private universities, universities of applied sciences, university colleges of teacher education), and
- higher education institutions which developed a lifelong learning strategy.

In February 2015 the following interested higher education institutions became members of the project group:

- Danube University Krems
- University of Applied Sciences BFI Vienna
- Carinthia University of Applied Sciences
- FH Campus Wien University of Applied Sciences
- University of Applied Sciences Kufstein

³ Discussion of the concept on 2 October 2014; Institutions and personally invited experts: Universities Austria – Elisabeth Westphal; FHK – Andreas Breinbauer; ÖPUK – Maria-Regina Kecht; RÖPH – Erwin Rauscher; AUCEN – Elke Gornik, Christine Stöckler-Penz; Federal Ministry of Science, Research and Economy – Edith Winkler, Heribert Wulz; Federal Ministry of Education and Research – Angela Weilguny; Carola Iller (personally invited); Arthur Mettinger (personally invited); Reinhard Zürcher (personally invited); AQ Austria – Barbara Birke, Anke Hanft.

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- Medical University of Graz
- MODUL University Vienna Private University
- University of Education Upper Austria
- Graz University of Technology
- University of Innsbruck
- University of Salzburg

In addition, the group was also joined by one representative of the Austrian University Continuing Education and Staff Development Network (AUCEN), of Universities Austria (uniko), and of the Federal Ministry of Science, Research and Economy (BWF), respectively.

The duration of the project amounted to twelve months and five theme-based workshops. Two methods were chosen for this project: a moderated exchange of experiences among the participating higher education institutions and external experts or representatives of the higher education institutions not participating in the project, but having experience with procedures and instruments regarding the recognition of non-formally and informally acquired competences, as well as an analysis of the literature and examples of good practice.

3 Principles of the project group

The aim of the project group was to decide jointly on the principles, minimum requirements, and quality criteria which shall apply to the endeavour of recognising non-formally and informally acquired competences and result in joint recommendations. The purpose of these recommendations is to guide and support higher education institutions in the development of procedures and instruments.

The recommendations were compiled by the project group and are based on the experiences of the participating higher education institutions as well as on national and international experiences of higher education institutions which were not part of the project group. National frameworks and developments at a European level were underlying the discussions and considerations. The publication remains the sole responsibility of the AQ Austria.

The purpose of these recommendations is

- to contribute to the permeability of higher education by recognising non-formally and informally acquired competences,
- to build awareness for the necessity of recognising non-formally and informally acquired competences, and
- to promote quality assurance in the field of recognition, also in order to increase acceptance and trust in the procedure.

Higher education institutions are faced with specific challenges and quality issues when it comes to the recognition of non-formally and informally acquired competences, since they are difficult to classify, especially with regard to the assessment of their level and the degree of equivalence to formally acquired competences. On this account, the focus of the project was placed on the recognition and crediting process of non-formally and informally acquired competences. The recognition and both the transfer of credits for formally acquired competences within the higher education sector as well as the award of credits for those acquired outside of this sector was also considered at all times. The guiding principles underlying the general recommendations are particularly meant to apply to all forms and procedures of recognition and crediting.

Furthermore, the considerations and discussions in the project partly focused on those course offerings that already take into account non-formally and informally acquired competences. These include primarily continuing education programmes (leading to the award of an academic degree) as well as the course offerings of universities of applied sciences. With vocational education and higher education connecting increasingly, questions regarding the award or transfer of credits for competences become even more relevant to all course offerings. The principles and considerations are therefore meant to apply to all course offerings when questions regarding the recognition and crediting of non-formally and informally acquired competences in degree programmes arise.

The project group established principles for the development of instruments and procedures, but the development of the actual procedures remains the higher education institutions' responsibility. The choice of instruments to be included in the procedures is also left with the institutions. The recommendations at hand shall offer support in the process.

Regardless, the project group has also laid down principles to be considered in all procedures.

The project was executed based on the applicable legal framework. Thus, the recommendations refer in general to what is currently possible and permitted by law, and are meant to support higher education institutions in their options.

In the course of the project, some of the conditions of the framework proved to be obstructive. For this reason, the project group additionally provided recommendations to educational decision makers on the adaptation or change of the respective laws.

4 Definitions of terms underlying the project

The terms recognition and crediting, formal, non-formal, and informal learning may be defined in several different ways. For this joint project, the group decided on the following definitions:⁴

- **Formal learning** means learning which takes place in an organised and structured environment specifically dedicated to learning and typically leads to the award of a qualification, usually in the form of a certificate or a diploma; it includes systems of general education, initial vocational training, and higher education.
This kind of learning is controlled, restricted by a curriculum, and results in the award of fixed degrees.
- **Non-formal learning** means learning through planned activities (in terms of learning objectives, learning time) where some form of learning support is present (e.g. a student-teacher relationship); it may cover programmes to impart professional competence, adult literacy, and basic education for early school leavers; very common cases of non-formal learning include in-company training through which companies update and improve the competence of their workers, such as ICT skills, structured on-line learning (e.g. by making use of open educational

⁴ Unless otherwise stated, the definitions were based on: Council Recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning. Official Journal of the European Union (2012/C 398/01), C 398/5. [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN-DE/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32012H1222\(01\)&from=EN](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN-DE/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32012H1222(01)&from=EN), accessed on 26 July 2016.

resources), and courses organised by civil society organisations for their members, their target group, or the general public.

This results in a self-regulated learning process, since the individual co-decides when and to what degree the learning process – be it formal or informal – will be carried out.

- **Informal learning** means learning resulting from daily activities related to work, family or leisure, and is not organised or structured in terms of objectives, time, or learning support; it may be unintentional from the learner's perspective; examples of learning outcomes acquired through informal learning are competences and skills acquired through life and work experiences, project management skills, or ICT skills acquired at work, languages learned and intercultural skills acquired during a stay in another country, ICT skills acquired outside work, competences acquired through volunteering, cultural activities, sports, youth work, and through activities at home (e.g. taking care of a child).

This kind of learning cannot necessarily be controlled or planned and is unintentional.

- **Validation** means a process of confirmation by an authorised body that an individual has acquired learning outcomes measured against a relevant standard and consists of the following four distinct phases:
 1. IDENTIFICATION of particular experiences of an individual through dialogue;
 2. DOCUMENTATION to make visible the individual's experiences;
 3. a formal ASSESSMENT of these experiences;
 4. CERTIFICATION of the results of the assessment which may lead to a partial or full qualification.

At an international level, special centres have been established to document, validate, and assess the equivalence of learning outcomes acquired in prior learning processes.⁵

In German, the terms *Anerkennung* (recognition) and *Anrechnung* (crediting) are often used interchangeably and inconsistently. For the purpose of this project, these two terms are defined as follows:

⁵ For further information see Hanft, Anke, Müskens, Wolfgang: *Anerkennung und Anrechnung beruflicher Qualifikationen und Kompetenzen im Hochschulbereich*. In: Heister, Michael, et al. (ed.): *Durchlässigkeit in der beruflichen Bildung*. 2017. In print. (in German only)

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- **Recognition** (of prior learning) means that the learning outcomes acquired either through formal education, non-formal, or informal learning are validated upon admission.
- **Crediting** means that prior learning outcomes are credited to a degree programme and do not have to be repeated. This may lead to shorter study periods⁶ or at least to a reduction of examinations to be taken. Study period refers to all parts of a degree programme that are graded and which results in the award of a document of proof and also leads to the acquisition of significant knowledge or skills even if it does not present a complete study programme⁷. The recognition of examinations pursuant to section 78 of the Universities Act (Universitätsgesetz, UG) as well as the recognition of proven knowledge pursuant to section 12 paragraph 1 of the University of Applied Sciences Study Act (Fachhochschul-Studiengesetz, FHStG) correspond to the act of crediting (the award or transfer, respectively, of credits), according to the definitions.
- **Access** (to higher education) means the right of qualified candidates to apply and to be considered for admission to higher education.⁸
- **Admission** (to higher education institutions and degree programmes) means the act of, or system for, allowing qualified applicants to pursue studies in higher education at a given institution and/or a given programme⁹

⁶ Summary of: Anrechnung von außerhalb des Hochschulwesens erworbenen Kenntnissen und Fähigkeiten auf ein Hochschulstudium, (Decision of the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs from 28 June 2002). http://www.kmk.org/fileadmin/Dateien/veroeffentlichungen_beschluesse/2002/2002_06_28-Anrechnung-Faehigkeiten-Studium-1.pdf (in German only), accessed on 26 July 2016.

The European Higher Education Area – Achieving the Goals Communiqué of the Conference of European Ministers Responsible for Higher Education, Bergen, 19–20 May 2005.

http://www.ehea.info/media.ehea.info/file/2005_Bergen/52/0/2005_Bergen_Communique_english_580520.pdf, accessed on 26 July 2016.

<http://www.hrk-nexus.de/meta/glossar/>, accessed on 26 July 2016.

⁷ Lisbon Recognition Convention, Section I, Article I, Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region, signed on 11 April 1997 in Lisbon. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list/-/conventions/rms/090000168007f2c7>, accessed on 26 July 2016.

⁸ ibidem.

⁹ ibidem.

5 Framework for the recognition of non-formally and informally acquired competences and their development in international and national discussions

Several strategies and developments in the European education policy can be identified as the driving forces behind the recognition and crediting of competences towards degree and certificate programmes, in particular the Bologna Process (higher education), the Strategy for Lifelong Learning (LLL), the Copenhagen Process (vocational training), and the Lisbon Strategy in the education sector which connects all of the above.

The clear programmatic commitments of the Bologna Declaration as well as of the subsequent conferences which link higher education with the LLL strategy are particularly important in terms of the recognition of competences. They created the possibility to gain credits for competences acquired in non-academic contexts¹⁰, to promote continuing higher education including the recognition of prior learning¹¹, also to recognise non-formal and informal learning for access to higher education programmes¹², and to simplify the recognition of all forms of prior learning by implementing national qualifications frameworks¹³. In the Communiqué of Leuven and Louvain-la-Neuve, it was determined that “basic

¹⁰ The Bologna Declaration of 19 June 1999. Joint declaration of the European Ministers of Education.

http://www.ehea.info/media.ehea.info/file/Ministerial_conferences/02/8/1999_Bologna_Declaration_English_553028.pdf, accessed on 26 July 2016.

¹¹ “Realising the European Higher Education Area” Communiqué of the Conference of Ministers responsible for Higher Education on 19 September 2003 in Berlin, p. 6.

https://www.bmbwf.gv.at/fileadmin/user_upload/Bologna_Grundsatzdok/Berlin_Komm_unikee_engl.pdf, accessed on 26.7.2016.

¹² The European Higher Education Area – Achieving the Goals Communiqué of the Conference of European Ministers Responsible for Higher Education, Bergen, 19–20 May 2005, p. 3.

http://www.ehea.info/media.ehea.info/file/2005_Bergen/52/0/2005_Bergen_Communique_english_580520.pdf, accessed on 26 July 2016.

¹³ London Communiqué, Towards the European Higher Education Area: *responding to challenges in a globalised world*, accessed on 26 July 2016.

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principles and procedures for the recognition of prior learning based on learning outcomes"¹⁴ are essential for developing a successful LLL policy.

Important steps concerning the mutual recognition and the award or transfer of credits for competences in the higher education sector were already taken before the Bologna Declaration through the implementation of the European Credit Transfer System (1989) and through the Lisbon Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region on 11 April 1997. The Lisbon Convention guarantees the mutual recognition of academic records achieved at a higher education institution in one of the contracting states. In case it decides not to recognise certain competences, the admitting higher education institution must provide some form of proof which substantiates its decision. The refusal must be based on "significant differences"¹⁵. The institution where the applicant has taken the examination is bound by the Convention to provide the applicant or the admitting higher education institution with relevant information on the academic records within a reasonable period in order to facilitate verification of the application. In order to create mutual trust in terms of academic recognition, it is important to ensure quality assurance strategies and procedures at higher education institutions.

At first it seems that the Lisbon Convention does not apply to non-formally and informally acquired competences. But when looking closely, it is apparent that higher education institutions base the implementation of regulations on recognition partially on the Lisbon Convention. In order to promote the implementation of the Lisbon Convention as well as the recognition of competences acquired outside of the higher education sector, the European Area of Recognition Manual (EAR manual)¹⁶ was established. The ministers of education of the Bologna states recommended its use at the Bucharest Conference 2012 in order to promote the development of mutual standards and guidelines as well as comparable methods for the recognition process¹⁷. The EAR

¹⁴ Communiqué of the Conference of European Ministers Responsible for Higher Education, Leuven and Louvain-la-Neuve, 28–29 April 2009. , accessed on 26 July 2016.

¹⁵ Lisbon Recognition Convention, Section IV, Article 1, Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region, signed on 11 April 1997 in Lisbon. , accessed on 26 July 2016.

¹⁶ European Area of Recognition Manual, Practical guidelines for fair recognition of qualifications. , accessed on 26 July 2016.

¹⁷ Making the Most of Our Potential: Consolidating the European Higher Education Area, Bucharest Communiqué, p. 4. , accessed on 26 July 2016.

manual also includes the recognition of “non-traditional learning”¹⁸ which apparently refers to non-formal and informal learning.

At a national level, lifelong learning strategies were established based on the international developments and put down in writing for example in Austria's Guidelines for a Coherent LLL Strategy, in the position paper “Take the Opportunity of Learning”, in the paper “Knowledge – Opportunities – Competences. Strategy on the Implementation of lifelong learning in Austria”, and ultimately in the expert report on the consultation process.¹⁹

Based on these national and international documents, the Austrian Lifelong Learning Strategy “LLL:2020”²⁰ was adopted by the Federal Government in July 2011. The 10th action line of the LLL strategy includes visions, goals, and measures concerning the recognition of non-formally and informally acquired knowledge and competences. Thus, the Council's recommendations in terms of validation of non-formal and informal learning²¹, which were developed during the establishment of the national LLL strategy, are being implemented.

The vision in the 10th action line is that acquired skills and competences, regardless of where they were acquired, be recognised and certified, thus placing non-formal and informal education processes on an equal level with formal education processes²². However, the strategy paper also points out that education institutions currently decide autonomously on the permeability and recognition of already acquired skills and competences, mostly on a case-by-case basis and in different ways, which indicates the lack of a systemic approach in practice.²³ It suggested the development of an Austrian validation strategy for

¹⁸ European Area of Recognition Manual, Practical guidelines for fair recognition of qualifications, p. 55 ff. , accessed on 26 July 2016.

¹⁹ cf. LLL:2020, Strategie zum lebensbegleitenden Lernen in Österreich; Bundesministerium für Unterricht, Kunst und Kultur; Bundesministerium für Wissenschaft und Forschung; Bundesministerium für Arbeit, Soziales und Konsumentenschutz; Bundesministerium für Wirtschaft, Familie und Jugend; July 2011, p. 6 f. (in German only), downloaded on 26.7.2016.

²⁰ ibidem.

²¹ Council Recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning. Official Journal of the European Union (2012/C 398/01), C 398/5. , accessed on 26 July 2016.

²² LLL:2020, Strategie zum lebensbegleitenden Lernen in Österreich; Bundesministerium für Unterricht, Kunst und Kultur; Bundesministerium für Wissenschaft und Forschung; Bundesministerium für Arbeit, Soziales und Konsumentenschutz; Bundesministerium für Wirtschaft, Familie und Jugend; July 2011, p. 44 f. (in German only), downloaded on 26.7.2016.

²³ see ibidem, p. 46.

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the comprehensive recognition of non-formal and formal learning outcomes in a large-scale consultation process including the relevant federal ministries, state governments, and social partners. This consultation process ended in 2016 and incorporated first results of this project.

In addition, a working group of the Austrian Higher Education Conference engaged in promoting non-traditional access to the entire higher education sector at a national level. Its focus differs from that of the project at hand: On the one hand, the recommendations of the Austrian Higher Education Conference mainly focus on the admission while on the other hand they also cover a part of the formal sector (higher education entrance qualification examination, TVE diploma examination, equivalent certificates of foreign institutions etc.) by including non-traditional ways to access higher education. The main focus of this project in turn is on the non-formal and informal acquisition of competences. At the same time, both papers include recommendations, for example on the necessity to provide consultation to applicants wanting to begin a degree programme and to promote transparency.²⁴

In order to prepare and support the measures of the 10th action line, a review of the framework regarding the recognition of non-formal and formal learning in Austria was carried out, specifically with regard to vocational education, the validation of non-formal and informal learning, and higher education. The review process concerning higher education was carried out and published by the AQ Austria in May 2014.²⁵ It also formed the basis and the starting point of the project at hand.

²⁴ BMWFW: Empfehlungen der Hochschulkonferenz zur Förderung nicht-traditioneller Zugänge im gesamten Hochschulsektor, Dezember 2015. (in German only), accessed on 26 July 2016.

²⁵ AQ Austria: Bestandsaufnahme zur Anerkennung und Anrechnung non-formal und informell erworbener Kompetenzen an Hochschulen, Projektbericht, 2014. (in German only)

6 Austrian legal framework²⁶

The recognition of competences acquired through formal, non-formal, or informal learning is of significance with regard to the admission or the certificate required for admission to a degree programme as well as concerning the act of crediting which leads to shorter study periods.

The following chapter examines the legal framework regulating the admission requirements to degree programmes in the four higher education sectors, and also focuses on questions regarding the act of crediting competences. Regulations applying to all sectors will be jointly covered, especially those regarding the general university entrance qualification as well as the TVE diploma examination and the university entrance qualification examination. Specifics of the individual sectors or specific courses of study will also be covered.

The admission requirements of and crediting options in the individual sectors are regulated in individual legal acts. What is notable is the fact that the Private Universities Act (Privatuniversitätengesetz, PUG)²⁷ does not offer any regulations to private universities with regard to matters of study. Section 3 paragraph 1 PUG includes a reference to the Universities Act 2002 (Universitätsgesetz, UG)²⁸ regarding completed degree programmes which shows that, unless otherwise stated, the regulations for public universities also apply to private universities.

6.1 Recognition upon admission – Admission requirements and admission

The admission process to degree programmes differs across the various sectors. Access to public and private universities is solely granted based on the competences gained in the formal education system, with the exception of a few degree programmes. University of applied sciences degree programmes, on the other hand, were designed from the very beginning to grant access to people not

²⁶ Already published in a similar form in: AQ Austria: Bestandsaufnahme zur Anerkennung und Anrechnung non-formal und informell erworbener Kompetenzen an Hochschulen, Projektbericht, 2014, pp. 10–17. (in German only)

²⁷ Private Universities Act (Privatuniversitätengesetz, PUG), F. L. G. I No. 74/2011 as amended.

²⁸ Federal Act on the Organisation of Universities and their Studies (Universities Act 2002, UG), F. L. G. I No. 120/2002 as amended.

holding a secondary-school leaving certificate. University colleges of teacher education offer applicants the opportunity to meet the requirements of specific degree programmes by providing proof of vocational qualifications.

6.1.1 Degree Programme – General University Entrance Qualification – Universities, Universities of Applied Sciences, University Colleges of Teacher Education

The general university entrance qualification is required for the admission to degree programmes of all sectors considered.²⁹

The general university entrance qualification can be obtained in a number of ways, most frequently by passing the Austrian secondary-school leaving examination (including the TVE Diploma Examination, see below). Other formal certificates, such as foreign certificates or documents certifying the completion of a degree programme of at least three years, provided by a recognised domestic or foreign educational institution are recognised as well. The university entrance qualification examination also constitutes a general university entrance qualification (see below).

“Non-traditional” paths leading to the attainment of the general university entrance qualification

The TVE Diploma Examination and the university entrance examination were developed to grant access to higher education to those not holding a secondary-school leaving certificate. These two options are occasionally considered as instruments for the recognition of prior learning³⁰, but also as a means to recognise non-formal and informal learning³¹. From the perspective of the admitting institution, though, both represent a formal proof of qualification. For

²⁹ § 63 para. 1 UG; § 64 para. 1 UG; § 4 para. 5 University of Applied Sciences Studies Act (Fachhochschul-Studiengesetz, FHStG), F. L. G. No. 340/1993 as amended; § 51 para. 3 Bundesgesetz über die Organisation der Pädagogischen Hochschulen und ihre Studien (Hochschulgesetz 2005, HG), as amended. (in German only)

³⁰ Westphal, Elisabeth, Friedrich, Margret.: Non-formales und informelles Lernen als Herausforderung für die Universitäten. In: Westphal, Elisabeth; Friedrich, Margret. (ed.): Anerkennung von non-formalem und informellem Lernen an Universitäten. Graz, 2009, p. 23. (in German only)

³¹ Federal Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture (BMUKK), Federal Ministry of Science and Research (BMWF): Austrian EQF referencing report, December 2011, p. 85. , accessed on 26 July 2016

this reason, they are classified as “non-traditional forms of access to higher education” in this project instead of non-formal or informal.³²

TVE Diploma Examination

Introduced in 1997, the TVE Diploma Examination³³ constitutes a school leaving examination that is taken at colleges for higher vocational education, and qualifies graduates to enter higher education. According to legal provisions, the TVE Diploma thus represents an Austrian secondary-school leaving certificate³⁴. The TVE Diploma Examination is taken by graduates of the dual system (with an apprenticeship-leave examination), graduates of schools of intermediate vocational education of at least three years’ duration, graduates of schools for healthcare and nursing, or schools for the allied health professions. The content and the scope of the TVE Diploma Examination are stipulated by the law.³⁵ The TVE Diploma Examination is taken at public or publicly licensed colleges for higher vocational education. The examination is an instrument that enables the recognition of priorly acquired competences. Admission, though, is also bound to qualifications requiring formal proof (e.g. apprenticeship-leave examination, skilled-workers’ examination etc). Higher education institutions have no influence on the TVE Diploma Examination, since it is outside their area of responsibility.

University entrance qualification examination

In contrast to the TVE Diploma Examination, the university entrance qualification examination is a limited university entrance qualification, especially with regard to certain courses of study of public universities³⁶ or universities of applied sciences³⁷ and regarding the admission to degree programmes of university

³² see also: BMWFW: Empfehlungen der Hochschulkonferenz zur Förderung nicht-traditioneller Zugänge im gesamten Hochschulsektor, December 2015, p. 9. (in German only), accessed on 26 July 2016.

³³ Bundesgesetz über die Berufsreifepfung (Berufsreifepfungsgesetz, BRPG). (in German only)

³⁴ § 64 para. 1 subpara. 1 UG; § 4 para. 5 FHStG; § 51 para. 2 subpara. 1 Teacher Training Act (Hochschulgesetz 2005, HG), F. L. G. I No. 30/2006 as amended. (in German only)

³⁵ § 3 BRPG. (in German only)

³⁶ § 64a UG.

³⁷ § 4 para. 5 subpara. 2 FHStG.

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colleges of teacher education³⁸. The university entrance qualification examination is taken at public universities and university colleges of teacher education. When choosing to enrol for a degree programme at a private university, the university concerned is entitled to introduce an admission examination for applicants who do not hold a secondary-school leaving certificate equal to the university entrance qualification examination.³⁹

Since the amendment of the Universities Act in 2009⁴⁰ higher education institutions may decide autonomously on the university entrance qualification examinations to be taken. Provisions governing the university entrance qualification examination shall be determined by decree by the rectorate. The UG specifies certain groups of studies to which this applies, unlike the decree on the university entrance qualification (Studienberechtigungsverordnung) which does not offer any provisions on the content of the subjects to be examined.⁴¹

In order to be able to take the university entrance qualification examination for the desired degree programme, applicants must be no less than 20 years of age and provide proof of having successfully completed a vocational or non-vocational education which exceeds the general compulsory education⁴². These provisions create the framework for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning.

6.1.2 Degree programmes – university specific regulations: Artistic aptitude, physical/motor skills, and aptitude for teacher training

Certain degree programmes additionally require specific aptitudes. This includes the aptitude for teaching at schools and for working at elementary education institutions as well as the artistic and physical-motor aptitude for certain degree

³⁸ Bundesgesetz über die Erlangung der Studienberechtigung für Studien an Pädagogischen Hochschulen (Hochschul-Studienberechtigungs-gesetz, HStudBerG), F. L. G. I No. 71/2008, as amended. (German only)

³⁹ Decision of the Board of the AQ Austria on 3 September 2013.

⁴⁰ Bundesgesetz, mit dem das Bundesgesetz über die Organisation der Universitäten und ihre Studien (Universitäts-gesetz 2002) geändert und einige universitätsrechtliche Vorschriften aufgehoben werden (Universitätsrechts-Änderungsgesetz 2009). (in German only)

⁴¹ Verordnung des Bundesministers für Wissenschaft und Forschung vom 24. Juli 1986 über die Studienberechtigungsprüfung (Studienberechtigungsverordnung, StudBerVO), F. L. G. No. 439/1986 as amended.

⁴² § 64a para. 2 UG.

programmes.⁴³ Degree programmes requiring physical-motor⁴⁴ or artistic aptitude must include additional examinations or entrance qualification examinations in their curriculum⁴⁵. The autonomy of higher education institutions to autonomously assess the aptitude of applicants presents an opportunity for the recognition of informally and non-formally acquired competences.

6.1.3 Degree programme – specifics of the universities of applied sciences sector: Subject-relevant professional qualification

The recognition of subject-relevant professional qualifications as a requirement for the admission to university of applied sciences degree programmes⁴⁶ constituted a novelty. It can be seen as a commitment to the recognition of non-formally and informally acquired competences and offers more freedom as regards recognition matters. In the explanatory remarks on the government bill concerning the FHStG⁴⁷ it is explicitly stated that, besides the admission requirements stipulated for public universities by the UG, further forms of access are to be developed by the university of applied sciences sector. Specific target groups are the graduates of the dual system and of schools for intermediate vocational education as well as professionals considering degree programmes at a university of applied sciences as a means of continuing education. Additional examinations for first-year students with subject-relevant professional qualifications may be considered.⁴⁸

Furthermore, the government bill takes into account the fact that individual educational paths may exist apart from the above-mentioned professional qualifications which may also be considered as relevant professional qualifications. The choice lies with the programme director.⁴⁹

The FHStG also stipulates that the admission to university of applied sciences degree programmes may be limited to an appropriate target group if the

⁴³ § 63 para. 1 UG.

⁴⁴ Pursuant to § 76 para. 2 of the UG this refers to the teacher training studies in movement and sports as well as the sports science degree programme.

⁴⁵ § 76 paras. 2 and 4 UG.

⁴⁶ § 4 para. 4 FHStG.

⁴⁷ Explanatory remarks on the government bill No. 949 (ErläutRV 949 BlgNR 18. GP), p. 12. (in German only)

⁴⁸ § 4 para. 7 FHStG.

⁴⁹ § 10 para. 5 FHStG.

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scientific and didactic concept is based on professional experience.⁵⁰ This option was not exercised very often in the past years.

The goal to grant access to persons with no university entrance qualification is not only supported by law, but is also part of the five financial and development programmes for the university of applied sciences sector. The first plan in 1994 concluded that, in theory, there is a significantly high demand potential from this target group, while also stating that there is no empiric evidence to this assumption.⁵¹ In any case, one of the criteria for federal funding of university of applied sciences degree programmes is to enable access to new target groups. In the first programme it was furthermore established that the endeavour will be supported by granting special funding measures to applicants without a secondary-school leaving certificate⁵². The second programme developed in 1999, however, stipulated that specific parameters be agreed on for the participation of this target group.⁵³ Further aspects of funding criteria were added in the third development and financial programme, including, for example, the crediting towards study periods: The providers must stipulate general regulations concerning the recognition of subject-related prior knowledge especially of those students who have completed a higher vocational education and furthermore, regulations on the recognition of proven subject-related prior knowledge for part-time degree programmes alongside work.⁵⁴

For the first time, the terms non-formal and informal learning were used in connection with the recognition of knowledge in the development programme for 2010/11–2012/13. Additionally, appropriate innovative measures aimed at an increase of the participation of students not holding a university entrance qualification certificate.⁵⁵ In the fields of continuing education and lifelong learning, the current development and financial programme for universities of

⁵⁰ § 4 para. 4 FHStG.

⁵¹ Bundesministerium für Wissenschaft und Forschung, Entwicklungs- und Finanzierungsplanung für den Fachhochschulbereich, März 1994, p. 6. (in German only)

⁵² *ibidem*, p. 12.

⁵³ Bundesministerium für Wissenschaft und Verkehr, Entwicklungs- und Finanzierungsplanung für den Fachhochschulbereich II, März 1999, p. 17. (in German only)

⁵⁴ Bundesministerium für Bildung, Wissenschaft und Kultur, Fachhochschul-Entwicklungs- und Finanzierungsplan III, FH-EF III, 2005/06 bis 2009/10, as of June 2004, p. 21. (in German only)

⁵⁵ Bundesministerium für Wissenschaft und Forschung, Fachhochschulplan > 2010/11–2012/13, p. 6. (in German only)

applied sciences⁵⁶ concludes that the implementation of new courses and changes to existing ones should be based on the principle to promote non-traditional access to university of applied sciences degree programmes.

6.1.4 Degree programme – specifics of university colleges of teacher education: Aptitude for a degree programme and recognition of professional experience for certain degree programmes

Apart from providing a general university entrance qualification, university colleges of teacher education require applicants to bachelor programmes for teacher training to prove performance-based, personal, subject-related, artistic, and pedagogical aptitude.⁵⁷ The provisions on the aptitude test for admission to a bachelor programme at a university college of teacher education shall, by decree, be regulated by the competent government member, and in accordance with the requirements of the curricula defined by the board of the university colleges of teacher education.⁵⁸ The regulation on the admission to university colleges of teacher education (Hochschul-Zulassungsverordnung, HZV) lays down criteria defining the eligibility of applicants for bachelor programmes. Communication and social skills are some of the required competences.⁵⁹

For the admission to a bachelor programme of teacher training for secondary schools (vocational training) the general university entrance qualification may be substituted by the master craftsman's certificate or an equivalent qualification in conjunction with at least three years of working experience⁶⁰, thus recognising informally (on the job) acquired competences and a formal qualification (master craftsman's certificate).

⁵⁶ Bundesministerium für Wissenschaft, Forschung und Wirtschaft, Fachhochschulentwicklungs- und Finanzierungsplan >> 2017/18, p. 16. (in German only)

⁵⁷ § 51 para. 1 HG 2005.

⁵⁸ § 51 para. 3 HG 2005.

⁵⁹ § 3 para. 1 subpara. 1 Verordnung der Bundesministerin für Unterricht, Kunst und Kultur über die Zulassungsvoraussetzungen an Pädagogischen Hochschulen (Hochschul-Zulassungsverordnung, HZV), F. L. G. II No. 112/2007 as amended. (in German only)

⁶⁰ § 51 para. 2a HG 2005.

6.1.5 Continuing higher education – Requirements for access to certificate university programmes for further education, to certificate university of applied sciences programmes for further education and to programmes for continuing education and certificate programmes at university colleges of teacher education

Over the last years, higher education institutions have developed a wide range of courses in the field of continuing education, promoting lifelong learning and enabling people with different educational backgrounds to access continuing higher education.

Higher education institutions are entitled by law to offer certificate university programmes for further education⁶¹ ⁶²(universities), certificate university of applied sciences programmes for further education⁶³ (universities of applied sciences) as well as certificate programmes and programmes for continuing education⁶⁴ (university colleges of teacher education) in addition to other certificate programmes, courses, seminars etc.

In contrast to degree programmes, the requirements for the admission to the above-mentioned offerings of public universities are not defined by law, but by the curriculum which is established by the higher education institutions.⁶⁵ A corresponding provision concerning the university of applied sciences sector does not exist.

The admission requirements for university colleges of teacher education, on the other hand, are defined by decree by the competent government member (Decree on the admission to higher education) and by the university college of teacher education board. In this decree, the provisions regarding the admission requirements for (certificate) programmes⁶⁶ for continuing education at university colleges of teacher education specifically refer to proof of qualifications by professional practice and working experience.

⁶¹ § 56 UG.

⁶² § 3 para. 4 PUG.

⁶³ § 9 FHStG.

⁶⁴ § 39 HG 2005.

⁶⁵ § 70 UG.

⁶⁶ § 12 HZV.

This means that non-formally and informally acquired competences are considered in all higher education sectors in terms of admission to continuing education.

6.2 Recognition of examinations and documented knowledge – crediting

The aim of recognising competences, previous achievements, or examinations is to enable applicants to skip parts of a degree programme, the act of which is defined as *crediting*.

6.2.1 Universities

Public universities recognise passed examinations, that is formally acquired competences, provided that such qualifications are equivalent to those prescribed by the curriculum.⁶⁷

The recognition of non-formal and informal learning shall be ensured by the provision that scientific research at business establishments or non-university research establishments capable of providing preparatory scientific training may be recognised as equivalent to examinations.⁶⁸ The same applies to artistic activities at institutions outside higher education capable of providing pre-vocational artistic vocational education.⁶⁹ Moreover, the Universities Act⁷⁰ determines that recognising such qualifications as being equivalent to prescribed examinations leads to a shortening of the period of study required.

However, these provisions only refer to examinations taken by degree students. Appropriate provisions for non-degree seeking students, that is students of certificate university programmes, do not exist.⁷¹

6.2.2 Universities of applied sciences

The FHStG includes the possibility to recognise documented knowledge⁷² (as being equivalent to certain courses). This means that not only competences

⁶⁷ § 78 para. 1 UG.

⁶⁸ § 78 para. 3 UG.

⁶⁹ § 78 para. 4 UG.

⁷⁰ § 59 para. 1 subpara. 14 UG.

⁷¹ see also chapter 8.

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acquired through formal learning can be recognised, but also those acquired through non-formal and informal learning. Applicants are not required to take additional examinations, provided that the passed examinations are considered equivalent to the courses of the desired programme.

The law also stipulates that specialist knowledge or experience from the job must be considered when assessing equivalence of courses or the professional practical training, especially where part-time degree programmes, or parts thereof, which were designed to be taken while continuing one's employment are concerned.⁷³ The responsibility for recognition and crediting procedures lies with the programme director.⁷⁴

The workload associated with degree programmes addressing specific target groups may be reduced by up to 60 ECTS credits.⁷⁵

This forms the legal framework for the recognition of non-formally and informally acquired competences.

6.2.3 University colleges of teacher training

Provisions for the recognition of competences are also made in the sector of university college of teacher training. On the one hand, the Teacher Education Act 2005 (Hochschulgesetz, HG) provides regulations on a transfer of credits for formally acquired competences (successfully completed degree programmes or parts of degree programmes⁷⁶). On the other hand, it stipulates that relevant professional experience is to be recognised as being equivalent to relevant practice-oriented parts of the degree programme for teacher training for secondary schools (general education and vocational education). The body responsible for matters of the study law shall decide on the award or transfer of credits.⁷⁷ This body is determined by the university colleges of teacher education's statutes. The role must be assumed either by a member of the rectorate or the respective head of institute.

⁷² § 12 para. 1 FHStG.

⁷³ § 12 para. 1 f FHStG.

⁷⁴ § 10 para. 5 subpara. 2 FHStG.

⁷⁵ § 3 para. 1 subpara. 2 FHStG.

⁷⁶ § 56 para. 1 HG.

⁷⁷ *ibidem*.

6.2.4 Recognition of activities as a student representative

One fact that applies to all higher education sectors is that activities as a student representative, especially in modules where social and soft skills are gained, reduce the amount of ECTS credits required for a degree programme, thus recognising informally acquired competences.⁷⁸ The body responsible for study law matters decides on the extent of the reduction.⁷⁹

6.3 Summary of the legal provisions

The previous sections show that there are distinct differences in all sectors regarding the higher education institutions' possibilities to recognise non-formally and informally acquired competences due to the current legal regulations.

- Applicants to a university must provide a proof of aptitude in order to be admitted to certain studies (e.g. artistic aptitude) by taking admission or supplementary examinations. Formal criteria are not defined by law. Universities may decide autonomously on the recognition of non-formally or informally acquired competences. The situation at university colleges of teacher education regarding the proof of aptitude for a degree programme is similar.
- The recognition of subject-related qualifications as a legal requirement for the admission to degree programmes of universities of applied sciences clearly indicates that formally acquired competences should also be taken into consideration upon admission.
- Higher education institutions across all sectors are free to determine ways to recognise non-formally and informally acquired competences in the field of continuing higher education (certificate university programmes for further education, programmes for continuing education and certificate programmes at university colleges of teacher education).

⁷⁸ In the planned amendment of the HSG, it is suggested to include the following: "Terms of office as student representatives shall count towards the ECTS credits envisaged in the curriculum for modules or courses designated accordingly as well as for courses and modules to be chosen freely."

https://www.parlament.gv.at/PAKT/VHG/XXV/ME/ME_00219/imfname_544043.pdf (in German only), accessed on 6 October 2016

⁷⁹ § 31 para. 2 Bundesgesetz über die Vertretung der Studierenden (Hochschülerinnen- und Hochschülerschaftsgesetz 2014. HSG), F. L. G. I No. 45/2014 as amended.

- There are regulations on the crediting of non-formally and informally acquired competences towards a degree programme, aiming at reducing the periods of study for all sectors (although recognition opportunities in the public universities sector is limited to specific scientific and artistic activities).
- The Union of Students Act 2014 (Hochschülerinnen- und Hochschülerschaftsgesetz, HSG) stipulates that activities as a student representative are to be credited towards modules where social and soft skills are taught. This regulation applies to all sectors.

7 Recommendations for recognition and crediting procedures

Over the last few years, and building on the legal framework, the higher education institutions have developed procedures – albeit to varying degrees – for the recognition upon access or admission to higher education, and for the crediting of non-formally and informally acquired competences.

This variety of approaches to the topic and the range of different procedures is due to the different legal framework conditions within the higher education sectors on the one hand. On the other hand, it is influenced by the positioning of the higher education institutions and especially of their management regarding the matter of permeability. In particular where the promotion of permeability is not part of the higher education's strategy and thus depends on initiatives by individuals or at an operational level, where competences and responsibilities have not been clarified or are not known, there is a danger of establishing inconsistent procedures which lack transparency.

In the following, the experiences and observations of higher education institutions which participated in the project group as well as the common practice at higher education institutions are presented in a summarised form, providing the framework for the recommendations. Building on this and taking into account the external input expressed within the workshops and the evaluation of documents and literature, recommendations on the organisation of the procedures were developed jointly.

First, the project group agreed upon basic recommendations to apply to all recognition and crediting procedures equally. Recommendations specific to the admission procedures to a degree programme or to recognition procedures are discussed in the following chapters.

The recommendations are highlighted with a gray background.

7.1 Basic recommendations for recognition and crediting procedures

Integration into the higher education institution's strategy

- The recognition and crediting procedures for non-formally and informally acquired competences are tools which help to promote permeability. Therefore, commitment of the management and all levels of higher education is a basic prerequisite. Ideally, the promotion of permeability should be included in the higher education institutions' profiles and strategies.

Developing suitable quality-assured procedures

- Given the increasingly heterogeneous skills, the higher education institutions require appropriate procedures and tools in order to ensure quality in the recognition and crediting of prior achievements. Such procedures shall make it possible to document the different skills and competences and their level and thus allow for a recognition of competences which exceed the requirements on the one hand, and an identification of skills shortages on the other hand.
- The recognition and crediting procedures and tools used by higher education institutions are suited to the purpose and correspond with the staffing and financial framework conditions of the respective higher education institution. These procedures are part of the higher education institution's quality management.

Ensuring transparency

Transparency in the organisation and implementation of recognition and crediting procedures are a basic prerequisite.

- The concept of transparency refers to the development and organisation of procedures, to all decisions, and to a consistent use of criteria.
- Transparency shall be ensured internally (within higher education) as well as externally (towards applicants for a recognition procedure and applicants to a degree programme, as well as students).
- The use of these procedures requires the applicants and students to establish transparent proof of their competences.

The transparency of procedures is promoted by taking into consideration the following aspects:

Developing regulations and providing information

- If a higher education institution provides for opportunities for the recognition of and transfer of credits for non-formally and informally acquired competences, relevant regulations must be established. Regulations regarding the organisation and implementation of the procedures shall be part of the internal quality management.
- Regulations shall cover the procedures, the responsibilities, and the criteria to be used.
- The higher education institution shall prepare information for target groups inside and outside higher education, including, in particular, handouts for employees and for applicants.

Defining the responsibilities

- The responsibilities shall be defined by the respective higher education institutions. They shall be clearly defined and internally as well as externally transparent.
- A first point of contact for applicants for a recognition procedure or to a degree programme and students shall be established, and easily accessible information provided on the higher education institutions' websites.
- It is advisable to divide the tasks into the coordination and preparation of the procedure on the one hand and the technical decision-making on the other hand.

- Experts in the respective subject shall be responsible for a content-related assessment.
- The procedures and decision-making process shall be based on the four-eyes-principle or on multiple stages, e.g. by including several persons, or by providing for means of appealing against decisions. If this is not possible, particular care must be taken that the procedures are carried out in a quality-assured manner (e.g. by giving founded reasons for and documenting the decisions, and by informing the applicants and students of the procedural decisions and the underlying reasons).

Defining and meeting criteria

- Decisions must be based on predefined criteria.
- The criteria must be transparent and shall not be changed in the course of a procedure.
- Criteria which are derived from specialist fields or recognised expert qualifications, respectively, shall correspond with reference frameworks and national or international standards.

Quality assurance of decisions

- Decisions must be criteria-based, plausible, consistent, comprehensible, and verifiable.
- The applicants shall be informed of a decision within a reasonable time period.
- Means of appealing against a decision shall be part of the procedure.

Ensuring documentation and monitoring

- The documentation of procedures is an important tool which helps to promote transparency.
- Monitoring of admission and crediting procedures (recognised competences, statistics) shall be carried out at the respective higher education institution and shall be used as a basis for decisions.

Transferring information to consultants

- Within the framework of their possibilities, higher education institutions shall ensure that counselling staff and decision-makers receive information, counselling and, if necessary, training.

Providing applicants and students with information

- Information on the websites as well as personal counselling shall ensure that applicants and students receive adequate information during the process of admission to a degree programme or crediting of prior learning.
- Applicants and students shall be informed about the burden related to the procedures, enabling them to make a realistic assessment and relating the burden to the expected benefit (in particular with regard to the crediting process).
- Applicants and students shall receive counselling on how to make their competences visible (e.g. by way of a competence portfolio). However, these services can be provided only in part by higher education institutions.
- Applicants and students shall be made aware of their obligation to provide proof of their competences and informed that only proven competences will be taken into account.

Interacting positively with applicants and students

- Interaction with applicants seeking recognition or applicants to a degree programme and students shall be based on an attitude of goodwill.

7.2 Access to higher education and admission to degree programmes

As described earlier, a conceptual distinction between access to higher education and admission to a degree programme is useful for subsequently going into detail about the procedures and their requirements.

Kasparovsky⁸⁰ clearly illustrates that the differences may be easily compared to an example from professional practice: Only because someone meets all training

⁸⁰ Kasparovsky, Heinz: Zugang und Zulassung zur Hochschule, In: Prisching, Manfred et al. (ed.): Die (Rechts)Stellung von StudentInnen in Österreich. Schriften zum

requirements for a profession, that does not mean that they will necessarily find a job.

When translating this example to starting a degree programme, the Lisbon Recognition Convention defines this difference as follows:

- Access (to higher education) is the right of qualified candidates to apply and be considered for admission to higher education.
- Admission (to higher education institutions and programmes) is the act of, or system for, allowing qualified applicants to pursue studies in higher education at a given institution and/or a given programme.

Thus, admission to a degree programme requires all admission requirements to be met.⁸¹ Admission to a degree programme is defined as the procedure for the recognition of competences carried out for every applicant and constitutes the formal beginning of a degree programme.

The legal admission requirements are described in chapter 17. In addition, the higher education institutions may autonomously define admission requirements, in particular, the admission requirements to certificate university programmes for further education or the recognised subject-relevant professional qualifications in the university of applied sciences sector.

The recognition of non-formally and informally acquired competences requires the determination of admission requirements as well as the organisation of the admission procedures.

Determining admission requirements

The admission requirements to be determined autonomously by the different higher education institutions have been regulated to a varying extent.

Some higher education institutions have defined broadly applicable regulations and framework guidelines, for example in the form of internal recommendations of the curriculum committees or other committees, or in the form of minimum

Bildungsrecht und zur Bildungspolitik des Instituts für Bildungsrecht und Bildungspolitik, Joanneum, Graz. Band 11. Verlag Österreich, Vienna 2007, p. 47. (in German only)

⁸¹ § 4 para. 4 FHStG uses the term "educational requirements". § 63 para. 1 UG describes what is required for admission to degree programmes.

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requirements which may be defined in a handbook for quality management. In addition to these higher education wide regulations, further detailed, individual regulations may be stipulated for each degree programme.

There are also higher education institutions which do not have any higher education wide regulations, and which specify the admission requirements separately for each degree programme. This offers the opportunity of specifying a target group to be addressed by a degree programme in more detail, but also involves the risk of lacking comparability.

Admission requirements for continuing education programmes leading to the award of a master's degree

The admission requirements for continuing education programmes leading to the award of a master's degree are determined by the higher education institutions (see chapter 24). The completion of a first degree programme as a requirement for admission is customary in all higher education sectors.

Often, alternative admission requirements are provided in addition, which shall address "highly qualified"⁸² persons with professional experience being described as "extensive", "qualified", "relevant" or "study-related". Occasionally, a specific duration for the required professional experience is indicated. Other descriptions address a specific formal qualification and additionally determine necessary professional experience.

- If admission requirements are based on statutory provisions, this shall be included in the preliminary information (website).
- Regarding the admission to continuing education programmes leading to the award of a master's degree, the applicants' existing competences shall be a completed first degree programme or be equivalent, in terms of level, to the competences obtained upon completion of a bachelor degree programme.

Admission procedures

- The procedure for the recognition of competences carried out upon application to a degree programme shall be organised at the individual higher education institutions, and the responsibilities in the procedures are

⁸² Excerpts from documents of the higher education institutions.

to be determined.

- In any case, measures for promoting transparency shall be included.

The higher education institutions have developed procedures for the admission to a degree programme, which, as a rule, comprise several elements. The diagram below outlines typical elements of such a procedure.

Figure 1: Process stages in an admission procedure

Process stage	Description	Recommendations
Counselling	Briefing on the admission requirements or on the procedure in detail; "pre-check"	There is no clearly defined time for the counselling process stage. It may/should be provided as needed.
Written or online application	typical documents: application form, CV, certificates, evidence	Required documents shall be made available on the website.
Selection	review of requirements, plausibility check, if necessary request references or additional documents	Based on defined criteria, e.g. admission requirements, motivation, extent of professional experience, ...; informing candidates about fulfilment/non-fulfilment of the requirements; responsibilities during the selection procedure: - pre-check shall not be carried out by the persons taking the decision
Including selection interviews		In any case, structured records shall be kept – as a basis for justification and – for deriving decisions (transparency).
Selection decision		Transparency of the decision shall be ensured, i.a. by above-mentioned measures

Counselling

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It is important that applicants are offered counselling at different stages of the admission procedure. Counselling typically comprises a briefing on the admission requirements or on the admission procedure in detail. Some higher education institutions furthermore provide for a first screening of the submitted documents. Higher education institutions are increasingly establishing self-assessment procedures to help students assess their own skills and competences in the counselling process.

Counselling is offered personally, as telephone consultations, or by video conference.

- Applicants shall be provided sufficient opportunity for counselling and may be supported, in particular, by the provision of information on the higher education institutions' websites. On the part of the higher education institutions, sufficient resources shall be made available, among others, by providing guidelines and/or counselling, and by training the consulting persons.
- Information and required documents shall be easily accessible (especially on the websites) and shall supplement, but not necessarily replace, personal counselling.

Written applications

The higher education institutions shall determine which documents are required to be part of the written application. These generally include application forms, motivation letters, CVs, training certificates, recommendations, certificates of further education, letters of reference, and competence portfolios. Proof for determining equivalence with formal qualifications may be provided in a number of ways and, in any case, shall be in accordance with the specific requirements. If necessary, the higher education institution may determine that certain evidence is not accepted, provided that these provisions are useful and not overly restrictive.

- The documents required for the written application shall be listed on the website.
- Tools for visualising skills and competences are, in particular, competence portfolios, learning diaries, work samples, and job references.

Selection and selection criteria

During the selection procedure, it is checked whether the requirements are fulfilled. The plausibility of the submitted documents is checked and, if necessary, the applicants are asked to send additional documents. That is especially the case if the submitted documents indicate that the applicant has acquired certain competences, but they are not sufficiently supported by evidence. If the applicants do not provide the required evidence, admission cannot be granted.

- All necessary documents must be provided in order for the application to be considered, and a decision to be taken.
- The selection shall be based on predefined selection criteria.
- The selection criteria must be transparent and shall not be changed in the course of the application procedure.
- For the assessment of the documents and evidence a grid or checklist may be used to record which requirements are met and which documents are missing.
- Following the check and assessment of the documents, an opinion of the submitted documents shall be prepared, which includes a summary of the most important aspects and shall facilitate the comprehensibility of decisions made, based on this, both for internal communication (in particular with a view to the next instance) as well as towards the applicant.

The selection procedure may consist of one or multiple stages. A multiple-stage-procedure often involves different persons or persons with different functions, respectively. The selection procedure is typically the responsibility of the course management, the programme director, or the head of an organisational unit (e.g. for continuing education). A first screening and/or plausibility check are often carried out by an assistant or an employee of an organisational unit.

- If possible, the selection decision shall not be made by only one person. Otherwise, means of appealing shall be provided.
- The applicants shall receive information on whether they meet the requirements or not as promptly as possible.

Catalogue of competences and proof of equivalence

During the admission procedure, proof of equivalence of non-formally and informally acquired competences with a formal qualification shall be provided and assessed.

Upon submission of the required documents, equivalence shall be verified on the basis of a catalogue of competences and the proof of equivalence.

- The verification of equivalence requires a catalogue, which includes all competences and skills required for beginning a degree programme (catalogue of competences). This catalogue shall be compiled during the development process of the curriculum (including its further development) and must also identify to what level of formal qualification (e.g. general university entrance qualification, bachelor's degree) the non-formally and informally acquired competences refer to.
- The higher education institution shall define minimum requirements for having assessed existing competences and their equivalence in the first place. As a "minimum requirement" for professional experience it may determine the respective duration for the acquisition of a formal qualification (i.e. a three-year bachelor corresponds to three years of relevant and equivalent professional experience).
- The applicant shall describe the competences to be recognised as equivalent in a plausible way and with regard to the level and contents. The more specialised the required competences are, the more accurately and precisely it is possible to create references and provide evidence.
- Owing to the complexity, the scope and necessity for a high degree of actuality of the description of the evidence and of the recognised forms of proof of competence, they shall not be described in the curricula, but in module manuals, brochures, or information materials. It must be ensured that the competences to be acquired are available in written form (e.g. in module manuals or ECTS descriptions).

Selection interviews

Selection interviews are conducted at most higher education institutions. They are usually conducted by the course management, the programme director, or a committee (e.g. a selection committee).

- Records shall be kept of the selection interviews in order to comprehend and substantiate decisions.

Selection decision

Typically, the selection decision is taken by the above-mentioned persons or groups (e.g. course management, programme director, committee, or the rectorate on the recommendation of the course management).

- If an application is granted on the basis of non-formally or informally acquired competences, it must be ensured that the basic requirements for the successful completion of an academic education are given.
- To ensure studyability, higher education institutions may offer appropriate courses to obtain certain skills (e.g. for scientific working).

Documentation and monitoring

The documentation of procedures, and in particular of decisions, supports transparency and provides for a monitoring of the decisions and their consequences.

- Records shall be kept on the selection procedures, and in particular on the selection interviews, in order to ensure transparent decisions and to derive further decisions.
- Decisions of previous procedures shall be taken into account. The consideration and compilation of previous decisions shall be a defined task.

7.3 Crediting

A transfer or the award of credits is relevant if applicants already possess some of the competences to be acquired during their studies, the main goal being to reduce the prescribed duration of studies and/or the workload. Students shall not be required to acquire competences which they already possess. However, a student may not be awarded credits for competences that have already been counted within the application procedure (problem of double counting). Within the crediting procedure it shall be established if the competences underlying the degree programme towards which the credits shall be counted already exist.

Crediting practice at higher education institutions

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As illustrated in chapter 25, the transfer of credits for formally acquired competences is provided for by and possible according to the respective laws of all higher education sectors. The award of credits for non-formally and informally acquired competences is regulated differently in each sector and significantly more restricted. The university of applied sciences and the university colleges of teacher education sectors have laid down explicit provisions. The Universities Act (UG) governing the public universities regulates explicitly only the crediting of formally acquired competences. The Private Universities Act (PUG) does not provide any regulations on this matter.

Against this legal background, very heterogeneous strategies, experiences, and practices can be identified in the different sectors and at the higher education institutions. Although there are exceptions, it can be concluded that the higher education institutions promote recognition rather in the process of application than with regard to the award or transfer of credits for prior learning.

At some **public universities** efforts are being made to incorporate such acts of crediting in the field of degree programmes into the legal framework. The Medical University of Graz (Medizinische Universität Graz), for example, has developed instruments which could be applied for the award of credits for non-formally and informally acquired competences. These include case descriptions, certificates of clinical traineeships, or logbooks. Due to the legal provisions, in addition to the procedure, the competences shall be verified by way of an examination.

The crediting of non-formally and informally acquired competences at public universities is rarely provided for, including in the field of certificate university programmes for further education where students usually have considerable professional experience. With regard to recognition in the field of certificate university programme for further education, the universities follow the existing legal provisions for the degree programmes, which mainly provide for the crediting of formally acquired competences. This explains why there is little experience at the higher education level, and more at a professional level.

Especially with regard to public universities, it can be said that the focus lies on the recognition of non-formally and informally acquired competences upon the admission to a degree programme of continuing education. It is therefore not regarded expedient to further promote the crediting of non-formally and informally acquired competences.

In any case, it is fundamental for the universities that the competence and responsibility regarding the crediting of competences remain with the institutions.

Based on the legal provisions, at **universities of applied sciences** the procedures for the award of credits for non-formally and informally acquired competences are also carried out for university of applied sciences degree programmes. The way the regulations are applied internally differs, the range reaching from guidelines applicable across the whole university of applied sciences sector to case-by-case decisions. Furthermore, there are great discipline-specific differences among the universities of applied sciences, and the opportunity for having prior learning credited is of high relevance in particular for those disciplines which have become increasingly focused on academic training (e.g. the social and health sectors).

A positive aspect is that, in practice, the decisions are taken not only by one person but, as a rule, in accordance with the four-eyes-principle, e.g. by the programme director and the course management, or the programme director and the head of faculty. The FHStG furthermore provides for appeal stages (board) against decisions of the programme director.⁸³ It is considered a challenge that, pursuant to section 12 paragraph 1 FHStG, in case equivalence has been established, the student's knowledge shall not be tested. This means that an old diploma shall be recognised without the possibility of establishing whether the competences indeed still exist. Therefore, it must be questioned whether equivalence can be established after long periods of time. This question is discussed, for instance, in the handout of the Round Table Recognition⁸⁴ of the Rectors' Conference. According to this, not the period of time is important, but instead it must be evaluated whether the competences and qualifications acquired at that time are so out-dated that they appear devalued in comparison with the actual requirements⁸⁵.

Owing to the provisions of the new teacher training, the **university colleges of teacher education** also face new challenges when it comes to the issue of a recognition. The recognition, not only, of formally acquired competences in the

⁸³ § 10 para. 6 FHStG.

⁸⁴ Hochschulrektorenkonferenz: Kriterien für gute Anerkennung und gute Anerkennungsverfahren; Handreichung des Runden Tisches Anerkennung, 201. , accessed on 14 July 2016. (in German only)

⁸⁵ *ibidem*, p. 4.

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field of teacher training makes it possible to introduce interested experts as lateral entrants within the framework of their vocational training into the schools. Up until now, applicants required existing expert knowledge; now, however, this expertise is also taken into account for the degree programme.

For example, the teacher training for secondary schools (vocational training) provides the opportunity that of the 120 ECTS credits for the professional fundamentals up to 120 ECTS credits may be awarded for a minimum of three years of relevant professional experience. In the event that less than three years of relevant professional experience have been obtained, a maximum of 60 ECTS credits may be awarded. Moreover, further crediting opportunities are provided for experience in pedagogical professions. That way, relevant vocational training and corresponding professional experience may be recognised as being equivalent to a maximum total of 180 ECTS credits, which may then be credited towards the 240 ECTS credits required for the bachelor degree programme for teacher training for secondary schools (vocational training).

Also lateral entrants with tertiary professional education were taken into account; 180 ECTS credits of the 240 ECTS credits to be completed are covered by the relevant degree programme and relevant professional experience.

Relevance of the award of credits for non-formally and informally acquired competences in continuing education

In the project group it was emphasised that the demand of applicants pursuing continuing education for having prior learning credited is generally low. If there are any requests at all, they are mostly very specific. On the one hand, this target group especially wants to visit courses to back their professional experience with theory or to learn new contents. On the other hand, the award of credits for prior learning achievements is not regarded expedient and thus not provided for in those areas in which theory is strictly necessary. This applies, in particular, to very specific continuing education offerings. International examples show that, in particular, applicants with professional experience take advantage of the crediting opportunities. However, this requires that the students are actively informed about such opportunities.⁸⁶

⁸⁶ Brokmann-Nooren, Christiane, Lammers, Sarah: Studium und Beruf verzahnen. In: Hochschule und Weiterbildung Ausgabe 1/2016, p. 41. (in German only)

The higher education institutions are in relative agreement that a crediting procedure, or the handling of an application for the award or the transfer of credits in the field of continuing education shall take place only following admission. That way they want to avoid applicants pressuring the higher education institutions applied for.

Reducing tuition fees following the recognition of prior learning

There is no uniform approach regarding if or to what extent tuition fees in continuing education and at private universities may be reduced following the recognition and crediting of prior learning. A large part of the experiences available are from foreign higher education institutions: some higher education institutions provide models of cost reduction, others definitely rule out any kind of cost reduction. A one-to-one cost reduction is expected to be the exception rather than the rule. In any case, a reduction of the tuition fees shall not be used as a marketing instrument.

Specific features of the award of credits for non-formally and informally acquired competences

In contrast to the recognition of prior achievements within the framework of formal education, there are some particularities to be considered when crediting non-formally and informally acquired competences, which have to be taken into account also for the structure of the procedures.⁸⁷

- Professional competences may be acquired within the framework of formal vocational qualifications (training and further education), non-formal continuing education and/or informal learning within professional practice. Accordingly, the evidence giving proof of competences to be recognised often is a lot more heterogeneous as regarding the recognition of higher education prior achievements.
- The crediting of vocational learning outcomes from formal training or further education is often made difficult by a structure which differs significantly from that of the respective qualifications' curricula. In contrast to higher education degree programmes, professional qualifications are often structured in a process-oriented way according to the learning fields, and not according to subjects or disciplines.

⁸⁷ The following list was taken from: Hanft, Anke, Müskens, Wolfgang: Anerkennung und Anrechnung beruflicher Qualifikationen und Kompetenzen im Hochschulbereich. In: Heister, Michael, et al. (ed.): Durchlässigkeit in der beruflichen Bildung. 2017. In print. (in German only)

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- In many cases, when crediting learning outcomes of non-formal continuing education, learning outcome descriptions or curricula providing information on what knowledge or competences have been acquired within the framework of the respective educational offerings are missing. Continuing education is often not aligned with regional or national standards⁸⁸, and the learning result is mostly not safeguarded by examinations.
- Students applying for informally acquired competences to be credited oftentimes cannot provide documentary evidence of their learning result. In many cases, job references or CVs only provide the basis for assumptions as to the acquired competences, based on the activities performed. The decision on crediting specific competences is mainly based on information provided by the applicants themselves.
- The learning outcomes in higher education and in the professional field differ, in part, systematically. The fundamental non-similarity of academic and professional learning outcomes requires the verification of equivalence of the competences to be credited. Within the framework of the German model initiative ANKOM⁸⁹ (Credit of vocational competences towards higher education study programmes) and subsequent development projects, corresponding procedures for the verification of equivalence, the so-called "equivalence checks", have been developed.
- Especially regarding informally acquired competences, crediting always requires an additional validation of the competences described by the applicants. But also with regard to the learning outcomes of formal and non-formal professional learning pathways, the award of credits based solely on learning outcome descriptions is oftentimes not possible owing to the significant differences in the understanding of what specific learning outcomes include in the different educational fields.

Types of recognition

Generally, two types of recognition are distinguished: the individual recognition and the blanket recognition.⁹⁰

⁸⁸ These experiences refer to the situation in Germany.

⁸⁹ „ANKOM – Übergänge von der beruflichen in die hochschulische Bildung“; <http://ankom.his.de/>. (in German only)

⁹⁰ A recognition procedure may include elements of both types of recognition, i.e. a combination of blanket and individual recognition. Furthermore, it is possible to distinguish between case-by-case decisions and supported case-by-case decisions within the individual procedures (cf. Hanft, Anke, et al.: Anrechnung

Individual recognition procedures are case-by-case decisions concerning the applicant's competences. In these procedures, the equivalence of the submitted or documented proof of competence (e.g. reports, professional qualifications, non-formal continuing education certificates or competences acquired informally) of each recognition applicant is verified individually and assessed in terms of content and level of the degree programme. Individual recognition procedures may take into account formally, non-formally or informally acquired competences. The development of such procedures involves little effort, the individual procedures, however, are time-consuming.

Blanket recognition means that certain defined parts of a degree programme are credited if all applicants providing proof of these requirements have a formal educational background or periods of professional experience. Blanket recognition in the sense of automatic recognition means that the competences are recognised without an assessment of the cases on an individual basis.

For example, this type of procedure includes cases governed by section 78 UG, i.e. the recognition of examinations passed by degree seeking students at a post-secondary education institution, or examinations passed at a (higher) vocational school. The same applies to the provision under section 12 paragraph 1 FHStG which also refers to the recognition of passed exams, and thus to formal evidence.

Therefore, blanket recognition is typically based on formal qualifications or formally acquired competences, respectively. As a rule, an "automatic" recognition of non-formally and informally acquired competences is hardly possible, since they are difficult to determine and require individual assessment.

An exception or a special variant, respectively, are the target-group-specific degree programmes in the universities of applied sciences sector. Admission to a university of applied sciences degree programme is limited to the corresponding target group⁹¹, and the required ECTS credits may be reduced by up to 60 ECTS credits. However, the practical significance is rather low, since only a small number of such degree programmes have been offered in the past few years.

außerhochschulischer Kompetenzen in Hochschulstudiengängen, Studie: AnHoSt „Anrechnungspraxis in Hochschulstudiengängen“, Oldenburg, 2014. https://www.uni-oldenburg.de/fileadmin/user_upload/anrechnungsprojekte/Anhost.pdf, downloaded on 26.7.2016.), p. 4. (in German only)

⁹¹ § 4 para. 4 FHStG.

Compared to the individual recognition procedures, the development of blanket recognition procedures involves a higher degree of effort, but then the effort required for each recognition procedure is relatively low. The reverse is true for individual recognition procedures, the development being low in effort, whereas each individual procedure requires the same amount of effort every time. Within a system of individual recognition it is possible to determine cases for which blanket recognition procedures are applied; e.g. if certain certificates or diplomas are repeatedly credited towards a specific course.⁹²

In the project context, the recognition of non-formally and informally acquired competences are relevant especially for the individual recognition procedures. Nevertheless, the majority of the recommendations also applies to blanket procedures, especially with regard to aspects such as transparency, the definition of responsibilities etc.

Process stages in a recognition procedure

The Austrian higher education institutions have developed recognition procedures which include a few typical process stages. There are, however, only few elaborated process descriptions or guidelines. This is also due to the above-mentioned reluctance to have non-formally and informally acquired competences recognised.

In Germany, different measures have resulted in the recognition of non-academic competences at higher education institutions gaining in importance.⁹³ Ever since, appropriate guidelines or orientation frameworks have been compiled at many higher education institutions.

⁹² cf. Hank, Helmar, Sturm, Nico: Außerhochschulisch erworbene Kompetenzen anrechnen, Praxisanalyse und Implementierungsempfehlungen, Springer, 2015, p. 39 f. (in German only)

⁹³ These first included the relevant resolutions of the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Länder in the Federal Republic of Germany (Kultusministerkonferenz, KMK) of 2002 and 2008. Meanwhile, all Länder have incorporated regulations on recognition in their higher education laws. The accreditation council and the accreditation agencies in Germany play an important role in the compliance with (and interpretation of) the regulations at higher education institutions. Following the revised version of the KMK's „Ländergemeinsame Strukturvorgaben für die Akkreditierung von Bachelor- und Masterstudiengängen“ of 2010, the obligation to introduce recognition procedures for the accreditation and re-accreditation of degree programmes by accreditation agencies is now regarded a criterion to be mandatorily demanded. Since January 2015, examination regulations lacking corresponding procedures and criteria are only accepted with conditions (Accreditation Council 2014).

The following discussions build on the experience and documents of Austrian higher education institutions and, in addition, on documents of German higher education institutions as well as on recommendations and project reports⁹⁴. From this, the scheme for designing recognition procedures below has been derived.

Independent of the individual process stages, each higher education institution shall take appropriate measures to promote and ensure transparency of the procedures, including, in particular, the development and communication of internal higher education regulations for applicants and employees as well as the definition of responsibilities within the procedures.

Guidelines and regulations

The higher education institutions adopt guidelines and regulations which address the different target groups and typically describe the responsibilities and details of the procedures. Documents addressing the applicants often provide information on the required documents or support for drawing up competence portfolios. Often, templates are provided. Examples for such documents can be found in chapter 55.

⁹⁴ These mainly include: Cendon, Eva, et al.: Handreichung: Anrechnung, Teil 1, Ein theoretischer Überblick. Handreichung der wissenschaftlichen Begleitung des Bund-Länder-Wettbewerbs „Aufstieg durch Bildung: offene Hochschulen“, 2015, p. 52 ff. (in German only); Universität Oldenburg, Orientierungsrahmen zur Anrechnung außerhochschulisch erworbener Qualifikationen und Kompetenzen an der Carl von Ossietzky Universität Oldenburg, 2015, p. 7 (in German only); Gerich, Eva, et al.: Handreichung: Anrechnung, Teil 2. Ein Einblick in die Praxis. (in German only) Eine Publikation der wissenschaftlichen Begleitung des Bund-Länder-Wettbewerbs „Aufstieg durch Bildung: offene Hochschulen“, 2015 (in German only); HIS Hochschulinformationssysteme GmbH (Hrsg.): ANKOM-Arbeitsmaterialien Nr. 3, Verfahren und Methoden der individuellen Anrechnung, p. 16f (in German only); Hochschulrektorenkonferenz: Kriterien für gute Anerkennung und gute Anerkennungsverfahren; Handreichung des Runden Tisches Anerkennung, 2016, p. 4. , accessed on 14 July 2016 (in German only); Leibniz Universität Hannover, Orientierungsrahmen für die Fakultäten zur Anrechnung beruflich erworbener Kompetenzen (in German only); Amtsblatt der Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg, Juristische und Wirtschaftswissenschaftliche Fakultät, 2013 (in German only); Fachhochschule Brandenburg, Anrechnung beruflicher Kompetenzen und Qualifikationen auf ein Hochschulstudium, Leitfaden für die individuelle Anrechnung für Hochschule und Lehrende, 2015 (in German only); Anrechnungsrichtlinie der ESMOD BERLIN Internationale Kunsthochschule für Mode, 2015 (in German only); Hochschule Augsburg, Handreichung zur Anerkennung von Studien- und Prüfungsleistungen innerhalb und außerhalb des Hochschulbereiches, 2014. (in German only)

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- Cross-sectoral higher education guidelines on recognition promote transparency and a common understanding. The guidelines shall be as brief and concise as possible. Guidelines applying to the entire higher education area may be supplemented by area-specific guidelines or guidelines specific to the respective degree programme.

Responsibilities

There are different ways for defining the various responsibilities. They shall be specified and communicated in a transparent way.

It is primarily specialist/content-related decisions that have to be made during the recognition procedure, then again the procedure needs to be coordinated and compliance with the guidelines as well as transparency and coherence of decisions ensured. Furthermore, there are numerous formal tasks relating to the procedure.

These tasks may be carried out centrally by a single person or department. However, they are usually and ideally split between several persons or office holders.

The specialist tasks or the specialist assessment of equivalence may, for example, be carried out by course lecturers, module managers, programme managers or programme directors, respectively.

Many German higher education institutions have, in addition, appointed recognition commissioners (or established a centre for recognition) responsible for ensuring that (current or previous) decisions are consistent and comparable. They are the point of contact for applicants, and may furthermore be delegated the task of coordinating the procedures. These tasks may also be carried out by other persons or organisational units – typically the programme director or the competent body for study matters.

A recognition decision is usually taken – as especially the German examples show – by the examination committees or boards of examiners, by the recognition committees, or – especially for Austrian courses or universities of applied sciences – by persons in management positions (e.g. the course management or the programme director, respectively).

- The higher education institutions may determine the regulations regarding the different responsibilities.
- When regulating the different responsibilities, the aims of transparency, comprehensibility, and consistency with earlier decisions as well as the required specialist knowledge shall be taken into account. Recognition commissioners or recognition managers shall promote the coherence and transparency of the recognition decisions.

Figure 2: Process stages in a recognition procedure

Process stage	Description	Recommendations
Information & Counselling	for interested persons and students	There is no clearly defined time for the information and counselling process stage. It should, however, precede the application.
Application	documents, proof of existing competences	Transparency of required documents shall be ensured; where required, provide templates and forms for the applications; determine clear deadlines for the application (commonly by the start of a semester); an application shall be submitted in written form
Processing and verifying the application	Assessment in general only for students; screening of the submitted documents and, if required, requesting additional documents; assessing the equivalence in terms of content and level	Assessments shall only be carried out for students; four-eyes-principle or multiple stages (e.g. programme management, course manager, recognition commissioner, committee) promote transparency; proposal/recommendation and decision may be separate;
Recognition decision	Grant or reasoned refusal, including information for student	The recognition decision shall be based on specialist criteria and ensure coherence and transparency. Means of objection or appealing shall be provided for.

Recognition	recognition act (e.g. notification, entry in a portal or database, ...)	
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Information and counselling

- Information and counselling shall be offered to all interested persons and supplemented by written materials.
- Counselling of the applicants contributes to improving the quality of the documents submitted, resulting in a reduction of the efforts necessary for their inspection and assessment.

Application

Formally and non-formally acquired competences are mostly supported by documentary evidence, being primarily diplomas in the formal sector, and certificates, e.g. for continuing education, in the non-formal sector. But also detailed descriptions of learning contents and outcomes (e.g. in curricula) are a possible basis for comparison. Regarding the outcomes of informal learning processes, the learners have to provide the descriptions themselves.⁹⁵

The students or applicants submit the required documents which shall provide proof of the competences to be recognised. In this regard, competence portfolios, an organised collection of documents, are a common instrument.

Documents to be submitted upon application typically include some of the following:

- Application forms
- Curriculum vitae
- Evidence, or, where applicable, a competence portfolio which refers to the skills and competences to be recognised
 - Diplomas, documents, and certificates
 - Job references, job descriptions, letters of recommendation
 - Presentations, lectures
- Work samples and job references
- Work items created specifically for the recognition process

⁹⁵ cf. HIS Hochschulinformationssysteme GmbH (ed.): ANKOM-Arbeitsmaterialien Nr. 3, Verfahren und Methoden der individuellen Anrechnung, p. 9. (in German only)

Many higher education institutions⁹⁶ have issued guidelines and templates for drawing up competence portfolios for the applicants, or for the assessment of competence portfolios for teachers and other persons involved in the recognition procedure.

Furthermore, some higher education institutions have introduced supplementary placement exams.

- The students are responsible for submitting all information and documents necessary for the recognition procedure.
- The higher education institution may request additional documents.
- Templates (e.g. for application forms or competence portfolios) assist the students in the application process and promote transparency.
- Competences to be recognised shall be comprehensibly, credibly, and verifiably supported by evidence.

Processing and verifying the application

- The higher education institutions shall decide on the applications within a reasonable period.
- If no recognition decision can be made on the basis of the documents, assessment interviews may be held.
- The verification of equivalence as well as any interviews shall be documented.

Recognition decision

The recognition decision includes a comparison with regard to contents and level of the performance to be credited for and the equivalent course. The different levels in the European Qualifications Framework or the respective national qualifications framework are often used as a reference in comparing the levels.

The higher education institution shall determine to what extent equivalence shall be recognised. For instance, the University of Oldenburg has defined that a recognition may only be granted if the levels of the learning contents of the source profile and that of the target module represent at least 70 per cent

⁹⁶ see chapter 9.

compliance⁹⁷. The ESMOD BERLIN International University of Art for Fashion expects coverage of 75 per cent.

- A good learning outcome description or skills description is an important basis for the recognition decision.
- A decision of refusal shall include a written statement which is to be forwarded to the applicant.

Crediting

A student does not have to take courses, modules, or semesters that have been credited anymore. Often, performances that are credited are not graded. The respective performance is regarded as having been positively completed.

8 Conclusion and outlook

The recommendations made in this report were phrased against the backdrop of the applicable legal provisions and framework conditions on the recognition and crediting⁹⁸ of non-formally and informally acquired competences in Austria. The recommendations are based on the experiences of the higher education institutions involved in the project, but also take into consideration current developments and experiences at the European or at an international level.

The consideration of informally and non-formally acquired competences may apply to two different phases: with a view to the fulfilment of the application requirements upon beginning a degree programme or to the crediting of study achievements towards a degree programme. Due to the Austrian legal

⁹⁷ University of Oldenburg, Orientierungsrahmen zur Anrechnung außerhochschulisch erworbener Qualifikationen und Kompetenzen an der Carl von Ossietzky Universität Oldenburg, 2015, p. 7. (in German only)

⁹⁸ The terms recognition and crediting are sometimes used as synonyms and often inconsistently. Even though the UG and FHStG use the German term „Anerkennung“ (recognition), the term „Anrechnung“ (crediting) has become the customary term in the literature and public discourse in German. A clearer distinction and clarification of both concepts seems advisable.

For the project, the following distinction was made: Recognition means that upon access the learning outcomes achieved – in the field of formal education or non-formal or informal learning – are validated. The term crediting refers to the recognition of prior achievements within a degree programme, which do not have to be repeated, for parts of a degree programme aiming at reducing the period of studies or the workload, respectively.

framework, most experiences are available at higher education institutions in the field of continuing education and regarding recognition upon admission to a higher education degree programme, in particular in the university of applied sciences sector.

The higher education institutions have only just started on their path towards the implementation and realisation of a recognition of non-formally and informally acquired competences. A cross-sectoral approach for the introduction of recognition and crediting procedures following comparable standards would be advisable for them to successfully pursue this path. Furthermore, the higher education institutions depend on a supportive framework (e.g. corresponding laws) and sufficient resources. Owing to the complexity of the implementation and realisation of the recognition of non-formally and informally acquired competences, the higher education institutions are faced with a considerably increased workload which cannot be covered solely by additional financial means. Therefore, it is necessary that policy makers, higher education institutions, and students contribute in equal measure to a successful implementation. Thus, the recommended actions are aimed at all stakeholders involved.

Recognition and crediting must be carried out in a quality-assured manner. This applies especially to the recognition of non-formally and informally acquired competences which are more difficult to assess. The project group has drawn up recommendations for the development of recognition tools and procedures which shall contribute to the development of quality-assured procedures, and thus strengthen the confidence in recognition procedures. These recommendations, addressing the higher education institutions, shall provide guidance for the development of such quality-assured recognition procedures.

The recommendations shall furthermore contribute to raise awareness for the necessity of recognising non-formally and informally acquired competences. This requires appropriate framework conditions. That is why some of the concluding recommendations are targeted especially to policy makers.

Applicants to a degree programme and students are the target group for and with whom the procedures are carried out. Separate recommendations define their obligations and their role in the procedures.

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Recommendations to policy makers

The promotion of recognition may be supported by incentives, especially in the form of project funding. The higher education institutions shall be responsible for assessing the equivalence of competences. Initial funding shall be provided for the development of procedures at the higher education institutions. Funded projects must take into account the aspect of implementation.

In addition, a legal basis for the recognition of non-formally and informally acquired competences shall be established which grants students the right to an assessment of equivalence of their competences. There is a particular need for clarifying the regulations on the options for recognition concerning certificate university programmes for further education at public universities.

In order to be able to assess the equivalence free of charge, external funding and appropriate personnel resources must be ensured.

Recommendations to higher education institutions

The higher education institutions shall establish transparent systems and procedures for the recognition and crediting of non-academic competences. These systems shall also take into account non-formally and informally acquired competences. Double recognition, that is a crediting of previous achievements both upon admission as well as towards academic performance, shall be avoided. The quality of the procedures must be assured.

A cross-sectoral agreement shall be reached regarding the maximum amount of ECTS credits to be transferred.

Recommendations to applicants to a degree programme and students

In order to be able to provide proof of their competences, applicants and students shall reflect more deeply on their existing competences and make them as visible as possible.

The recognition and crediting of competences offers possibilities, but also entails obligations. Applicants to a degree programme and students are required to provide transparent and verifiable proof of their competences.

9 Examples for guidelines and handouts of higher education institutions

- Danube University Krems, Richtlinie über die Anerkennung von Studienleistungen, http://www.donau-uni.ac.at/imperia/md/content/donau-uni/mitteilungsblaetter/2014/duk_mb_8614.pdf (in German only), accessed on 10 October 2016.
- ESMOD Berlin, Internationale Kunsthochschule für Mode, Anrechnungsrichtlinie der ESMOD BERLIN Internationale Kunsthochschule für Mode, 2015; http://esmod.de/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Anrechnungsrichtlinie-ESMOD-Kunsthochschule_31.7.2015.pdf (in German only), accessed on 26 July 2016.
- Brandenburg University of Applied Sciences, all documents available under <http://zdd.fh-brandenburg.de/anrechnung/links-und-downloads.html> (in German only), accessed on 26 July 2016.
 - Anrechnung beruflicher Kompetenzen und Qualifikationen auf ein Hochschulstudium, Leitfaden für die individuelle Anrechnung für Hochschule und Lehrende, 2015.
 - Anrechnung beruflicher Kompetenzen und Qualifikationen auf ein Hochschulstudium Leitfaden für die individuelle Anrechnung für Studierende und Bewerber/innen, 2014.
 - Anrechnung beruflicher Kompetenzen und Qualifikationen auf ein Hochschulstudium Leitfaden für die pauschale Anrechnung für Hochschule und Lehrende, 2014.
 - Anrechnung beruflicher Kompetenzen und Qualifikationen auf ein Hochschulstudium Leitfaden für Hochschule und Lehrende.
 - Anrechnung beruflicher Kompetenzen und Qualifikationen auf ein Hochschulstudium Leitfaden für die pauschale Anrechnung für Hochschule und Lehrende.
 - Beispielhaftes Anrechnungsverfahren nach Anrechnungssystematik der FH-Brandenburg.
- Frankfurt University of Applied Sciences, all documents available under <https://www.frankfurt-university.de/studium/anrechnungsverfahren.html> (in German only), accessed on 26 July 2016.

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- Verfahren zur Anrechnung von außerhochschulisch erworbenen Kompetenzen (AAEK- Verfahren) an der Fachhochschule Frankfurt am Main – University of Applied Sciences;
- Informationen für Erstsemester zur Anrechnung außerhochschulisch erworbener Kompetenzen (AAEK).
- Studieren ohne Abitur Ein Leitfaden zum Hochschulzugang für beruflich Qualifizierte an der Frankfurt University of Applied Sciences.
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