

COUNSELLING FOR THE RECOGNITION OF FOREIGN QUALIFICATIONS IN AUSTRIA: THE OFFERINGS OF THE COUNSELLING CENTRE FOR MIGRANTS IN VIENNA (CCfM) AND AST-NETWORK

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ABSTRACT

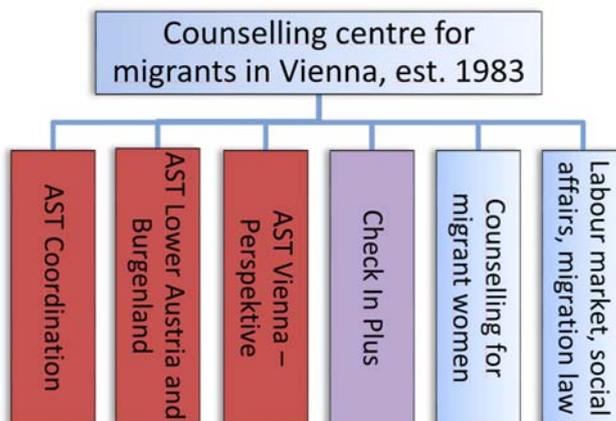
The Viennese Counselling Centre for Migrants (CCfM), an NGO, and other NGOs in Austria are offering Contact Points for people who gained professional qualifications abroad (AST). The countrywide AST-network has been providing counselling around the recognition of non-Austrian qualifications since 2013. This counselling supports migrants to validate their know-how and, in particular, to enhance their employability to match their existing qualifications. To reach this goal, many steps are needed. One of the steps can be provided by the additional offering of Check In Plus (CIP) by CCfM in Vienna.

In this paper the background of counselling for the process of qualifications recognition will be described: the counselling process itself, the target group, goals and principles, as well as Austrian conditions for recognition, will be outlined.

Key words: Austria-wide, counselling, migrants, procedure, qualification, recognition, refugees, service, measure-set.

INTRODUCTION – ORGANISATIONAL, HISTORICAL AND GEOGRAPHICAL BACKGROUND

The CCfM in Vienna was established as an NGO in 1983, and is one of the oldest NGOs in Austria dealing with the issues of labour market policy for migrants. The focus was originally on migrants from Turkey and former Yugoslavia. Currently, there are six sections of CCfM:



The organizational chart of CCfM in Vienna (red and purple sections provide recognition and education counselling).

During the 1980s another three Austrian NGOs were founded to support migrants: ZeMiT in Innsbruck, Zebra in Graz and *migrare* in Linz. Since being established all four NGOs have specialized in counselling for specific target groups and issues: female migrants, social affairs, employment, social and migration law, etc.

During the early 2000s a strong need for counselling on recognition of foreign qualifications was observed. CCfM started with *Perspektive – recognition counselling* in 2006. At the beginning of 2012 an inter-ministerial *Recognition of foreign qualifications* task force was formed, and developed the concept of “Contact Points for people who gained professional qualifications abroad – AST” (Anlaufstellen für Personen mit im Ausland erworbenen Qualifikationen - AST).

The concept of an AST-network was presented in summer 2012. The Viennese *Perspektive – recognition counselling* was taken as a model, so that by the first of January, 2013 five AST-Contact Points had been integrated into well-established counselling partner-NGOs for migrants in Linz, Graz and Innsbruck.



Geographical chart of NGOs including their offer of AST

Since its establishment the AST-network also provides counselling in the neighbouring federal states and districts, and additional locations can be provided by request. Each NGO is responsible for several regional AST-Contact Points. CCfM in Vienna offers two Contact Points (AST-Vienna and AST-Lower Austria) and coordinates the AST-network (AST-coordination).

AST-network provides counselling services according to § 5 *Recognition and Assessment Act (AuBG)*. The Austria-wide AST-offering is supported by the Austrian Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs, Health and Consumer Protection. Additionally, AST-Vienna is supported by the Vienna Employment Promotion Fund (waff) and the Integration and Diversity Department of the City of Vienna (MA 17).



Organization chart of AST-network

Since being launched, CCfM in Vienna has expanded from a small association with two employees to an NGO with more than 50 staff members, offering counselling in over 20 languages. We cooperate with the Austrian Public Employment Service (PES) and many other public stakeholders and authorities.

The demographic conditions determining the counselling for migrants in Austria are as follows (2018): Austria has 16.2% foreign citizens and 23.3 % of the inhabitants of Austria have a so-called “migration background” (that is, at least one foreign-born parent). The fact which is determining counselling on recognition of existing non-Austrian qualifications the most is that so many migrants are overqualified for the work which they are doing: 23.5 % of foreign-born compared to 8.8% of the native-born population are working beneath the level of their qualifications. We assume that only approx. 20% of the qualified migrants benefit from our recognition counselling offer.

CIP AS PART OF CCfM

CIP is a specialized follow-up project of CCFM which targets guidance in cases of longer-lasting recognition processes. CIP is an offering for highly qualified but unemployed clients registered by the Austrian PES. The goal of CIP is to build on prior qualifications and skills, and to search for and finance tailor-made measures (bridging courses, internships, etc.) which will supplement the individual recognition process. All of the necessary steps for the individual are listed in the “educational plan” for each client, as well as for the PES advisors.

CIP specializes in particular in clients from non-EU backgrounds with regulated professions, such as those from the medical professions: doctors, dentists, nurses, pharmacists and physiotherapists; but it also targets many other groups such as teachers, lawyers, etc.

CIP has developed unique measures and measure-sets for clients, and arranges the coverage of costs for any additional expenses during the recognition process with PES Vienna and Lower Austria. CIP has provided support for nearly 5,000 academically / professionally qualified migrants and refugees since it was launched in 2012.

THE ROLE OF AST-COORDINATION

AST-coordination is the back-up for AST-counsellors. This support includes the organization of continuing education for the AST-network; quality management, and the elaboration of working- and position-papers and checklists.

AST-coordination maintains the homepage of the website for the network, and informs stakeholders and actors about news from the education sector. It is involved in PR, and issues statements and comments in reaction to the ongoing development of law and policies around recognition and migration law.

AST-coordination is involved in lobbying and networking with decision-makers to promote adequate employment of migrants, and works on the further development and adaptation of the regulations around qualifications recognition. Additionally, there are meetings and events for stakeholders organized by AST-coordination several times every year, maintaining contacts with authorities on a regional, national and international level.

THE DETAILS OF COUNSELLING FOR QUALIFICATIONS RECOGNITION

AST-counselling for qualifications recognition includes:

- preliminary information and professional advice about the legal basics of individual recognition: offered multilingually (German, Bosnian / Serbian / Croatian, Bulgarian, Turkish, English, Polish, Russian, Ukrainian, French, Spanish, Chinese, Farsi, Arabic), free of charge and case orientated, at every stage of the recognition process, with reference to regional possibilities.
- comparison of the foreign qualification with the professional requirements in Austria (referring profession in Austria).
- clarification of the necessity and potential for formal recognition (not every qualification can / must be formally recognized), leading to a decision as to whether assessment or recognition is needed.
- coverage of costs of certified translations of documents needed for recognition (approx. 40% of the clients are using the translation service).
- support with the application for recognition, assistance during recognition proceedings, and explanation of the decision given.
- cooperation with recognition authorities like Enic-Naric *et al.*, and other partners.
- clarification of the occupational fields, qualification profiles and regulations of the Austrian labour market.
- clarification of opportunities for continuing education and training, and of potential sources of funding and the eligibility criteria.
- assistance in the search for “bridging courses” and the financing of these (a set of measures in cooperation with Viennese CIP),
- identifying alternative paths if formal recognition is not possible.

Counselling regarding the recognition procedures is a specific form of professional advice, assisting clients to gain the formal and equal recognition of foreign qualifications as well to identify employment appropriate to their qualifications and, thereby, allowing them equal participation in the Austrian labour market. This kind of counselling is an interface between labour market counselling, education counselling and career guidance. The approach of AST-network is based on Austria-wide networking and cooperation between relevant recognition authorities, institutions and organizations at a regional and national level to promote recognition and utilize the existing resources.

The AST- and CIP-counselling is based on the following principles:

- open to the evaluation of all formal qualifications, and professional analysis of the individual's set of qualifications and competencies in the context of the Austrian labour market.
- recognition counselling is not obligatory.
- the duration of the counselling process has no prescribed limit.
- includes a filter function: preventing unpromising applications.
- core values of empowerment, equality of opportunity, cooperation, solution- and goal-orientation, transparency, assistance for decision making, up-to-dateness.
- no general education advising or vocational orientation is offered.
- clarity that counselling is not the recognition, but supports clients to seek recognition - recognition as a formal act is the responsibility of the authorities;
- due to the complexity of the recognition process, the counselling can't be offered by e-mail, and only in a limited way by telephone (however, in some Austrian regions, difficulties in attending for personal counselling occur).
- Recognition counselling can't solve other issues like compliance with migration law, but due to cooperation, there is access to other counselling for these matters for clients.

Our mission statement and a description of the counselling concepts underpinning AST-network and CIP are available.

TARGET GROUP OF AST – FACTS AND FIGURES

The target group of AST contains clients living in Austria with completed formal qualifications from abroad above the Austrian complementary level (8th grade) and who wish to utilize their competencies in the Austrian labour market. The labour market status of the client (employed or unemployed) is irrelevant to the counselling, as is nationality, origin or ethnic group. However, the clients must have approved access to the labour market (permission to work in Austria). Clients contact the appropriate AST depending on their place of residence in Austria. Because we offer multilingual counselling, clients can book an appointment for counselling in their mother tongue.

The following details describe the profile of the AST-target group (2018):

- 38.3 % of AST-clients are residents of Vienna.
- 54.1% of the clients have academic degrees; 33.5% have high school diplomas; 10.1% have completed a professional qualification / apprenticeship.
- 62% of AST-clients are women.
- 70% of AST-clients are below the age of 40.

- 61.2% of AST-clients are non-EU citizens. About 23% of the clients among non-EU citizens are state-approved refugees (entitled to asylum or holding subsidiary protection status).
- the ten major groups among AST-clients are citizens of Syria, Iran, Serbia, Hungary, Poland, Rumania, Iraq, Turkey, Russia and Slovakia.

The target group of CIP overlaps partly with the group of AST-clients. The profile of the CIP clients includes persons who are unemployed and registered by PES Vienna, which is in the case of refugees only possible if they have been granted the status of asylum protection or subsidiary protection (asylum seekers are neither allowed to work in Austria or to be registered as unemployed). Because the focus is on usability of the qualifications, the CIP target group is confined to persons already living in Austria for a maximum of seven years. The individuals also have to be interested in using their existing qualification (rather than to seek to re-train or engage in another occupation), and willing to build upon the recognition process and to undertake further relevant education or training.

RECOGNITION OF FOREIGN QUALIFICATIONS IN AUSTRIA

Currently, there are very different procedures, and no uniform system, for the recognition and validation of foreign qualifications in Austria. Formal recognition is formative for the AST-counselling - numerous regional and federal laws and regulations determine the counselling. There are more than 100 authorities responsible for recognition Austria-wide.

The validation of non-recognised foreign qualifications is being driven by the demands of the labour market and companies' requirements. Clients encounter difficulties in gaining professional experience in Austria. Professional recognition is often an agreement between the employer and the employee, except in the case of regulated professions where formal education and qualifications are needed to engage in the professional activity; e.g. nurses, medical doctors, dental practitioners, physiotherapists, teachers, etc.

The type and form of recognition depends on many variables, for example, the level of education gained abroad. In the case of a university degree, there will be the Ministry of Education or the university responsible for recognition. In the case of an apprenticeship, the Ministry of Economics will be the recognizing authority. If the qualification originates in the EU, the recognition will be determined under the relevant EU directives, but there are still multiple authorities responsible for the assessment. Qualifications gained in countries outside the EU need to be recognized through different boards. The purpose for which the recognition is sought defines the authority too: depending on whether the client is planning on further education or aiming directly at immediate employment, a different authority will be involved. The variable of whether the relevant profession is regulated or not specifies the form and the length of the recognition process as well. Based on the type of qualification and the client's professional plans, the assessment or recognition procedure can be started.

The complexity of recognition of foreign qualifications, based on the examples of an EU- and non-EU qualification for dentistry and dental assistant, is demonstrated in the following chart:

Qualification	Steps needed for recognition
Dentistry gained in EU-country	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language courses in German and medical German. • Collecting of documents, translation and application by Ministry of Labour, Social Issues, Health and Consumer Protection. • Decision of authority – recognition based on the EU-directive. • Registration in Dentistry List of Dental Medical Council.
Dentistry gained in non-EU country	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language courses in German and medical German. • Collecting of documents and translation, and application to Medical University. • Attending the nostrification assessment; comparison of foreign transcript of records with Austrian curriculum by the Medical University. • Decision of authority including complementary exams and diploma thesis. • Attending the complementary exams, writing of diploma thesis. • Exam in Medical German by Dentistry Medical Council. • Registration in Dentistry List of Dentistry Medical Council.
Dental assistant gained in EU-country	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language courses in German and medical German. • Collection of documents and translation, and application to Ministry of Labour, Social Issues, Health and Consumer Protection. • Decision of authority with potential complementary measures. • Attending the complementary exams / training.
Dental assistant gained in non-EU country	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language courses in German and medical German. • Collection of documents and translation, and application to local governmental Department of Social and Health Issues. • Decision of authority including complementary measures. • Attending the complementary exams / training.

The huge number of regulations and laws concerning formal recognition within Austria make the counselling and the recognition process itself challenging. Additionally, there are various other challenges, which need to be considered, such as:

- insufficient language skills to meet the need for those skills during recognition (for some recognition types German language skills have to be confirmed).
- missing or incomplete documents.
- lack of system-knowledge and inadequate practice; not enough experience; how to initiate professional performance. Some migrants spend years trapped in low skilled jobs for which they are overqualified. The reasons are very diverse: lack of support in job search, being a single wage earner or the unknown / complex processes for recognition of qualifications.
- different qualification profiles in the country of origin and in the country of residency.
- personal situation and family background.

INNOVATIVE ADDITIONAL SERVICES

AST-network, as an initial expert body in the matter of recognition counselling in Austria, now offers meetings for specific groups of clients. These meetings provide group counselling for certain occupational groups or owners of specific degrees (doctors, dentists, nurses, etc.). These events take place in all AST regional centres.

The meetings for occupational groups started in 2010 with “Nurses from former Yugoslavia”, offered in the mother tongue. Currently doctors, dentists, construction engineers, psychologists, pharmacists, teachers, kindergarten teachers, those from economic and commercial professions, those from the technical occupations, and a group for “utilizing the high school diploma” are meeting regularly, to share ideas, experiences and learning materials across members. The goal of these groups is to get know each other; avoid social exclusion, and become informed about recognition procedures or existing training / courses. At the same time, there is a need for contact with stakeholders or relevant recognition bodies and potential employers, and for preparation for job-seeking. Ex-clients whose qualifications are already recognized participate in these meetings to speak about their experiences and become role models.

Additionally, there are meetings and events concerning various fields of education in the context of recognition, e.g. international education systems and support systems for refugees and migrants in Austria. These events are organized by AST-coordination several times every year.

CONCLUSION: THE INVOLVEMENT OF AST AND CIP

AST-counselling is a well-known offering in Austria. We shape the issue of recognition of qualifications and make it visible. Recognition is an issue for civil society, and a political and economic matter.

The AST-network employs 29 staff members, who are experienced multi-professionals with self-explored expertise and accumulated knowledge. Cooperation at regional level within the AST-network is essential as there is no uniform system for recognition and validation of foreign qualifications in Austria. Since its founding in 2013 AST-network has counselled more than 50,000 beneficiaries Austria-wide. About 500 (5,000 since launched in 2012) among them were parallel clients of CIP in Vienna.

AST-counselling, connected with the offer of CIP, can cause the following effects for clients:

- formal recognition of the equality of foreign qualifications in reference to its Austrian equivalent.
- achieving an education level through complementary measures.
- qualification activities financed through public funding.
- supplementing professional abilities and language skills.
- occupational change and adequate job opportunities.
- networking, connection with additional counselling offers.

The external evaluation of AST shows that participation in AST-counselling speeds up the recognition and / or assessment of foreign qualifications; helps with requalification and further training / education; supports finding employment suited to migrants' qualifications and helps avoid underqualified employment. Since the AST-counselling was established many new training / education options have been developed.

Based on wide experience, AST-Contact Points provide structured pathways for getting learning outcomes validated / recognized, and a matrix of solutions for clients, depending on their personal and educational situations. In cases where the intended recognition process doesn't work, AST-counselling seeks to find alternative case-orientated solutions.

The daily practice of AST-counselling implies a need for the revision of some legislation, which we are lobbying for (e.g. labour law, collective agreements and recognition practice) to represent the interests of migrants. We are lobbying in favour of further regulation of recognition adaptations, especially the adjustment of degrees from third countries to EU standards.

Employing people who gained qualifications abroad is still beset with the issue of employers' doubt. This has to be overcome by awareness-raising on the subject of recognition of foreign qualifications and competences, so preventing "overqualified" employment. Awareness-raising among employers to the existence of available skills among migrants and refugees is an important part of our work. We are trying to encourage employers to rethink their current recruitment policies to identify and target foreign-diverse skills and knowledge.

The process of recognition of foreign qualifications is long, but it has a long-term positive effect once completed. Due to the information and counselling provided, and the resulting clarification of professional goals, the AST-Contact Points promote adequate employment of migrants. Having settled in Austria, migrants are supposed to be reached as soon as possible to provide information about the professional possibilities available. Furthermore, AST-counselling makes a contribution to sustainability: counselling resulting in a job appropriate to the client's qualification has a sustainable impact on the further career and the employability of the individual.

The employment of persons who are qualified abroad positively affects their long-term labour market integration. It impacts and helps to stabilize the Austrian labour market and economy permanently. The hidden potential of migrant's qualifications and their need to utilize this potential can in turn address the needs of the Austrian labour market regarding several under-supplied professions (IT, medical occupations etc.).

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