

AUSTRIAN NTN: THERE IS MORE TO SKILLS THAN MEETS THE EYE

The Austrian Lifelong Learning National Thematic Network (NTN) may be relatively new and straight forward, but there is more to it than meets the eye. Using a network to work on 'skills' is much more difficult than one would think, not least because of the definition itself. What is skills? What skills? Skills for what? And skills for whom? As Haymo Scherz, the network coordinator, explains: "*Skills and the disadvantaged, and especially informal skills, are concepts that are flawed by previous attempts to incorporate solutions into traditional education and support routes. But there are so many different ways in which this subject can be approached that we recognise the need to start being more focused.*"

So, there is a need for a focus on the issue of skills in Austria...and since October 2005, the NTN has emerged to provide just that. This network has hit the nail on the head by choosing to start from scratch and develop a once-only programme, an all-satisfying approach to 'skills', with particular focus on acquisition and recognition of informal skills!

Under the motto '*Consciously Competent*' ('Bewusst Kompetent'), the network has clearly understood that the best approach is to assemble those who look at skills in different ways and deal with skills in different contexts for different target groups. And now we find a knowledge of the parameters, issues and complexities of skills development within the network that is truly inspiring.

Currently, the network seeks to go beyond traditional models and approaches that are already out there. It has understood from which angle this nail needs to be hit, and that all the entry points need to be targeted, such as labour market education, society, community inclusion and socio-economic factors. Ultimately, it seeks to communicate common definitions, and communicate an acceptable understanding of skills acquisition and recognition.

And as the sum is truly greater than its parts, the network's capacity has not gone unnoticed by those who have an interest. Mag. (FH) Christian Zagorski works for the Federal Office for Social Affairs (Bundessozialamt). His focus is on routes from education to employment and his organisation supports many projects for people with disabilities across Austria. Talking about this network at their conference in May 2006 he says: "*The network is really good in terms of identifying measures that help us understand the social economic factors that impact on routes to employment. I have seen some really great things from the Dutch partner of one of the network's partnerships, and I can see a potential benefit of having such a model in Austria.*"

The network could not have received a more positive statement after only six month's work. And if statements of this kind continue, it marks a direction for future work that is more than promising!

THE STEPPING STONES ON WHICH TO BUILD

So why is the network attracting such praise? Why does it seem so promising? Well essentially, the network's objectives fit under a big enough thematic umbrella to be of interest to many. More specifically, the network brings together five EQUAL partnerships that effectively complement each other to define and develop new qualifications opportunities based on informal skills for people already facing barriers to education and employment.

This common theme has not been picked randomly. It has been chosen in direct response to the observation that countries like Austria, where labour market requirements traditionally focus on formal qualifications also traditionally have a more sceptical attitude towards the concept of 'informal' skills. Through the network, the partners are developing approaches and arguments to raise awareness about the benefits of acquiring and recognising informal skills, as has already happened in other EU countries. In addition, they are channelling these approaches and

arguments through a process of constant information sharing framed within two network approaches to dialogue: on the one hand, the network holds regular so-called 'transfer dialogues' between selected regional and national actors and the press during the period May 2006-07. In addition, the network coordinators expect individual partnerships to regularly report on progress towards the network's objectives, and to provide updates on changes that affect and support the these objectives. However, moving on from there, "*Now that we have set up our framework for dialogue, it is time to get down to business*", says Haymo Scherz, network coordinator.

In practical terms, getting down to business has meant holding a first meeting in October 2005 to launch the network and decide on the broad directions to take. This was closely followed by a meeting to introduce the conceptual models to measure and recognise skills, and to develop working group ideas for other partnerships. The network also held its first thematic conference in May 2006 in Graz, which involved an impressive number of partners, key users and transnational partnerships. And as the network was at the time entering its core 'business' stage, this made the conference even more interesting.

"We want to start creating our sub-groups to focus on specific subjects. We are at the stage of launching the sub-groups once we agree on the subjects", adds Haymo Scherz.

And clearly, individual partners and their partnerships are not short of ideas for these sub-groups and the activities of the network in general; indeed, the debates were lively within each conference working group!

Two activities were particularly striking in the network conference. Firstly, the quality of the workshops was impressive, not only in the range of participants, ideas and expertise, but in the integrative and participatory approaches that were successfully applied. It was clear from each workshop that there was an interest in sharing ideas, sharing expertise, demonstrating what works elsewhere and learning from each other. While some workshops were used as 'demonstration labs' of new tools from abroad, others addressed some of the more 'uncomfortable' questions around skills. These were clearly testing what different groups have to say, and the extent to which different countries and backgrounds influence our understanding of skills. Not short of heated discussions, the workshops clearly took the concept of cooperative working and thinking a step further than expected.

Another striking activity was the press conference, which again took a surprising turn. Not only was every key user represented at the top table (from career services, to education, to the employment services). But, beyond the polite Question and Answers session, there was a surprising willingness by top-table participants to be directly challenged by members of the audience and a series of pupils at the critical age of 16. Addressing pupils' pertinent questions around the lack of career advice in schools, the lack of interpersonal skills teaching in schools, the lack of informal skills recognition within the curriculum, the press conference was more lively and factually interesting than one is normally used to.

THE ROAD TO SUCCESS IN THREE STEPS

Based on the meetings and the more recent conference, it is possible to see the network mapping out a 'road to success'. A road that essentially enables network members to think clearly about and confront directly the issue of skills - particularly 'informal skills'- along with all its issues and challenges. Moreover, it is a road that pushes members to overcome their own specialist isolation, and to understand, formulate and communicate common solutions. As Haymo Scherz, network coordinator, adds himself: "*Every partnership involved acquires and develops a great deal of know-how, but there is too often no sharing of that knowledge. This network does two things: it helps communicate know-how between the partners, and ultimately helps raise awareness about the topic to the outside.*"

Step one: understanding

After initially meeting in the autumn of 2005, the partnerships were very busy starting up their projects and intensifying their expertise through their own work. Meeting together again in May 2006, partners came into the network more informed, with clearer ideas and ready to think more concretely about common work programmes for the network. Brigitte Hinteregger works for the independent women support network of the city of Graz. On this point, she adds: *"There is a demand for our work, but it comes from the bottom. It was important that we all started to work individually within our partnerships to assess the demand and needs separately before we discussed common angles of work."*

In fact, this pre-conference period also provided the network with concrete evidence for the skills demand. As every partnership reached out to its beneficiaries and re-discovered the nature and needs of its participants, the message became clearer as they went along. This emerging message is that today's political commitment in Austria is to shorten and rationalise education routes which actually goes against those who are already disadvantaged in the current system.

By definition, such a message means that it is more difficult for the network to find its place and influence. But the network has successfully understood that a step-by-step and collaborative approach is required to evidence and build influence in Austria. As Otto Rath, coordinator of the In Motion EQUAL partnership explains: *"Different partnerships in the network experience different barriers and difficulties that depend on the political willingness and commitment relating to their issue. For example, our partnership looks at adult basic skills. This is very hard as it is not a popular topic, nor had it really been dealt with in Austria before EQUAL. But the NTN helps us to look at our individual and common strengths, and build on those areas where we can really change things."*

Step two: formulating the case

Once a common understanding and ethos have been achieved, convincing those who actually make political decisions is a real challenge. So how has the network worked on this?

Well, the most effective approach has been to take the economic argument. The network has found this argument to be a good starting point around which messages from the network can be shaped, formulated and ultimately communicated. The messages have not failed to stress that there are huge wage-based values attached to better recognising and acquiring skills, and that these values need to be better integrated and recognised. As the partners have agreed amongst themselves: *"Political decision-makers know of these [economic] arguments, and are aware that the acquisition and recognition of skills and informal skills among the disadvantaged brings about more benefits than those of just social inclusion. The discussion thus goes further than the argument itself. We need to prove that there are effective ways to get both sides right: give and recognise everyone's skills effectively, and thereby maximise the economic and competency potential of all those in Austria."*

Formulating a strong case – based on the economic argument – has also hinged on advocating a marketing approach to integration as well as workplace integration processes. Linked to this, the network has not failed to overlook a single aspect of employment integration - and this starts with careers services at a young age, right through to employers' responsibility for upskilling their workforce.

Covering such a wide spectrum has only been possible through combining the experiences and insights of the network members. These members have given the network such a wide breadth and remit, based on which there is little doubt in the future that the network's messages and outputs will find fit in Austria's mainstream structures. In fact, during the network's May conference, there were already signs of mutual interest between the network's activities and the Austrian Public Employment Services (AMS). During the press conference, a representative of AMS responded to a young pupil's demands for better career services and orientation at an early age in schools. Positively, the AMS's response did not fall far from what the partnerships in the network were themselves trying to get across: *"The careers service is moving towards screening, careers and more intensive information, advice and guidance approaches. AMS has in fact been starting to pilot such approaches since February 2006, which should try to respond to some of the gaps in career advice. The AMS is keen to recognise the reality that young people often do*

not know what it is they can do, and we are hoping to provide [you] with more tailored responses to fit your needs."

Step three: communicating

Notwithstanding the positive message it carries for the network, the interaction between a range of political users and external participants during the conference was tremendous. It also serves to reinforce the point that stakeholders are ready and willing to be challenged by the 'real'skills questions, and respond to individual expectations. In other words, communicating can mean talking to people head on!

In fact, partners say this observation can be made beyond the conference. Indeed, network participants have observed consistent interest from those they are trying to engage with. Partners have observed good attendance levels at thematic and issues-based events organised by the projects. But there is still a long way to go in communicating and engaging interested parties... indeed the network is still in its early stages. And as Haymo Scherz, network coordinator, explains: *"Partnerships often don't stress enough the economic arguments and the argument of integration for a better labour market. Of course, we are aiming to influence the policies out there, but we also understand that, whilst our approach might be right, we still target a very wide audience of decisions makers and we have yet to mature our ideas and our network."*

But that said, the network is maturing quickly. With a website already in place to display fact sheets and disseminate documentation, the network is really picking up pace. And given how much the partners have already learned about 'skills' from each other, one can be confident about the network's capacity to raise awareness at large. One thing is sure: the network is consciously diverse, driven and competent and therefore quite clued up about 'skills'— are you?

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