

AMS Standing Committee on New Skills 2013

Follow-up-Workshops 2013 – www.ams.at/newskills



1 Preface

In October 2009, the Administrative Board of Public Employment Service Austria (AMS) set up an AMS Standing Committee on New Skills. Since that time, the Committee has continually initiated projects that aim to identify changes in needs for qualifications in collaboration with experts from companies. Based on these projects, the Committee develops continuing education and training (CET) programmes to make it easier for jobseekers to re-enter the world of work. These CET programmes are based on cluster-specific catalogues of modules that, since the autumn 2011, have become part of the AMS course plan and have since undergone further development and optimisation to ensure a continuous improvement of the target group-appropriate course design.

This report aims to summarise the results of a follow-up phase in 2013, during which one workshop each was organised for the following eight company clusters (in alphabetical order):

- construction and building ecology
- office and administration
- chemistry and plastics
- electrical engineering, electronics, telecommunications
- energy and environmental engineering
- commerce
- machinery, motor vehicles, metal
- tourism and wellness

As well as the participants in the first series of workshops in the years 2009 until 2011, other companies and institutions were also invited to take part in these follow-up workshops. Those who were interested but could not attend for time reasons were offered the possibility to express their views in interviews or expert statements.

In the workshops, each of which lasted three hours, the existing catalogues of modules were discussed in brainstorming sessions, activities in small groups and panel discussions, depending on the group size. Here the following issues were analysed: To what extent do the catalogues of modules meet the companies' needs? Where is it necessary to modify the contents or specify them in greater detail? And which structural changes are suggested to ensure that the programme has lasting success? In addition, the workshop participants reflected about what changes and new developments have been perceived in the companies since the

first phase of the work that might have impact on the need for qualifications.

2 Cross-cluster developments

In principle it can be stated that there has been confirmation of the importance of the topics and developments which were developed in the initial working rounds and have been summarised in two research reports. Whereas there are indications of new topics in individual partial areas, some aspects from the first work phase were discussed in a more differentiated way in the follow-up sessions. One possible explanation is that the current catalogues of modules enabled a more critical examination of the respective topics.

In practically all of the company clusters, the trend towards higher qualifications is continuing. Frequently, a formal qualification as a skilled worker/specialist clerk is seen as the minimum requirement by many company experts. In the sectors of small-scale and industrial manufacturing, simple manual jobs and activities on the conveyor belt without qualification are still migrating to countries with a lower wage level or are being replaced by technological solutions (automation). Therefore unskilled and semi-skilled workers find fewer and fewer employment opportunities particularly in industrial manufacturing.

The following competence areas in particular were repeatedly mentioned during the discussions:

- **e-skills:** As a synonym for all forms of knowledge of information and communication technologies, including programming, control and supervision of fully automated production processes, e-skills are an indispensable prerequisite in all occupational areas. This means that staff in all functional areas and on all qualification levels have to work with computer applications in one way or another and need to have at least basic e-skills.
- **Languages:** There were very differentiated discussions in the follow-up workshops about the topic of foreign languages – especially English – whereas there was relative agreement that there is major need for action for people without any formal qualification, but also for many skilled workers, particularly regarding German as a working language.

In principle it seems undisputed that the importance of English is also increasing in day-to-day company reality for a

rising number of staff on different qualification levels. At the same time, however, it is being emphasised that – particularly in the case of jobseekers – it should be considered whether labour market opportunities can be enhanced by using existing options of teaching and refreshing occupation-specific knowledge rather than by imparting fundamental knowledge of English.

- **Green skills:** The company experts demand for all clusters that awareness be raised of energy-efficient, sustainable, resource-saving actions in all VET and CET programmes. Here the main point is that the staff are able to assess the impact of their actions for their own field of work and identify where they can contribute towards energy efficiency and the saving of resources. In addition, however, practical specialist skills (such as in ecological construction, in energy- and resource-saving processing methods) are playing an increasingly major role in many clusters as well.
- **Soft skills:** Basically, the importance of social skills (soft skills) is underlined in all company clusters and seen as an inherent element of the New Skills specialist courses. At the same time, the company experts are warning against putting too much focus on soft skills and ignoring, or taking for granted, specialist know-how, which distorts the perception of the companies' requirements.
- **Multi-skilling:** The trend towards generalisation accompanied by specialisation increasingly requires the staff to have a combination of different specialist competences. The company experts are observing the trend, for example, that individual employees more and more frequently have to take on more and different areas of work and fields of activity. Flexibility is increasing and the staff need to increasingly see the bigger picture, analyse processes, anticipate new situations and develop.

As well as these cross-cluster trends, the workshops also dealt with different cluster-specific developments and gave suggestions to develop the contents of the catalogues of modules. In principle, the company experts state that the catalogues of modules cover the key contents well. But as the descriptions of the contents are largely restricted to keywords and topic headings, the question arises how the topics are planned in detail and operationalised when the courses are designed in concrete terms. There are various other topics and themes as well for which the priorities and focuses in particular should be reviewed.

3 Feedback on the catalogues of modules

In the following, general feedback on the catalogues of modules will be summarised which, independent of the area, applies largely for all company clusters and mainly concerns the formal, structural design of the catalogues of modules and New Skills specialist courses.

- **Certificates & performance appraisal:** Many workshop groups particularly highlighted the great importance of certificates and report cards for CET programmes. The New Skills programme should be connected with specific certificates. From the perspective of the companies, a clear and, ideally, also

learning outcome-oriented description of the CET contents would make it easier to assess the applicants and their increase in know-how after having attended the specialist course.

This is connected with the view that the courses should be completed with a performance appraisal in the form of an examination, practical work or similar. The majority of the experts reject mere certificates of attendance as having little informative value.

- **Work placements:** The company experts agree in principle that work placements are of great importance within the framework of the specialist courses. As well as offering the possibility of testing in practice what the participants have learned, the significance of work placements cannot be overestimated especially when they search for a new job. Frequently the company experts demand that work placements be specified as compulsory and longer periods of work placements be planned. Two-week work placements – as they are currently recommended in the catalogues of modules – are seen as too short by many company experts. Work placements should furthermore not be an isolated but rather, from the beginning, a firmly integrated part of CET programmes and be closely linked with the rest of the curriculum. The companies should be involved from the onset in order to coordinate the contents and organisation of the various stages of work placements between the companies and CET providers.
- **The target group and the formation of groups:** A special challenge for the successful implementation of the specialist courses is seen in the target group issue. This is because, on the one hand, it is connected with the quantitative output of the courses and, on the other, the possibility of forming homogeneous participant groups with an as uniform initial level as possible. Whereas the quantitative availability of the target group is essential for courses to be held, homogeneous groups have decisive impact on the quality and consequently on the success of the courses.

Therefore the issue of alternative target groups was frequently discussed in the follow-up workshops: In general it was questioned if it is useful in the field of CET to distinguish between employees and jobseekers or whether it might be possible to create diverse synergies by offering joint courses.

Before people take up a programme, even more attention than before should be paid to determining and checking whether they are actually suited for it. By all means, it should be made compulsory to identify the physiological and personal prerequisites before the beginning of a CET programme, including entry tests/talent checks/analyses of potential and an intensive assessment phase/clearing phase. As well as the prerequisites, the preferences of potential participants should also be taken into account.

The challenge for the planning is always the coordination of the course contents specifically for different participant groups within one specialist area: Not all modules, not all contents are equally relevant and viable for every target group. It is important to ensure that individuals are not assigned to modules which have no benefit for them and also in particular that the contents do not put excessive pressure on them.

As far as group formation is concerned, the potential participants' different learning requirements and learning experiences

should also be taken into account. Depending on their individual aptitude for learning, their speed of learning and receptivity, etc. can also differ largely and different teaching and learning methods can play a major role.

- **Job application training:** The job application training as foreseen in the specialist courses is rated as important by many experts and should be a realistic preparation for application processes and, if appropriate, also include assessment centre training and test preparations. The participants should know what can actually lie ahead of them and also how they can cope with the stressful situation. Therefore job application training should, if possible, include people from corporate practice.
- **Trainer qualification:** The minimum qualifications of trainers in gender and diversity training as demanded and specified in the AMS system of guidelines considerably limit the possibilities of employing practitioners in training programmes; in many cases, experts in specific occupations drop away as trainers because it does not pay off for them to furnish these proofs of qualifications.
- **Socio-pedagogical support & personality training:** In general, socio-pedagogical support in the courses is frequently underestimated. In many cases, the participants are individuals who have not taken part in any CET measures over a longer period and therefore have learning difficulties or, under certain circumstances, have also not been employed for a longer period of time. Partly this is connected with different social problems which can have a profound impact on learning success and ultimately on a placement being successful. Socio-pedagogical support and personality training are however not only understood as a valuable contribution in terms of the successful completion of CET programmes but also in particular regarding the development of soft skills and interpersonal relations in the future daily work routine.

4 Project-related and AMS-related tips

Some of the statements and tips given in the follow-up workshops generally refer to the New Skills project and AMS services independent of the catalogues of modules and specialist courses.

- **Simple and sustainable organisational structures:** The processes and connections in administration are so complex that much energy is lost here. Clear organisational structures are required that are easily understood regarding areas such as the following: contacts, funding, information flow, legal limits and possibilities.

- **Regionalising the process:** Especially in the expert interviews it is repeatedly suggested that the project be regionalised. This would also allow company representatives to be involved in the project who can hardly travel to Vienna for time reasons and, in this way, enable better portrayal of the partly differing regional needs and by all means differing regional perceptions.
- **Optimising the information work about the New Skills project:** The information work about the New Skills project should be further intensified. Many companies do not know enough about the initiative. It does not suffice to download results from a website.
- **Occupation-related know-how for AMS staff:** The fast changes and developments in the various company clusters present the AMS staff, for example in the Services for Companies (SfU, Service für Unternehmen) area, with the challenge of strengthening and continually updating their occupation-related knowledge. To understand the companies' requirements, the AMS staff in the respective occupational areas must have sufficient command of the specialist vocabulary. This can also lead to the improved planning of specialist courses and enhanced instruction of the course participants.

5 General statements and conclusions

It is quite natural that in the course of the discussions held in the follow-up workshops topics are also repeatedly raised which go beyond the structural and content-related design of the catalogues of modules and specialist courses as well as the developments in the needs for qualifications in companies. These topics relate both to educational and to labour market policy developments and framework conditions. Topics that were repeatedly discussed were:

- need for skilled labour – skilled workers' shortage
- entry into the world of work: additional offer of career guidance
- target group: older workers
- vocational education and training (VET) and specialisation
- requalification or skill upgrades
- company-based CET – upgrade training for employees
 - use of technological possibilities
 - CET motivation of employees
 - time factor CET
 - organisational aspects
 - CET based on learning by doing
- credit transfer of school-based qualifications for apprenticeships

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Anschrift der Autorinnen

ibw – Institut für Bildungsforschung der Wirtschaft
 Rainergasse 38, 1050 Wien
 Tel.: 01 5451671-0, E-Mail: info@ibw.at
 Internet: www.ibw.at

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