

## KEEP MOVING IN AUSTRIA, BUT MIND THE GAP

The Austrian education, learning and training sector has historically been seen as very efficient in meeting the needs of the Austrian economy. With its unique 'dual system' where students can alternate between classroom and in-company occupational training, it has provided access to professional training as a widely and highly recognised alternative to higher education. On the surface, this system has meant that Austria's labour market has performed well, as seen in the low and steady unemployment rate (5.2% in 2005). But if we look closer, the first gaps start to appear. Joblessness in particular areas remains high and public employment services have found it difficult to deal with this problem, a problem that has worsened steadily since the 1980s. It also seems that a wide range of disadvantaged individuals have continuously stayed outside of the labour market, for reasons difficult to understand... and then came PISA.

One of the OECD's early programmes, PISA, was implemented in Austria and did not go unnoticed by those who care. Indeed, a shocking finding emerged from this programme: 20% of those aged between 15 and 16 could not read, write or count properly, which touches on one of Europe's hot topics today: basic skills or functional illiteracy. But the real question that came with this finding was: if 20% of people of this age have basic skills needs, how many have a similar disadvantage amongst those of working age, and how much of the issue has been left unattended? And here lies the real crux of the problem: there are very few answers to these questions, functional illiteracy is not properly evidenced in Austria, and there is a taboo around the issue that makes it difficult to address. Not least, the issue of functional illiteracy has not yet found official political recognition – and if there is no issue, what is there to talk about?

The fact is, there is an issue, but it needs evidence and answers before it can be officially picked up by those who can make a difference on a larger scale. And this is why the EQUAL partnership *In Motion* is committed to both providing proof and piloting solutions to the problem. With Austria's four (and only) basic skills network institutions on board, together with the Austrian Trade Union Confederation (OGB), qualifications networks, the Austrian Chamber of Commerce, the Austrian Public Employment Service and a number of education and training institutions, the partnership is complete. Led by one of Austria's key social project institutions, Innovative Social Projects (ISOP), the message of the partnership is clear for Otto Rath, *In Motion* partnership coordinator at ISOP: *"Basic skills is taboo, stigmatised and linked to prejudices, which is why we have to start to build a dialogue and get acknowledgment that there is a problem and that work on the ground is important. This is why we are starting from scratch, by evidencing the problem and the scale of the issue in Austria. We will complete this work by testing an information centre, building quality standards for those who work with basic skills, and even reaching out to those who are already in work."*

And indeed, as all the EQUAL partners have stressed at least once: the concept of lifelong learning cannot start to exist before basic skills needs have been addressed.

### AN END-TO-END APPROACH FOR EVIDENCE AND SOLUTIONS

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It is very early days for the EQUAL *In Motion* partnership, but it has already made big strides in addressing and evidencing the 'unpopular' topic of basic skills and functional illiteracy. This is why the partnership has incorporated a strong research element into its project, with the intention of providing initial evidence as a basis for dialogue as the partnership progresses. But beyond the evidence base, the innovation goes much further.

Indeed, the partnership is taking an 'end-to-end approach' that ranges from doing outreach work, providing information and delivering courses, right through to undertaking activities in the workplace. It leaves out no single cause of functional illiteracy, nor does it leave out the related difficulties that it strives to support. Furthermore, the project looks at everyone: young people of school leaving age, adults whether employed or unemployed, as well as long-term unemployed women. Geographically, it also looks everywhere: the partnership is national, and looks into rural,

urban and workplace areas to make sure that it leaves out no corner of disadvantage and builds solutions that adapt to individual situations and contexts.

Finally, the *In Motion* partnership itself is complete through its partners, involving all organisations that have the necessary expertise. Using the very important motto that it is not about "reinventing the wheel", the partnership makes use of existing experts, training networks, outreach and information organisations, those who represent and care for workers in the workplace, and those who hold the political knowledge and understand the policy challenges attached to the topic.

But what does the partnership actually do? Well, because it tackles so many issues, areas and groups of people, *In Motion* has adopted a very structured and rational approach to its work. It has six modules which comprise:

- three 'development modules'. The first module involves building a basis for awareness-raising by developing toolkits and undertaking research on the origins of the basic skills issues, needs and approaches to be aware of; the second developing basic structures of information and advice in the form of an Info-Hotline; and the third developing quality standards for those who teach and engage with those lacking basic skills; and
- three 'qualifications modules' that test approaches that have never been trialled in Austria before. These include: developing ways to reach out and provide basic skills courses to women in structurally weak areas; providing workplace basic skills training to woman in Carinthia; and training trade union members to identify and support workers with basic skills needs in their workplace.

Having already established much of their understanding and networks, the *In Motion* partnership is now at the stage of putting in place solutions and approaches for the qualifications modules. One important aspect of these modules is reaching individuals directly in their workplace, and offering either a contact point through a member of the trade union or offering free, in-house functional skills training. While the former is about building support networks in businesses (using works councils), the latter is more about raising general interest in lifelong learning. Otto Rath explains:

*"Our three qualifications modules are clear: they are about testing methods, approaches and courses that have not previously existed, and working with groups that have not been supported before now. Through EQUAL, we are able to offer different courses via expert training organisations in literacy, numeracy and ICT, in the hope that we can awake a taste for learning, whether the individuals are employed, housewives or early school leavers."*

This quote clearly demonstrates that basic skills needs are not necessarily specific to a single group, area or work status. And this reality is very much reflected in the innovative, multi-faceted approach of the *In Motion* partnership.

## **LEARNING FROM OTHERS, ENGAGING PEOPLE**

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The underpinning rationale for the development of *In Motion* was that empowering individuals to ask for help and empowering those who can help to do so must be at the heart of the project. Moreover, this empowerment needs to be fostered through innovative approaches and solutions.

*"Getting people to say 'I need help' is maybe the most difficult thing to do, but there are ways to get them to do this",* explains Sonja Muckenhuber from Volkshochschule Linz and coordinator of the Info-Hotline development module. *"Raising awareness can only be done if we understand the diversity of the issue, and understand what people need to hear."* During the initial stages of *In Motion*, the partners found that, while careers services exist in Austria, the vast majority of those who need help with basic skills are lost by the time they actually get round to asking for help. Indeed, Sonja Muckenhuber stresses that: *"Current career services are not always apt at picking up on basic skills needs early enough and make the mistake of referring individuals to the wrong support. We need a system that provides more than advice – we need a system that provides guidance in the way that suits individuals."*

And hence the Info-hotline. So does such a hotline-based system work? If Sonja's mobile phone is anything to go by, yes! In the process of setting up the Info-hotline, Sonja used her mobile number as the hotline to test the initial response rate. It did not take long before word-of-mouth took effect - her mobile was ringing incessantly, to the point that it became urgent to set up a real, land-line. This astounding level of interest has given added momentum to the hotline system; the partners trained up paid volunteers to offer advice in preparation for the hotline that was officially launched across four regions in June 2006!

The participation of individuals has also happened in other ways across the *In Motion* partnership, and early successes are by no means lacking. In the process of gathering information on approaches and how best to raise awareness, the partnership found interest from the most vulnerable group: 15-year-olds about to choose their further education routes. By using a participatory approach and offering individualised anonymous interviews, Marion Höllbacher from the Styrian Economic Society (Steirische Volkswirtschaftliche Gesellschaft) was able to speak to 28 young people in Styria. While the information obtained has been key to developing toolkits to help identify basic skills needs in schools, the fact that these young people came forward in the first place is even more astounding. Notwithstanding the fact that identifying basic skills at school age is crucial for the Styrian Economic Society to better support young people in their search for apprenticeship places, Marion Höllbacher also explains:

*"The age of 15 is a turning point for young people in Austria as it is the age when they can either stay in education or leave. It is important to consider that this age is difficult, not least because it deals with complex issues – if the issues are not picked up properly, a young person can take on a negative decision or attitude that he or she may regret 10 years later on when other life choices come up. It was very courageous of these young people to come forward."*

Isabella Penz works at a further education institution in Carinthia and is the coordinator of the workplace women training project, the first project to have started its courses. Isabella also has a lot to share about the effect of *In Motion*. To get into the workplace, Isabella Penz had to work intensively with the trade unions and negotiate with two large shoe-making businesses in Carinthia. Thanks to her efforts and the overall support from EQUAL, Isabella Penz's project is now able to offer training to 32 women in reading, writing, IT and memory training. The project also offers personal skills coaching to every woman during the training. Now that she is mid-way through the project, Isabella Penz reflects on her progress: *"It is like bringing the bad news to an employer. While this was difficult initially, the fact that two thirds of the training now happens outside of working hours has made it easier for employers to buy in. Furthermore, the employers have realised very quickly that the women have enjoyed the courses in a way that has not only related to the business – but to themselves as individuals."*

And the result? Not one woman participant has dropped out. Some women have even come to the course during the office closure period. And most importantly, Isabella Penz has already seen the changes: *"I can see how some women start to formulate what they can't do and start to formulate desires. This project is about re-awakening a desire for learning and formulating goals, so this tells us that we are on the right track with the EQUAL work. The fact that these women now go to open a dictionary and ask questions shows that they are starting to slowly turn to help for the things they can't do. Some now surf the Internet while just a few weeks ago they started clicking a mouse."*

## **LEARNING FROM OTHERS, LOOKING ACROSS THE CHANNEL**

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Otto Rath has long been thinking and developing the idea of going straight into the workplace to work with those who hold the key to training individuals. He has developed this concept in two ways through *In Motion*: in the way illustrated by Isabella Penz's project above; and also by training members of work councils to identify and raise awareness of basic skills and support workers in this area.

To develop this second way involving works councils, *In Motion* undertook a lot of research and investigated good practice in other countries through the transnational partnership. This research has since led to the identification of a successful model in the UK whereby the Trade Union Congress (TUC) has developed 'Union Learning Representatives' to help employers train the

workforce by building the link between the individual and a training organisation/course (also initially done through EQUAL!). The Austrian Trade Union Confederation (OGB) has responded very enthusiastically to this model and is currently seeking to train its own work council members in a similar way. As Rudolf Diensthuber, coordinator of this work at OGB, explains:

*"We have only just started with this EQUAL module, but it carries many great ideas. Based on an initial survey, we have shown that basic skills needs are real and we are confident that this approach is the right one. The objective is to work with 40 individuals at this stage, who will be identified through our work councillors' across 4 Austrian sub-regions. Through these councillors, these individuals will be referred to external training opportunities in various areas of basic skills, including ICT."*

From what we can see at this early stage, there are several factors that show the potential of this work: the voluntary engagement of 'Agents of Change' as they call them, the structure and content of the training for these agents, and the scale of the support available. These are all recipes for success that have made the UK model the success and recognised approach that it is today, so it is good to see that this model is being adapted and transferred to Austria as well. In the words of Otto Rath, the UK's: *"know-how is incredible, but also shows that there are great things for Austria to learn from other countries – if only someone wants to do so. The model in the UK has already become part of an overall national skills strategy which includes lifelong learning – it is the way ahead for us!"*

There is no doubt that working with the UK has been a key strength for In Motion. Together with Finland and France, the transnational partnership has looked at the role of social partners in workplace learning from different angles and with a different focus, bringing real added value for all those concerned.

## **EARLY DAYS, BUT EARLY SUCCESSES**

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Yes it may be early days, but there is already much to expect from *In Motion*. With a diverse approach, this EQUAL partnership clearly points the finger at the problem and builds the foundations for decision-makers to better understand basic skills and functional illiteracy as an issue. By empowering individuals to address their own disadvantage, by engaging key stakeholders such as trade unions, and by looking across national borders to countries such as the UK, In Motion has set a firm foundation for success in Austria.

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