

Bertelsmann Stiftung (Hrsg.)

Kompetenzen anerkennen

Was Deutschland
von anderen Staaten lernen kann

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Abstract

In Germany – as in other European countries – discussions are taking place about how vocationally relevant practical knowledge can be better identified and certified. Up until now, it has been mainly formal training courses which have opened up opportunities in the education system and on the labour market. By contrast, competences acquired informally in work or leisure time or in further education without receiving a formal qualification have carried less significance, despite often being more beneficial to one’s vocational competence than formally certified knowledge.

Many people are more capable than their certificates show

In particular, those people without formal school or vocational qualifications but with many years of professional experience, as well as people with vocational competences acquired abroad, could benefit from the validation of informal learning. Formally low-skilled persons have usually acquired their vocational knowledge informally. They are therefore particularly dependent on using learning opportunities that come their way almost “in passing” – in work tasks, exchanges with colleagues and their free time – rather than those offered by the educational institutions.

It should be emphasised that “formally low-skilled” does not mean that a person does not possess any vocationally relevant qualifications or competences. In fact, the opposite is often true: a student dropout

who has been configuring IT systems for a decade, a Syrian engineer who fled his homeland and no longer has papers as proof, a widow who has amassed years of care experience in a family environment – they are all vocationally competent, but formally low-skilled. Herein lies the issue with the certificate-focus in our society: educational certificates might serve as an instrument to demonstrate one’s vocational competences, but they also fail to show competences for which there is no certificate.

In bygone eras and times of slow technical development, certificates and competences largely went hand-in-hand with one another: the educational system first taught and then certified skills to be used throughout one’s career. However, knowledge work and rapid innovation cycles have frequently made this sequential model of vocational learning obsolete, with an increasing number of vocational competences now acquired continuously, at work and in a self-organised manner rather than before beginning a career. This applies to both simple and complex tasks. Vocational training is therefore no longer exclusively provided by traditional educational institutions – it is also undertaken alone. Unfortunately that does not apply to its certification though. This continues to be closely linked with educational institutions, which show little willingness to recognise learning taking place outside of their training courses.

Detecting, recognising and making competences usable courtesy of a good recognition system

In Germany, there is a lack of possibilities to make competences not proven by qualifications and certificates usable for those who possess them. They are often used at one’s current workplace but are usually not documented or certified at all. The few procedures that are available – such as Europass – do not represent a standard for application procedures in the employment system and do not constitute any basis for entitlement to pay grades. Moreover, procedures that document and certify vocational competences or certificates that are acquired

non-formally often take a backseat to the formal qualifications offered by the dual educational system. They are only seen – in most cases – as little more than a supplement to recognised vocational qualifications. The formal education system creates obstacles – not only for formally low-skilled persons – as it very rarely recognises informally and non-formally acquired competences as entry requirements and thus offers no prospects for formal upgrading of qualifications.

However, making vocational competences usable is no longer exclusively a problem faced by the individual. In view of demographic declines and at the same time increasing requirements in the working world, the problem has taken on societal proportions. For example, every seventh young adult living in Germany does not have a vocational qualification to their name. Validation procedures would tap into all of their uncertified competences and could also lead to a decrease in unemployment among vocationally low-skilled persons. The education system and the labour market must be made more accessible for people with atypical, very different educational and vocational backgrounds – people with foreign qualifications, for example, or individuals who do not have a vocational qualification to their name, but who have decided to pursue a completely different professional avenue instead. In addition, the decision taken by the Council of the European Union back in 2012 has called upon the member states to create possibilities for the certification of informally and non-formally acquired competences by 2018.

Recognition systems work: what can we learn from other European countries?

In some European countries, there are already procedures leading to certificates that can be used on the labour market and as entitlements to access the education system. The study entitled “Recognition of non-formal and informal learning in Germany”, carried out by the Bertelsmann Stiftung as part of the “Continuing Education for All” project, focused on the good practices currently employed in other European countries. These were investigated to see to what extent

they would be *worth transferring* to Germany, based on the degree of binding force and standardisation that has already been achieved. In addition, these good practices should be *transferrable*, i.e. their application may not be dependent on indispensable conditions in the national education system or labour market which are not present in Germany. Five core elements, which touch on central questions and aspects of a recognition system, were focused on in this study and are illustrated here using examples.



Legal basis: This ensures that the results of a recognition procedure are made both binding and usable. Investigations were carried out to see how the recognition of informal learning is legally anchored and what area it applies to. In France, for example, one has a comprehensive legal entitlement to the examination of competences acquired while carrying out an activity that has lasted at least three years. The examination leads to an official qualification that is the legal equivalent of initial vocational training. A first step for Germany could be to create a legal basis for the possibility of examining the quality of informally acquired competences – just like the possibilities that exist for the recognition of foreign qualifications. I.e., a person with years of experience as a care worker without receiving a vocational qualification has learnt many of the basic elements and working procedures used in elderly care. She would then be entitled to the examination and recognition of these competences.



Procedures and instruments: A recognition system needs efficient procedures which provide meaningful results. This ensures acceptance and increases demand. In Denmark there is a two-step certification procedure in place. With the support of a vocational training centre for adults, this procedure records individually demonstrated competences in a certificate and reconciles them with the defined learning outcomes of training courses. This certificate can subsequently be used for one's personal planning to undertake further qualifica-

tion or to enter the labour market. This two-step model has the potential to be transferred to Germany by combining already existing competence passes and employment-related partial qualifications. For the care worker, this would mean that her competences would be documented; she could then complete an adequate professional competence profile by undertaking later qualification in various modules, and could take further steps towards acquiring a vocational qualification.



Financing: Existing financing structures and the question of who will cover which costs to what extent are essential for the establishment of a recognition system. In Europe there are currently state, company and private forms of financing for these procedures, as well as some which combine all three differently. The tradition of free education in other European countries has had a positive impact on the recognition systems for informal competences there, with people entitled to predominantly public financing. In Finland, the costs for validation are shared by the Ministries of Educational and Labour, supplemented by a small personal contribution for fixed costs – which may be higher in the event that candidates receive an income. As an alternative to full public financing, suitable combinations involving income-dependent support from the BAföG (Federal Training Assistance Act) or educational funds could constitute a potential approach for Germany. Just like in the Netherlands and France, it is conceivable for an approach to be adopted in Germany whereby companies take on a share of the validation costs by granting their employees a leave of absence.



Institutionalisation: The creation of an institutional framework is a fundamental requirement for the general acceptance of the certification of non-formally and informally acquired competences. In this process it must be clear which stakeholders are participating in which role or with which

responsibilities and in which form they are connected. In Switzerland the validation of education is a joint task for industry representatives/professional associations, the federal government and the cantons. Similarly, those involved in the field of formal vocational education in Germany, such as the Chambers or the Federal Employment Agency, could also share the tasks for the recognition procedures of non-formal and informal competences.



Support structures: The users of complex recognition procedures need low-threshold access to information and consultation. In Finland, for example, opportunities for face-to-face advice and support are offered nationwide. In addition, there are websites or online chats with specialists who provide information on qualifications and validation procedures. Similarly to Finland, Germany could also entrust the task of providing consultation to its Employment Agencies or the Chambers. They are already trained to provide consultation and already serve as a consultation point for other matters. Furthermore, they are well-established on a nationwide level with good connections to the labour market.

In the study, national experts for seven European countries provided an overview of the current state of the aspects outlined above. Based on this, they used case studies to illustrate just how recognition systems have proven to be successful in those countries. The experiences of the other countries could provide Germany with guidance and targeted transfer impetus as it seeks to introduce recognition procedures of its own. The latter was also covered in the study. The main test criteria for a recognition system in Germany are:

- the degree of legal binding force of the validation procedures,
- acceptance of certificates in the education and employment system,
- awareness of recognition possibilities (not only) for formally low-qualified persons and easy access.