European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2014

Case study

Kompetenz mit System (KmS), Austria

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Contents

1   Introduction

The overall aim of the Austrian project 'Kompetenz mit System' (KmS) is to support the employability of unemployed people[1] and jobseekers who have completed compulsory schooling at most. They are supported to acquire the competences necessary to pass the final apprenticeship exam and thus receive a qualification from the formal system, without actually participating in a programme offered by the formal system.[2] KmS is implemented at national level by a public-private partnership including the Austrian Public Employment Service (AMS), *Prospect consultancy* (a research and consulting company) as well as *ibw* and *öibf* (research and consulting institutions with close links to the social partners). The project is funded by AMS and it is a permanent initiative.

KmS is unique in that the competences required to achieve an apprenticeship qualification are acquired through a modular training programme. The case study illustrates how non-formal education can be linked to formal education, making use of validation methodologies.

Following the completion of each module, a 'competence check' is carried out and a certificate is issued to successful participants.[3] Although the certificate alone does not lead to any qualification from the formal system, it can be used when applying for a job as a proof of evidence of the competences acquired.

This case study is based on several sources, including a conversation with the head of the AMS department 'Labour market research and job information', the project manager from *Prospect consultancy* as well as available literature.

2   Country context[4]

The launch of KmS in 2009 can be linked to important developments in the Austrian qualifications system. As highlighted in the 2014 Inventory country report for Austria, since 2010, validation of non-formal and informal learning has continuously gained importance in relation to the development of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and the Austrian strategy for lifelong learning, as well as the implementation of the European Credit System in Vocational Education and Training (ECVET), the Council Recommendation on validation and the increasing use of learning outcomes. These developments are reflected in the design of the KmS training programmes.

3   The validation project / practice

The overall objective of KmS is to support the employability of unemployed people[5] as well as jobseekers, who have as a maximum achieved compulsory schooling. Low qualified women, working in seasonal jobs (such as tourism) were identified as a particularly

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[1] This covers only those registered at the Austrian public employment service, AMS.

[2] In Austria, 'exceptional admission to the apprenticeship examination' is possible. Individuals without formal training can take the final apprenticeship examination if they are over 18 years old and can provide evidence of having acquired the corresponding vocational skills and knowledge in another form, such as work experience or in courses.

[3] The certificate transparently presents the set of competences (i.e. which part of the apprenticeship profile) a learner has acquired so far.

[4] As stated in the 2014 Inventory report, in Austria there is no uniform framework for validation and recognition of non-formal and informal learning. However, there are mechanisms and arrangements (included in different Acts and Regulations) that enable formal education and training institutions to recognise learning outcomes acquired in non-formal and informal settings.

[5] This covers only those registered at AMS.

vulnerable group, as they are exposed to a higher risk of falling into recurrent unemployment, for example during out-of-season periods.[6]

So far, KmS training programmes have been developed for 14 apprenticeship profiles (retail merchant, IT technician, IT clerk, hotel and catering assistant, cook, restaurant professional, catering professional and office clerk, etc). Two additional training programmes will be developed in the summer of 2014.

■ *Programme structure*

Each training programme is composed of three modules (courses) and is based on a competence matrix that reflects the contents of the legally specified apprenticeship profiles. For example, the training programme for retail merchant includes the following modules:[7]

■ Module 1: 'Fit for retail'– a basic course facilitating entry into the occupational field;
■ Module 2: 'Retail Merchant Vertiefung' – the course provides complementary competences, which widen the scope of professional activities;
■ Module 3: 'Retail Profi' – the final course complements and deepens the knowledge in retail and prepares for the final apprenticeship exam. It delivers business skills and competences related to administrative tasks.

The competence matrix is composed of several competence areas; for each competence area three steps of competence development are defined (Table 3.1).

Table 3.1   Modular training programme KmS retail merchant

Competence area	Steps of competence development		
	Be able to perform tasks according to instructions	**Be able to perform routine tasks**	**Be able to perform tasks autonomously also in exceptional situations**
Sales	He/she knows about the procurement process ...	He/she regularly performs orders....	He/she observes the need for supply and determines alternative sources...

The modular training programmes provide a high degree of flexibility. It is not necessary to complete module 1 in order to proceed with module 2 or 3, i.e. modules 2 and 3 are open also to lateral entrants who have already acquired the required competences (for example, through work experience). Another aspect of the programme's flexibility is the fact that in some provinces KmS training programmes are offered in several rounds. For example, in Vienna, the KmS training for retail merchant is delivered between September 2012 and February 2014. Within this period four rounds (a round includes modules 1, 2 and 3) are offered.

Participants who need more time to complete module 1 or module 2 do not have to drop out but have the possibility to catch up at a later stage and complete the following module in the next round.[8]

■ *Awareness raising and recruitment*

The AMS regional offices in the provinces are in charge of awareness raising and recruitment for KmS. They are also responsible for the organisation of calls for tenders and the subsequent selection of training providers. AMS job advisers in the regional offices reach out to potential beneficiaries, for example, by a letter of invitation or face-to-face

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[6] The initiator of the project was the Prospect Consultancy together with the AMS department for labour market policy and women.

[7] AMS, Prospect (2013): Grundlage für die Vergabe von Schulungsleistungen für den Einzelhandel, Stand: 28-05-2013

[8] AMS: Leistungsbeschreibung Modulares Qualifizierungsprogramm „Kompetenz mit System" Einzelhandel, 1,2,3, p. 12.

consultation. Thus the recruitment process involves more a process of 'nomination' by the AMS advisers, than individuals themselves finding out about the courses and asking to go on them. This is partly because there is a limited number of places for each course. The regional offices, together with the training providers, decide on the maximum number of participants in a training programme. However it is unlikely that individuals would not be able to take up a place on the training due to the maximum capacity of a course being filled, because alternative solutions can be found, such as for example through cooperation with neighbouring Länder (described in Section 7).

■ *Assessment and award*

At the beginning of each module a 'clearing' takes place – in module 1 it provides information and orientation to participants on issues such as working hours in a given occupation, work life balance, etc. In modules 2 and 3, the clearing aims to provide a refresher on what has been learned in previous modules. Additionally, lateral entrants for modules 2 and/or 3 are required to take an assessment of their competences acquired through relevant work experience.

Each module is completed with a competence check, providing evidence on the competences achieved. Assessment criteria are based on the learning outcomes specified in the corresponding competence matrix. Successful candidates obtain a certificate which presents the set of competences they have gained (i.e. it reflects the part of the apprenticeship profile they have already covered). The aim of the certificate is to motivate participants to continue with the training. It is also supposed to serve as a proof (of evidence of the competences acquired) that can be shown to potential employers.

■ *Provision of guidance and support*

Guidance and support is provided by the trainers delivering the KmS training course. For example, throughout the training programme participants are supported to reflect on their competence development.

■ *Assessment methods*

The competence check (examination) which follows the completion of each module is organised in different ways, depending on the specific apprenticeship profile. In general it consists of several parts, which are very practice-oriented, i.e. the competence check focuses on solving concrete problems. Depending on the apprenticeship profile, the competence check may include the elaboration of a piece of work. The check is carried out in front of an examination commission, which includes a representative of the world of work i.e. an employer, employee organisation, AMS, etc.

■ *Quality assurance arrangements*

The fact that the training curricula (and also assessment criteria) are based on the contents of the legally specified apprenticeship profiles (i.e. occupational standards) is an important aspect of quality assurance. Another is the fact that the organisation and development of learning content was carried out in consultation with the AMS regional offices and enterprises (i.e. stakeholders that are well aware of the current labour market needs). Quality assurance arrangements can be also related to the fact that the structure and process of the competence checks is documented for each candidate, i.e. the information justifying the judgement of a competence check is recorded in a protocol. In relation to the delivery of training, quality assurance arrangements are within the sphere of competence of the AMS regional offices. As mentioned earlier, they launch a call for tenders and select training providers. An important selection criterion relates to the ability of training providers to ensure a competence-based methodology and teaching methods in the delivery of the KmS training programmes.

■ *Methods used to 'capture' the outcomes of the validation process*

The successful completion of a module leads to a certificate. Although the certificate alone does not lead to a qualification of the formal system, it can be used to support an application for a semi-skilled position on the labour market. Since employers are involved in the

competence check, it can be expected that the value of the certificate is recognised on the labour market.

- *Tools used to support the validation process, e.g. portfolios / e-portfolios, competence profiles etc*

All occupational trainings are based on competence matrices. Some training providers use additional tools such as competence portfolios.

- *Organisations (partners and stakeholders) involved in the validation project, from design and development to delivery, and their roles in the validation process*

AMS, together with Prospect consultancy, initiated and designed the project. *Ibw* developed the competence matrices in cooperation with *öibf. Prospect* designed the curriculum and the templates for certificates. The AMS is also responsible for involving the AMS regional offices and for covering the costs for the occupational training. AMS job advisers recruit the target group.

- *Practitioners involved in the validation project and their roles in the validation process*

The practitioners involved are the trainers who deliver the educational and training modules and also act as 'learning guides'. In general, trainers are required to be able to use a competency-based methodology and didactics in the delivery of occupational training. The selection of trainers is within the sphere of competence of the training providers. Three types of trainers are distinguished.

1. Trainers responsible for the 'clearing' that takes place at the beginning of each module as well as the assessment of lateral entrants (modules 2 and 3).
2. Professional coaches for the respective modules.
3. Trainers providing individual advice and assistance to participants in case they experience private and psychological problems (not directly related to the training programme) or personal problems and/or conflicts, directly related to the training programme.[9]

As mentioned earlier, assessment of competence checks is carried out by an examination commission, which includes a representative of the world of work i.e. an employer, employee organisation, AMS, etc.

- *Costs associated with the validation process and who covers these costs*

Costs for participating in the training modules are covered by AMS. They differ according to the apprenticeship occupation. For example, trainings for clerks have a lower budget compared to those that require craftsman workshops (for example in construction).

4   Innovation and sustainability

KmS is considered a good practice because of its unique nature, innovation and sustainability. Since 2010, the types of apprenticeship profile as well as the training programmes offered have been extended and diversified - originally, only four apprenticeship profiles were covered (retail merchant, IT clerk, IT technician and hotel and hospitality assistant) and by summer 2014 a total of 16 apprenticeship profiles will be covered.

The project is implemented by a public-private partnership led by the AMS, including its regional offices, in cooperation with research and consulting institutes (ibw, öibf and Prospect, which is responsible for the overall management)

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[9] AMS: Leistungsbeschreibung Modulares Qualifizierungsprogramm „Kompetenz mit System" Einzelhandel, 1,2,3, p. 29.

As mentioned earlier, KmS is unique in that competences are acquired through a modular training programme based on competence matrices that reflect the contents of the legally specified apprenticeship profiles. Furthermore, modules are designed in such a way that taken separately, each has an added value i.e. each represents a different part (different set of competences) of the apprenticeship profile and each corresponds to the current needs of the labour market.

In relation to sustainability, several aspects have to be highlighted i.e. there is sufficient demand and also funding to continue with the courses in the future. The success of KmS is evidence to support its continuation.

5   Results, outcomes and impact

So far, approximately 500 participants have successfully passed the final apprenticeship exam after participating in KmS. AMS provided the following data for the period between September 2011 and February 2014:

- 1,627 persons participated in one or more KmS modules 1, 2, and 3
- 1,072 of the participants were women.
- 785 persons took part in KmS retail merchant training
- 641 persons took part in training relating to tourism professions
- 127 persons took part in administrative clerk training
- 103 persons (40 women) took part in IT technician training
- Approximately 45% of the participants are under 25 years old and 45% are between 25 and 45 years old. Nearly 10% are older than 45 years old.

No data is currently available on the impact of the programme on individuals' employability.

In relation to qualitative outcomes, personal feedback from beneficiaries (mostly women) who attended the final apprenticeship exam indicate that their participation in the training has led to increased self-confidence. In relation to this, the support and guidance provided by the third type of trainer mentioned above was crucial.

6   Success factors

The following success factors can be identified:
- Commitment of a dedicated department within the AMS (labour market policy for women), which together with private partners (Prospect consultancy) initiated KmS;
- Selection of relevant partners (ibw, öibf, Prospect) with know-how and experience in the field of apprenticeship, design of curricula and labour market policy;
- Involvement, from the very beginning, of the AMS regional offices - in particular, those experts responsible for the administration of measures for further education;
- Consultation with AMS regional offices and enterprises for the organisation of the training courses into modules;
- Selection of appropriate apprenticeship occupations according to the labour market needs of the provinces i.e. considering skills supply, demand and mismatch

Due to the modular approach of the KmS model and the possibilities for re-entry, drop-out rates can be reduced. For example, it was possible for a participant to continue with the training programme even after her maternity leave[10].

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[10] Weber, F. & Putz, S. & Stockhammer, H. (2011): 11

7   Challenges and lessons learned

One of the biggest challenges is of a logistical nature and concerns the possibility to ensure a regular KmS training offer with sufficient number of participants, especially in rural regions. In theory, a person who has completed module 1 of KmS training (during previous unemployment) can relatively quickly proceed with module 2 (during recurrent unemployment). In practice, however, this is difficult to achieve; especially in rural areas i.e. there always needs to be certain number of participants in order to offer a course. In relation to this, the cooperation between the AMS regional offices is crucial – the offices can arrange a joint course for participants from Upper Austria and the neighbouring region in Lower Austria and in this way it is easier to fill the course.

In relation to the delivery of KmS trainings, challenges relate to the use of a learning outcomes approach. For example, feedback from trainers revealed that at the beginning the use of the learning-outcomes approach was a challenge for them i.e. they were used to the traditional methods of teaching and testing. It was new for them to communicate to learners from the very beginning what is expected of them: what they should know, understand and be able to do by the end of the training. During the practice, the trainers got used to this approach and are now satisfied with it. In comparison, feedback from learners indicates that for them it was quite motivating to know already at the beginning, the goal of the training and the competences they will have gained at the end.

Another challenge relates to the identification of the needs and job prospects of the target group from the point of view of AMS job advisers. This can be illustrated by the following situation: a job adviser puts forward a person for KmS training for a cook. The person completes module 1 and finds employment and therefore cannot continue with the training until his/her next period of unemployment. When the person is unemployed again, he/she is supported by a different job adviser. The adviser has to know that the person has already done module 1 and put him/her forward for module 2. The challenge relates to the complexities involved in AMS data storage, i.e. typically AMS job advisers do not look at all personal details related to training courses completed in the past.

Finally, another challenge relates to the fact that until now the successful completion of the KmS training programmes does not lead to exemption (or at least partial exemption) from the final apprenticeship exam.

Lessons learned

- *Good planning* in terms of logistics – this refers to the definition of an appropriate timeframe for the delivery of a training course i.e. periods of seasonal unemployment or high unemployment rates faced by a certain occupational group should be taken into consideration.
- *Ensure cooperation between the AMS regional offices* – for example, in relation to the organisation of joint courses for participants from neighbouring provinces
- *Information at a glance* – due to improvement of the AMS data storage, job advisers can now easily see personal data related to training courses completed in the past. This facilitates the mediation of a person in the corresponding KmS module.
- *Switching possibilities* – KmS modules are now designed in way that allows learners to switch between apprenticeship profiles with similar content. For example, according to the respective competence matrices, the apprenticeship profiles 'retail merchant' and 'IT clerk' have a common competence area - 'purchase management'. If a person has already acquired competences as a retail merchant, he/she can switch to IT clerk by taking part in some additional training. This information will be soon visible (in the AMS database) also for job advisers. In this way, they could offer different training paths to a client.

8   Summary / Conclusions

Compared to the traditional apprenticeship training, the KmS project provides an alternative way to acquire a qualification from the formal system without attending a training programme offered in this formal system.

KmS is unique in that competences are acquired through modular training programmes offered by the Austrian Public Employment Service and based on competence matrices that reflect the contents of the legally specified apprenticeship profiles.

The added value of KmS relates to its flexibility in terms of the needs of the target group and the organisation of the modules. Another positive feature is the involvement of employers in the assessment during the competence check.

The fact that the initiative is still ongoing and developing relates to its sustainability. This is manifested in the increased number of occupational profiles covered. A future development relates to the possibility to exempt participants from the theoretical part of the final apprenticeship exam based on successful completion of the competence check in module 3. This possibility is within the sphere of competence of the regional economic chambers and apprenticeship offices and is currently under discussion.

Another important development relates to the future extension of the KmS trainings - it will be possible to offer modules to people in employment parallel to their job.

ANNEX 1 - References

A1.1   Literature

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http://www.pro-spect.at/projekte/projekt_KMS2.php [accessed 10.04.2014]

A1.2   Interviews

AMS
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