

# European Inventory on Validation of Non- formal and Informal Learning 2010

## Case Study: Recognition for Professionalisation in the adult learning sector – Academy of Continuing Education (wba), Austria

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

The Academy of Continuing Education (Weiterbildungsakademie, *wba* – [www.wba.or.at](http://www.wba.or.at)) was set up in 2007 to support the professionalization of the adult-education sector in Austria. Today, it offers a rather new approach for assessing, validating and recognising formal, non-formal and informal learning of adult educators through a two-tier qualification structure, based on the provision of a certificate and a diploma. This process is structured around a comprehensive competence profile for adult educators.

The *wba* was developed during a three-year project funded by the European Social Fund (ESF) involving a large number of important stakeholders and institutions in adult education in Austria. In this preparatory phase, which also included a feasibility study (Schlögl et al. 2006), a set of competences required for the award of the *wba*-degrees was identified.

Today, the Federal Institute for Adult Education (*Bundesinstitut für Erwachsenenbildung, bifeb*) is responsible for the *wba*. The Academy is supported by all ten major adult education umbrella organisations (the *Konferenz Erwachsenenbildung Österreich, KEBÖ* institutions – Austrian Conference of Adult Education Institutes) and is therefore closely linked to practical experiences within a trans-institutional network of adult education centres. The institution is financed through funding provided by the Federal Ministry of Education, the Arts and Culture, the ESF and the fees paid by its own students.

The *wba* certification process enables adult educators with professional experience to receive credits for competences acquired through working in the field as well as for other forms of prior learning. Usually candidates have to attend additional seminars to acquire further competences and must participate in a 'certification workshop' as a kind of final and overall assessment. The system of certification is based on European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) credits. Permeability is provided in two respects: on the one hand, a modular approach provides flexible ways of moving through the recognition process. On the other hand, pathways to tertiary education will be provided by facilitating access to a 'Master of Adult Education/Continuing Education' programme based on the *wba* diploma. The master programme will be offered by the University of Klagenfurt, commencing in 2011.

In the future, the *wba* seeks to include the certificate and the diploma in the Austrian National Qualifications Framework (NQF) which is currently under development. In order to make this possible, the NQF Steering Group first needs to develop and agree upon the strategy and procedures for allocating qualifications acquired through informal or non-formal learning without an equivalent in the formal system. To prepare for the allocation of the qualification to a NQF level, the *wba* curriculum is being reformulated in terms of learning outcomes.

The *wba* has been selected as an example of good practice for developing and ensuring quality standards for adult education in Austria. In connection with these standards, the *wba* can also be seen as contributing to enhanced professionalisation in the sector. Graduates of the *wba* gain a deeper insight into their profession and also have better chances on the labour market, with a certificate or diploma widely recognised within the profession.

## 2 VALIDATION AT THE WBA

The first impulse for creating the *wba* came from the Association of Austrian Adult Education Centres (*Verband Österreichischer Volkshochschulen*). A project leader from the Association of Austrian Adult Education Centres (*Verband Österreichischer Volkshochschulen*) contacted other relevant stakeholders to suggest that, because no standardised system of CVET for adult educators existed in Austria, an infrastructure (now the *wba*) was required to:

- set overall quality standards in the field of adult education;
- develop a recognition model so that adult educators would not have to start from the beginning when enrolling in a CVET programme;
- enhance professionalisation of adult educators; and
- facilitate the access of *wba* graduates to study programmes offered at a higher education level.

The target groups of the *wba* are individuals actively involved in adult education (working on a full-time, part-time or on voluntary basis). This involvement can be in different fields of activity:

- management and all kinds of educational matters,
- planning, organising or accompanying learning processes as well as teaching,
- counselling, or
- working in libraries.

Therefore, the *wba* mainly targets the following four professional groups: educational managers, teachers/trainers, guidance counsellors and librarians.

Information on the *wba* is disseminated by a public-relations agency and can be obtained via traditional and online media such as the official website, brochures, mass-media and events for potential candidates. The launch of the *wba* was noted in regional and national media as well as on professional online platforms and on [www.erwachsenenbildung.at](http://www.erwachsenenbildung.at) (adult education) and [www.adulteducation.at](http://www.adulteducation.at) (the Austrian 'knowledge base' for adult education).

For admission to *wba*, candidates must have – at least – a professional certificate (for example, from an apprenticeship training) or a school certificate beyond the level of compulsory schooling (for example, *Allgemeinbildene Höhere Schule*, AHS, academic secondary school; *Berufsbildende Mittlere Schule*, BMS, VET school; *Berufsbildende Höhere Schule* – BHS, VET college). In addition, candidates must be experienced practitioners in the adult education roles listed above. Whilst the curriculum leading to the certificate level includes all four areas, candidates for the diploma level can, according to their professional orientation, focus on either training management, teaching and training, guidance counselling, or library and information management.

Candidates can obtain qualifications at two levels:

- Level 1, *wba* certificate: Certified Adult Educator

The first level's subject fields include a status-quo evaluation, educational theory, didactics, management of educational events, guidance and counselling, librarianship and information management, social competence, personal competence, elective subjects, a certification

workshop and a certain amount of practical experience. At the certificate level, the subject fields are the same for all four target groups.

- Level 2, *wba* diploma: Graduate Adult Educator

The diploma level offers four possibilities for specialisation: training management, teaching and training, counselling, and librarianship. The knowledge and competences relevant for all four areas include educational theory, social and personal competences, science-oriented work, subject-specific literature and reviews, and reflective competence.

Furthermore, the candidates must show subject-specific knowledge and competences in their area of specialisation: management for educational managers, librarianship for librarians, counselling competence for counsellors, and didactic competence for teachers. Competences relevant for specialisations other than one's own can be accredited as optional subjects. In addition, candidates are required to provide evidence of a certain amount of professional practice and they have to participate in a final colloquium.

## 2.1 The validation and certification process

The process of validation and certification at the *wba* entails the following six steps:

### 1. Information and guidance

Potential candidates can receive guidance on the certificates and the accreditation process via phone or in face-to-face meetings with *wba* staff members. At this stage, a first (rough) allocation of certificates from the formal and non-formal system to the *wba* curricula can be made in order to establish an idea of the individual's possibilities for receiving credits.

### 2. Initial assessment

The first stage of the accreditation process aims at identifying the candidate's existing competences and comparing them with those specified in the competence profile designed by the *wba*. For this purpose, the candidate elaborates an online portfolio (access to the online portfolios is restricted to candidates) of formal, non-formal and informal learning where his/her learning biography is described, by listing relevant certificates and confirmations of professional practice (which is considered to be informal learning). In a drop-down menu, the user can select whether the certificate was acquired in a course, in a school-based programme, a seminar, a higher education study programme, for non-formal learning or other. This document must include the date, duration and title of the programme and information about the relevant institution.

There is an extensive instruction sheet (access also restricted to candidates) outlining how to prepare the personal portfolio. If necessary, candidates are supported by *wba* staff via mail, phone or personally. Candidates are encouraged to save time by first using certificates or similar available documents. If necessary, further documents (for example, competence confirmations from former employers) can be submitted after the initial assessment.

The number of documents submitted varies widely: candidates have submitted between 5 and over 100 documents for validation. However, the number of documents is not relevant: one certificate for a long-term course could, for example, bring more credits than a number of certificates from short-term courses.

Accreditations for formal learning (i.e. prior certificated learning) refer to competences acquired in educational institutions from upper secondary level and higher (for example, upper secondary school – general or vocational, apprenticeships, universities, universities of applied sciences). The aim of the accreditation of prior formal learning is to avoid the

duplication of learning for candidates. Accreditations for non-formal learning refer to courses and seminars as well as meetings, conferences or lectures the candidate has attended.

Informal learning can be accredited in a variety of ways: candidates can write a paper on a certain topic or submit their own publication(s) on relevant topics. Intercultural competences which are part of the subject “educational theory” can be accredited based on a profession- or education-related stay abroad lasting at least three months. For some subjects, the employer can use a specific form to confirm the acquisition of the relevant competences. In this case, the candidate must have been working for the employer for a certain period of time<sup>1</sup> and the candidate’s relevant experiences and practices must be sufficiently described.

Competences in project management can be accredited for persons who have managed a project and can prove that they have had the main responsibility by providing a project proposal that includes a financial plan and a project report. For longer educational activities with seven or more days extra-credits on personal and social competence can be accredited. The reason for this is the assumption that personal and social competences are developed as a matter of course in this kind of learning environment - i.e. in a closed group as can be found in training courses etc. Personal competences can also be accredited based on supervision or coaching processes received by the candidate. The *wba* counsellors and the accreditation council must agree to further forms of proving competences.

Candidates fill in their online portfolio, print it out and hand it in to the *wba*, together with all relevant supporting documents such as copies of their certificates and confirmations of their professional practice. The *wba* staff members<sup>2</sup> then allocate the competences listed in the portfolio to the relevant parts of the curriculum and calculate the respective number of ECTS points the individual is entitled to. For specific educational programmes, allocation routines have developed since the start of the *wba*. The team also discusses allocations in order to develop and use, as far as possible, common standards. According to *wba*’s manager, new staff members develop an allocation routine after about six months. Allocations are usually discussed among the *wba* staff, so new staff members always get feedback on their allocations. However, courses might not always be allocated in the same way because, in cases of doubt, the candidates’ CV is also considered: one person can have a certain course accredited because it is connected with specific professional experience, another person who does not have that particular experience will not receive the accreditation.

The *wba* staff members calculate ECTS credit points according to the kind of activity carried out by the individual: for presentations or meetings, the time for giving the presentation or for attending the meeting equals the workload (for example, one hour in a relevant event is one hour of workload in the calculation of ECTS credit points). The time for the event is multiplied by 1.5 for seminars, courses, or workshops. For more intensive courses that last at least 56 hours, the time is multiplied by 2.

The allocation process can take between two hours and two days for a *wba* staff member. After the initial allocation, all candidates are reviewed by the accreditation council but the council only discusses those cases where allocation is difficult in more detail. The

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<sup>1</sup> Candidates need a minimum of 300 hours of professional experience for the *wba* certificate and a minimum of 700 hours of professional experience for the diploma level.

<sup>2</sup> There is always one staff member responsible for a candidate. The staff member does the allocation which is then confirmed or discussed in the accreditation council.

accreditation council meets every second month. When the accreditation council has confirmed the outcome of the initial assessment, the candidates receive a PDF document listing the allocations. Here, they can see which certificate or confirmation was accredited for which subject and to what extent. The number of ECTS credit points accredited is also displayed.

Candidates discuss the allocations with their dedicated counsellor. Questions of understanding can be clarified at that stage, or candidates can provide additional documents or information on a certain subject if they feel the accreditation was not sufficient. Thus, the recognition can be regarded as a participatory process with candidates as actively involved subjects and not merely objects of evaluation.

For the certificate level, a maximum of 80% of ECTS credit points can be accredited based on informal learning. However this is usually not the case - hardly anyone has acquired competences in all four areas via professional experience alone. For the diploma level, formal and non-formal learning are more relevant. Experience has shown that social and personal competences are often accredited based on informal learning.

Competences related to educational theory cannot be accredited based on validation of informal learning. The *wba* considers this topic as a core element of the curriculum although practitioners with long-term professional experience sometimes do not agree. But it is thought that the emphasis on knowledge and competences related to educational theory should enhance the level of professionalisation of staff from the sector and should facilitate progression to higher education where this is desired.

### **3. Education and training plan**

Based on the initial assessment, candidates work with a specifically trained *wba* counsellor to jointly clarify the remaining competences that need to be acquired to obtain the qualification.

### **4. Competence acquisition**

When competence gaps are identified, the *wba* counsellor supports the candidates in finding suitable ways to acquire the necessary competences. Competences can be acquired in seminars or through informal learning. Candidates will receive advice on opportunities and institutions where they can acquire the missing required competences. The *wba* also accredits courses and seminars that can cover all curricular topics for the certificate level.

### **5. Qualification ‘Certified Adult Educator’**

When all required competences have been acquired, candidates must attend a final three-day workshop with various tasks, discussions and a multiple-choice test. Candidates work in small groups of six people with a trainer. Their tasks include:

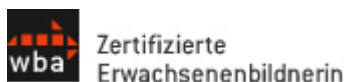
- a presentation of the individuals’ background, including a ‘learning biography’;
- a presentation of the working context relevant for the certificate (information about the institution/organisation one works for, explanation of typical tasks and work situations) and a presentation or role play of a ‘typical’ work situation (for example, part of a teaching lesson, counselling situation, typical situations in educational management or at the library);
- a role play in pairs and one in the whole group with situations relevant for the working field;

- a multiple choice test on basic knowledge about adult education, for example, facts and figures for Austria and relevant educational theories. To a certain extent, candidates can choose texts from the literature provided and will be asked questions particularly related to these texts.<sup>3</sup>

For each task other than the multiple-choice test, candidates receive extensive feedback from the other candidates and from the trainer. The trainer also hands out summative assessment sheets indicating an overall assessment of the certification workshop. The result of the multiple-choice test can be obtained immediately after finishing the test.

The reading list for this test currently has eight basic texts or books. It is possible to fail the test and the assessment. In this case, the certification workshop can be attended again. The certification workshop therefore is a means of quality assurance. In the workshop, candidates must show evidence of acquired competences and must be open for feedback and change.

Certified adult educators are entitled to use the following logo:



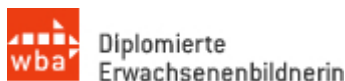
They can also enlist in an online database on the *wba* website. After achieving the certificate, it is possible to go on to the diploma level. During the preparation process for the certificate, relevant seminars for the diploma level can already be attended or papers can already be written. However, the certificate is compulsory for those who want to proceed to acquiring a diploma.

The time required to receive the certificate varies between nine and twelve months. A waiting period has resulted from higher than expected interest in the certificate. The timeframe also depends on whether the individual's portfolio is ready in time for the bi-monthly sessions of the accreditation council. In addition, candidates sometimes have to wait for a place in a certification workshop.

## 6. Qualification 'Graduate Adult Educator'

The graduate adult educator has to specialise in one of the four professional fields. The graduate level also has a stronger academic orientation. Candidates must write a thesis, usually attend seminars and write two book reviews. The thesis and book reviews are intended to provide evidence that they have at least basics competences in academic writing. Experience to date shows that this requirement seems to be a barrier for some Certified Adult Educators for continuing with the diploma level.

Apart from covering the ECTS credit points listed in the curriculum, candidates for the second level must hand in a thesis to be discussed in a final colloquium. Candidates present and relate it to their work as adult educators. There is a discussion based on the thesis and on topics relevant for adult education. The commission for the colloquium consists of leading members of institutions for adult education. Graduate Adult Educators are entitled to use the following logo:



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<sup>3</sup> If people fail to pass the test or the whole certification workshop, they can try again up to three times. Until now, almost all candidates passed the test and the certification workshop.



## 2.2 WBA staff

The *wba* has a team of counsellors, assessors and trainers who deliver the process described above. An accreditation council oversees the allocation of credits to the candidates. One staff member at the *wba* is responsible for the initial counselling of potential candidates, which can be done face-to-face or via phone. Interested candidates can bring their documents and receive an initial, rough evaluation of how many credits they might be entitled to and for which subjects. Other staff members also assess documents, allocate the credits and provide counselling related to the further process. At the certification workshop, one trainer is responsible for a group of six candidates. Usually, there are four groups. The trainers lead and moderate presentations and role plays throughout the three days of the workshop and give feedback to participants at different stages of the workshop. At the end of the workshop, candidates receive an assessment sheet filled in by the trainer. Here, the candidates receive feedback on the tasks and group work in relation to their professional, communicative, personal and social competences.

The accreditation council is responsible for accrediting candidates' competences, accrediting special courses offered by educational institutions to *wba* candidates and also addressing issues of quality assurance and monitoring.

## 2.3 Tools

The most relevant tool for the *wba* accreditation of prior learning is the online portfolio. In the portfolio, candidates can include certificates or other kinds of evidence confirming that they have taken part in certain courses. Professional practice is proven via employers' confirmations, letters of recommendation, invoices or similar documents. Practitioners in voluntary work can also use the *Ring Österreichischer Bildungswerke* (Austrian Adult Education Associations) 'competence portfolio' which was devised for use by voluntary workers.<sup>4</sup>

## 2.4 Funding and Costs

The Federal Ministry of Education, the Arts and Culture, the ESF and the students equally finance the *wba*. For students, the initial assessment costs 130 Euro; the degree 'Certified Adult Educator' is 650 Euro (for the certification workshop and the certificate); and the degree 'Graduate Adult Educator' costs 320 Euro. This does not include costs for courses the candidates might have to attend in order to cover all parts of the curriculum and travel and subsistence costs for participating in the certification workshop.

Students' possibilities for funding differ widely. Some funding is given by employers via the ESF or KEBÖ and organised via the ministry. Another funding source is the government's Public Employment Service (*Arbeitsmarktservice, AMS*). In some cases, the candidates do not have to pay extra costs. For the other candidates, specific funding differs; for example, according to federal province and target group. In 2009, around 40% of candidates did not have to bear all the costs themselves.

# 3 QUALITY ASSURANCE

The issue of quality assurance can be viewed from two perspectives in relation to this case study. Firstly, the *wba* provides a form of quality assurance for the adult education sector as

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<sup>4</sup> Further information on this portfolio can be found in <http://msplhs15.bon.at/~admin87/ring/kompetenzentwicklung/kompetenzportfolio.php> (23.09.2010)

a whole. Secondly, quality assurance is carried out to ensure the quality of the *wba* process itself.

For the sector, *wba* certificates serve as means of quality assurance for adult education professionals. Demand from candidates was much higher than originally expected and shows that a need for quality and professionalisation was and still is present in this field. The high acceptance of the *wba* certificate and diploma by employers in the adult education sector shows that stakeholders regard the *wba*-degrees as important tools for quality assurance.

For the *wba* itself, several aspects of quality assurance are integrated into the structure of the *wba* initiative as well as into the recognition process. These are outlined in turn below:

#### **Profile and competences of the actors involved:**

*wba* staff / counsellors: Staff members must be experienced professionals in adult education, i.e. they need to have worked for several years in one or several of the specialisations listed above. They must be familiar with the adult education system and 'scene' in Austria; they also need administrative skills and accuracy in order to deal with the many details involved in the accreditation process. They must have strong communicative skills for, on the one hand, counselling the clients and, on the other hand, discussing the allocations in the team.

Accreditation council: The council consists of independent adult education experts who work on the interface between adult education, the labour market, universities and universities of (teacher) education or university colleges of education.

Trainers / assessors: The trainers and assessors in the certification workshop are experienced professionals in adult education, educational management, teaching/training and library and information management. The evaluators in the final colloquium for the diploma level are mostly leaders of institutions of adult education and members of the 'cooperative system', a common initiative for professionalisation and quality assurance in adult education including the adult education institutions, adult education associations and the Federal Institute for Adult Education (bifef). They receive payment for undertaking this role.

#### **Development and content of the curriculum:**

Before the actual start of the *wba*, its curriculum was developed in an ESF project that included experts from important institutions of adult education (the 'cooperative system') and academics. First, competence profiles for the relevant target groups (training managers, teachers or trainers, guidance counsellors, librarians) were elaborated in terms of learning outcomes. Since the learning-outcomes approach was not well known at that time in Austria, these learning outcomes were 'translated' into a curriculum structured according to subjects. The process of elaborating and formulating the curriculum took around two and a half years and the experts involved extensively discussed many versions. This process ensured the curriculum's high quality: when the *wba* actually started in 2007, only minor changes in the curriculum were necessary.

Though the *wba* aims to recognise practical experiences, a certain standard for theoretical knowledge concerning adult education is regarded as essential for professionalisation. Thus, candidates have to prove or to acquire credits in educational theory and pass a multiple choice test based on theoretical literature on adult education.

#### **Methods applied**

When the portfolio is handed in for the initial assessment, candidates have to sign an affidavit that they have really attended/carried out/learned/experienced what they claim in the portfolio.

As the *wba* is mainly 'virtual', the certification workshop can be regarded as a final means of quality assurance. In fact, in the whole certification process the candidates' presence is only compulsory at the certification workshop. In this three-day workshop, a trainer or assessor works with a group of six candidates and verifies their competences through tasks such as presentations and role-plays related to 'typical' work situations.

The certification workshop focuses on social and personal competences, such as communication, listening, giving and taking feedback. Originally, only these competences should have been assessed. However, the *wba* and their cooperation partners soon discovered that subject-related competences must also be considered. Thus, standards were elaborated for the various fields, for example, methodological approaches.

Candidates have to prepare and submit a concept paper for their 'skills presentation' in the certification workshop. This concept paper is also evaluated. If the concept does not meet the required standards, then candidates can rewrite the concept based on feedback.

Throughout the three days, feedback and reflection play a major role. Each task has feedback sheets; after each presentation or role play, a feedback-round allows for comments on professional, communicative and personal competences. Based on the feedback sheets, candidates and the trainer give individual feedback on these competences and identify 'strengths' and 'fields for further development'. After three days, candidates have an extensive idea about how other professionals regard them and their competences. This can be regarded as an important step for reflection and, as a consequence, professionalisation.

Additionally, questionnaires are used as tools for assuring quality. Candidates are given a link to a questionnaire for feedback on the certification workshop soon after the workshop. When the final certificate has been issued, the recipient receives a further questionnaire on the *wba* and the whole accreditation process, with a view to improve them.

The feedback questionnaires are analysed and interpreted by the University of Klagenfurt. In the beginning, there were yearly intermediate reports in 2007 and 2008 and one overall evaluation report in 2009. Now, there is one report every six months.<sup>5</sup> The reports include, for example, comments on trainers, on tasks or on the multiple-choice test.

In summer 2009, the *wba* received the certification for quality management systems ISO 9001:2008. The process preceding the certification was seen to be relatively straightforward for several reasons: First, the *wba*'s head organisation bifeb already had the ISO certification, and the *wba* 'only' needed an integration audit. For this purpose, documents had to be reworked, processes had to be described, and all the relevant information had to be collected. Second, the *wba*, with its very complex system, already had quite extensive descriptions of processes that were very useful when working on the ISO certification; thus, they did not have to 'start from scratch'.

Some processes were slightly adapted in order to meet ISO criteria: feedback is now obtained every six months, notes or protocols of every conversation with candidates or cooperation partners are written down and filed in a system easily accessible to all the staff.

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<sup>5</sup> The main aim of shortening intervals between the reports was to get better feedback on the certification workshops. With only one report per year, trainers found it hard to relate the feedback to certain dates of the certification workshop. Now with the new system, this is easier and trainers get a more detailed feedback.

## 4 RESULTS, OUTCOMES AND IMPACT

Since the *wba* started in 2007, 857 persons have registered for the certification process; 271 persons have obtained the certificate 'Certified Adult Educator' and 76 have also received the diploma. Nearly three quarters (74%) of the 857 candidates are female, 26% are male.<sup>6</sup> With regards to age, 7% are younger than 30 years old, 25% are between 30 and 39 years old. Nearly half of the candidates (47%) are between 40 and 49 years, and 21% of the candidates are aged 50 years or older.

The candidates live in all Austrian provinces: 37% in Vienna, 16% in Lower Austria, 15% in Upper Austria, 12% in Styria, Tyrol and Vorarlberg each have 4% and Burgenland, Carinthia and Salzburg each have 3% of the candidates. Some candidates also come from Germany and Italy (although the certificates awarded by the *wba* are not valid in these countries, it seems the candidates recognise the value of acquiring the certificates even though they are not working in Austria). Around 48% of the candidates work in institutions belonging to the KEBÖ.

In terms of existing qualifications, 80% of the candidates have passed the Matura (matriculation examination – upper secondary school leaving exam which provides general access to higher education), 47% of those have completed a study programme at tertiary level, and 10% of those had started such a study programme but did not finish it. The candidates include 11% with a migration background.<sup>7</sup>

The high acceptance of the *wba* among candidates and employers shows that this new initiative has filled a gap in the professionalisation process of adult educators.

Feedback from certified and graduate adult educators shows that the newly acquired qualifications have positive effects on their self-confidence. The certificate and the *wba* service are generally evaluated positively. According to the *wba* manager, the most important evaluation results are:

- Candidates have a very positive view of the certification workshop. They regard it as an interesting learning experience with the possibility to receive feedback, and the networking opportunities are deemed positive as well.
- Collecting the material for the portfolio and summing up a professional career is also deemed very interesting.
- Support from the *wba* staff is evaluated as very helpful as feedback and information from the *wba* counsellors is given quickly and competently.
- As for costs, opinions vary between 'expensive' and 'rather cheap', there is no uniform opinion regarding this topic.
- Meeting all requirements for handing in the portfolio is seen as rather difficult.
- Reading the literature for the multiple-choice test is regarded as a lot of work.
- The regional dispersal of accredited seminars organised and held by cooperating providers is regarded as disadvantageous by some students; some wanted to take a seminar as soon as possible and were forced to travel to other cities for the next available seminar.

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<sup>6</sup> The percentage of women within *wba* candidates is higher than the percentage of women among adult educators in general (for relevant data see Gutknecht-Gmeiner 2008).

<sup>7</sup> 15 September 2010 is reference day for all these figures.

- The multiple-choice test is criticized by many students.<sup>8</sup>
- Practically all graduates would recommend the *wba* certification process to colleagues and adult educators.

The quality assurance system of the Austrian Public Employment Service (AMS) shows that the *wba* certificate is deemed a high-quality qualification. The AMS Vienna uses a system granting a maximum of ten points to their trainers to indicate the trainer's experience and competences. The *wba* certificate and diploma can provide for five points if other required criteria are also fulfilled.<sup>9</sup> Trainers with a high number of points have better chances to work for AMS.

At the VHS Wien (*Volkshochschulen Wien*, Adult Education Centre Vienna), which has around 700 employees and around 4,000 freelanced trainers, it is being discussed to adopt the *wba* certificate as the internal quality standard for their staff. The VHS Wien already practices a strong orientation towards the standards defined by the *wba*. Trainers and especially counsellors and new staff members are encouraged to participate in the *wba* certification process, and *wba* students working for VHS Wien can use several tailor-made and low-cost courses accredited by the *wba* and offered especially for VHS staff.

On an international level, the *wba* has been recognised as a model of good practice. Only half a year after the *wba* initiative was launched, the OECD showed interest in it. In October 2007, the *wba* was presented as model of good practice at an OECD meeting with 65 guests from 22 countries. In 2010, the *wba* was presented as model of good practice in a CEDEFOP report on 'professional development opportunities for in-company trainers'.

In 2011, a part-time Master study programme for Adult Education/Continuing Education will start at the University of Klagenfurt. The programme was planned by members of the University in cooperation with the bifeb, the bmukk (Bundesministerium für Unterricht, Kunst und Kultur - Federal Ministry of Education, the Arts and Culture) the *wba* and other institutions of adult education. The programme can be attended by graduates of the *wba* diploma, university graduates or persons with relevant professional experience. The Master programme consists of five modules and includes

- key questions of adult education/continuing education research;
- target groups and fields of action in adult education/continuing education;
- teaching and learning in adult education/continuing education;
- governance and organisation in adult education/continuing education;
- master thesis.

## 5 SUCCESS FACTORS

In the interview with the *wba* manager, cooperation was mentioned as major success factor of the *wba* initiative. As many of the most important institutions of adult education were involved in developing the *wba* in cooperation with scientists, they are well acquainted with

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<sup>8</sup> There are discussions within the *wba* on how this test could be replaced by other forms of assessment, such as a group discussion; but at the moment there is not sufficient time for such changes within the schedule of the certification workshop. In addition, the *wba* regards the students' command of the basic literature as essential for ensuring a high-quality competence profile.

<sup>9</sup> cf. AMS Wien 2010

the *wba* model and processes, and there is a high acceptance regarding the certificate and the diploma.

The determination of key individuals in lobbying and networking is also a key factor in creating the basis for the good cooperation and it is felt that the support of the national Ministry (bmukk) was also important.

CEDEFOP (2010, 47) has additionally identified a number of success factors of the *wba*<sup>10</sup>:

- the certificate and diploma is widely acknowledged and backed up by the KEBÖ institutions and other key national partners;
- the standards that the academy has set have helped greatly to improve the professionalisation of trainers in adult education;
- the academy functions within a solid, quality-assurance framework and is well linked to VET policy;
- the academy is also closely related to practical experience through an effective trans-institutional network of adult-education centres;
- the initiative is supported by a broad range of partners, including well known representatives from significant adult education and VET institutions. The partners have been closely involved in the academy since the early days and thus help ensure its long-term sustainability;
- the academy also benefits from the dissemination of results carried out by a PR agency;
- a key success factor has been the solid preparatory phase during which research on needs to be met was undertaken.

An important success factor is the quality assurance approach of the *wba* which seems to be one of the reasons for the high level of acceptance of the initiative in the field of adult education. As mentioned above, the *wba* has also already received the certification for quality management systems ISO and important aspects of quality assurance are integrated into the structure of the *wba* initiative as well as into the recognition process. For example, the development process of the *wba* curriculum is based on analysing and elaborating competence profiles for the relevant target groups in terms of learning outcomes. In this process, which took around two and a half years, experts from important institutions of adult education as well as academics were involved. Furthermore, the profiles, competences, other requirements and tasks of the actors involved (*wba* staff members or counsellors, members of the accreditation council, trainers and assessors) are clearly defined. Another important issue is the certification workshop. This is the only time during the whole certification process when the candidates' presence is compulsory. The certification workshop focuses on social and personal competences which usually seem to be more difficult to validate based on documents. The workshop itself is again evaluated by the candidates (based on questionnaires).

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<sup>10</sup> The mentioned study focused on the target group of in-company trainers.

## 6 CHALLENGES ENCOUNTERED AND LESSONS LEARNED

The main challenge encountered in setting up and running the *wba* was meeting the high interest from candidates when the Academy started in 2007. There were more candidates than expected, and though the workload for elaborating a portfolio had been calculated adequately, the counselling of candidates took more time than expected. The most difficult issue at the beginning was maintaining a high level of quality with limited resources. The *wba* reacted by successively increasing the number of staff members. Currently, with a full-time manager and four part-time employees, the workload is seen as satisfactory.

The creation of a Master study programme at a university for graduates of the *wba* diploma turned out to be very difficult. There was a cooperation partner and positive signals from one university, a course was planned and even advertised with a starting date. Then there were unexpected structural and personnel changes at this university, and the master programme could not be started. Some candidates were very disappointed because they had gone through the *wba* process in order to start this master course. This was difficult for the *wba*, even though the problems that led to the cancellation of the course were not caused by the Academy itself. However, the *wba* persevered and aimed at establishing other forms of cooperation. These efforts were successful and resulted in the development of a new course at another university. The Master study programme for Adult Education/ Continuing Education will start in 2011 and is organised by the Alpen-Adria-University of Klagenfurt in cooperation with the bifeb. Graduates of the *wba* diploma will gain automatic access to this academic programme.

## 7 CONCLUSIONS

Within a short timeframe, the *wba* model was able to develop a high level of acceptance on the labour market. It is regarded as an example of good practice not only for Austria but also for the European context. On the one hand, this seems to be due to the high importance that is given to quality assurance procedures. On the other hand, an important factor seems to be that the model is strongly based on co-operation and networking. Involving a broad range of stakeholders (policy makers as well as practitioners) can also be regarded as a basic condition for transferring the model to other contexts and countries (cf. CEDEFOP 2010).

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### **Stakeholders consulted:**

*Wba*

VHS Wien (Adult Education Centre Vienna)