TRANS**VAL**-EU

NATIONAL POLICY COHERENCE REPORT

Austria

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Introduction

The TRANSVAL-EU project

Transversal skills are often only an implicit part of the existing validation and guidance process. The aim of the TRANSVAL-EU project is to experiment on how to make those skills more explicit and to embed the lessons learned in validation and guidance provisions. TRANSVAL-EU proposes innovative approaches for the validation of transversal skills acquired through non-formal and informal learning (VNFIL), which were tested in five pilot countries – Austria, Belgium, Italy, Lithuania and Poland.

TRANSVAL-EU aims to increase the knowledge and awareness of validation assessors, counsellors and career guidance practitioners on transversal competences through capacity building. The project strengthens cross-sector cooperation between practitioners, policy-makers and other stakeholders in order to build coherent VNFIL systems. The project life span encompasses 30 months, starting on March 1st, 2021 and ending in August 2023. It is co-funded by Erasmus+ (Call KA3 Policy Reform – Policy Experimentations).

TRANSVAL-EU National Reports

In the last phase of the project, partners were looking into the potential for translating the successful experimentation that took place within the project frame into sustainable policy change.

Successful policies often rely on policy coherence and coordination. Policy coherence refers to how policies are connected between them and across silos, avoiding overlap and inefficiencies. It does not just happen by default. It implies a set of collaborative and knowledge-sharing practices between the responsible authorities in charge of the policy, their institutions and the staff in the institutions (the policy-makers). It is dependent on this cooperation to materialise in the policy texts.

A partner in the TRANSVAL-EU project, the Lifelong Learning Platform investigated coherence at the European level with the support of the other partners (see TRANSVAL-EU, European Policy Coherence Report, August 2023 and its short version). At national level (or in the case of Italy and Belgium, taking the regional dimension into consideration), partners from the five EU countries or regions where the experimentation took place (Austria, Belgium, Italy, Lithuania and Poland) plus a partner representing Nordic countries (for the case of Sweden and Iceland) also looked into the issue of policy coherence at national and regional levels. The National Policy Coherence Reports are the results of these reflections. They mostly relied on desk research and dialogue with the respective public authorities involved in the project.

The National Policy Coherence Reports address the issues of main policies relevant for validation, guidance, skills and competences, coherence between these policies (e.g. terminological coherence), coordination between the institutions in charge of these policies, among others. All Reports include recommendations for policy-makers at national and regional levels. The results of this work complete the early research made in the first phase of the project which led to the publication of the TRANSVAL-EU, European State-of-Play Report on the Validation of Transversal skills and Country sheets for the five countries (download links here).

Austria Policy Coherence Report

Main national policies

In the field of the validation of non-formal and informal learning in general and the validation of transversal competences in particular, there are three main policies to take into consideration on national level: Firstly, the **strategy for Lifelong Learning LLL:2020** (issued in 2011), its rationale being based upon the five pillars of life phase orientation (all ages), placing learners at the centre (flexibility supported by social partners and all key stakeholders), lifelong guidance (facilitating the learning process), competence orientation (recognition of informal learning), and promotion of participation in lifelong learning (enhancing the motivation to learn). The main challenge is that the strategy for LLL:2020 ended in 2020 and there is no succession in place.

Secondly, the **national validation strategy**, issued in 2017. Validation in Austria is generally based on a bottom-up approach with specific projects for example in the sphere of apprenticeships and adult education. There is no legal framework to regulate validation and recognition of non-formal and informal learning, there is also no individual right for individuals to access validation initiatives. In the national validation strategy, professionalisation of practitioners is one of the strategic goals, which is tackled by TRANSVAL-EU with a competence profile for practitioners as well as the developed curriculum for raising awareness for the relevance of transversal competences and respective assessment instruments and methods made publicly available in a database. Currently, there are no concerted efforts in the implementation of the national validation strategy on a political level.

Thirdly, the **NQF Act**, issued in 2016. The validation strategy does link to the NQF, especially regarding the approach on learning outcomes fostering transparency and therefore being a key success factor for building trust in validation. The objective of the NQF-Act is to use the NQF as a tool for encouraging the transparency and comparability of qualifications in Austria and Europe and to promote lifelong learning, which comprises formal, non-formal, and informal learning. The NQF therefore is open for qualifications recognized through validation and for transversal competencies included in qualifications.

Recent policy developments

In recent years, validation activities have been mentioned at least in passing in the following areas (not exhaustive) and measures have been taken, possibly for the future:

o Amendment to the Universities Act 2021: at Universities and Colleges of Education, vocational and non-vocational qualifications up to a maximum of 90 ECTS can be recognized via validation procedures.
o Bill on Higher Vocational Education (HBB): validation is provided for therein, but without more precise specification or connection to the EU or national validation strategy.
o Public Employment Service (AMS) competence orientation: also offers integration possibilities for validation.

Is there inter-institutional coordination between ministries on skills or validation/guidance? (or education/LLL policies at large)

On behalf of the Ministry of Finance and in close connection with the European Initiative Digital Decade and thereby "Digital Skills and Job Coalition" by the European Commission with the aim of the development of the digital economy and the transformation of European businesses by 2030, the "Digital Skills Network" has been established as a branch office at OeAD, agency for education and internationalisation. The goal of the office is the sustainable anchoring of digital competencies and digital education at all levels and for all areas in Austria. For this purpose, a National Reference Framework for digital competences shall be implemented as well as a concept for quality assurance, standardisation and certification of digital competencies. The expertise of TRANSVAL-EU, especially with regards to the competence "communicating using digital technologies" and its descriptors, will be used in the implementation. In addition, related to inter-institutional coordination between ministries on skills or validation/guidance the development of the LLL:2020 strategy and the validation strategy is to be mentioned here as both were developed as inter-ministerial strategies and supported by the social partners and all key stakeholders.

Is there coordination between national and regional levels?

One of the main characteristics and also challenges with regards to steering on policy level in Austria is the fact that Austria is decentralised and the respective regions have their regional law which is not concerted on national level.

Coherence with EU policies

Besides NQF, is there coherence with EU policies?

In 2021, the New European Agenda for Adult Learning was adopted. In Austria, the national implementation is conducted via various projects, e.g. the initiative for adult education. The Agenda on European Policy level is directly translated into the respective societal and labour market subjects and is co-funded nationally and by the European Social Fund.

A link to the European Initiative Digital Decade (see above) can be found.

Terminological coherence challenges

In the Austrian NQF-Act 2016, which is the legal basis for all mapping of qualifications to the NQF in Austria, §2 qualifications are defined as the result of an assessment and/or validation process confirming pre-defined standards. (§2 NQF-Act 2016). Furthermore, the terminology used is harmonised with the wording in EU policies, with the usage of an umbrella term encompassing skills and competences ("Kompetenzen").

The definition of knowledge, skills and competences are defined in the EQF framework and its adaptation in the national context. The National Coordination Point for the NQF in Austria has a handbook depicting the mapping process for qualifications to the NQF in which competences and qualifications are defined. In addition, the glossary of the yearly working report to the Austrian parliament also contains those definitions as in qualifications, learning outcomes can be recognized in the form of validation within the assessment procedure.

The definition of validation in the Austrian validation strategy 2017 (encompassing formative and summative validation) is based on the concepts of the European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning (CEDEFOP).

Policy recommendations for Austria

Recommendation: Make transversal competences more visible in education, training and the labour market

While curricula and examinations are increasingly formulated in a competence-oriented way, certificates and diplomas are still strongly focused on content or do not give any indication, in particular, of acquired transversal competences. These would be helpful in e.g. selection procedures in order to be able to make a (better) comparison with the requirements. Against the backdrop of the much-cited shortage of skilled workers, proven or identified transversal competencies in particular could be helpful for matching potential employees beyond the (still missing) technical qualification. In the area of initial vocational training, the identification of transversal competences could make more visible what these training courses achieve in the area of transversal competences. It would also be conceivable here to make specific transversal competences visible at the respective levels of the NQF.

Furthermore, the question arises how companies can be supported in formulating their qualification requirements in such a way that talent acquisition can also be pursued outside their classic occupational fields. Here, cooperation with validation providers or practitioners could be considered, who can perform certain "translation work" for companies between their needs and the transversal competencies that can also be found in other fields.

Recommendation: Sector-specific piloting

Stronger linkages to existing initiatives would be encouraged to leverage synergies and build on lessons learned. Initially, a sector-specific pilot would be conceivable - e.g., in the health sector, but also in other areas like the Public Employment Service.

Recommendation: Continuation of professionalisation activities

In the course of the pilots, it became clear that the practitioners involved brought a lot of experience and expertise with them and were largely responsible for the success of the pilots. Nevertheless, there are no common national standards in Austria with regard to the qualification and competences of validation practitioners. With regard to the professionalisation of validation practitioners, contributions have been made in recent years within the framework of projects, such as the development of a cross-occupational qualification profile for validation practitioners, which on the one hand allows the development of an overarching job profile and at the same time is open for context- and activity-related specifications. This qualification profile can be further developed, e.g. by integrating the validation of transversal skills, and serve as a basis for the development of qualification, further education and certification offers for validation practitioners.

Recommendation: National Coordination Center / Common Reference Point for Validation

In terms of constitutional law, the regions in Austria have their respective jurisdiction and competencies which explains why concerning skills or competencies, the perspectives and also responsibilities are rather fragmented and not nationally unified. It would thus be favourable to use the project findings and deliverables as a starting point to create a point of reference in coordinating the efforts with regards to validation initiatives. In this sense, the development of a concerted competence centre for validation could help to give a concerted overview on validation in Austria. Such a coordination centre to gather information and coordinate the dissemination could be located at the National Coordination Point (NCP) for the NQF in Austria as well as give insights in standardised tools for mapping and documenting validation processes (see database) and leverage existing experience, e.g. "Du kannst was!", wba procedures.

Furthermore, the Austrian Forum, created as a platform to inform relevant stakeholders about the project's progress and outputs and to discuss synergy effects on national level could be continued in the bi-annual setting, widening the scope and also encompass initiatives and stakeholders from the Higher education sector (EQF VI and above).

References

[NQR-Gesetz übernommen-von-RIS.bka .gv .at .pdf (qualifikationsregister.at)](#)

[NQR-Handbuch und Zuordnungsersuchen - Qualifikationsregister](#)

[Strategie zur Validierung nicht-formalen und informellen Lernens in Österreich (qualifikationsregister.at)](#)