

*Validation of Prior Learning strengthens
lifelong learning for the learner*

THE LEARNER AT THE CENTRE

Edited by:
Ruud Duvekot
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VIA University
College



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European Centre
for the Development
of Vocational Training

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Overcoming language barriers

9

Competence Cards help reveal migrants' skills

Martin Noack and Kathrin Ehmann

Determining the skills of refugees and immigrants as part of educational and professional guidance is key to their integration into the workforce and society. However, language deficits often stand in the way of learners communicating their relevant experience. The development of *Competence Cards* by the Bertelsmann Stiftung in Germany offers a flexible, low-threshold introduction to competence assessment. The cards are based on tried-and-tested competence terms. The visualisation of the individual competencies, together with the competence term translations in seven languages, is helpful in overcoming language barriers and establishing a common terminology for social, personal and methodological skills between the guide and client. In addition to the information for the clients (on the front), the cards also contain valuable information and instructions for the guide (on the back). They have the potential to contribute toward the development of a more comprehensive validation system in Germany and have triggered further projects, both analogue and digital, regarding multilingual picture-based skills assessment. In this chapter, the *Competence Cards* are described and analysed within the existing frameworks of competence- and skills-tests. The objective is to identify an innovative approach toward linking the competences of refugees and immigrants to the competences and skills needed on the German labour market.

1. Utilising potential – promoting integration

Andrea Nahles, Federal Minister of Labour and Social Affairs in Germany, remarked, in light of the debate on the new integration law on June 3, 2016, that the best path to integration is the path toward work (Nahles, 2016). This should, however, not be just any work. A sustainable pathway to integration should provide a job that corresponds to the skills and qualifications of the individual migrant. But which skills do refugees and immigrants bring with them and how can we make their path to adequate work as efficient and fair as possible?

1.3 million people sought asylum in Europe in both 2015 and 2016 (Eurostat, 2017). A large portion of them in Germany. Considering the continuing critical situation in the countries of origin, we need to face the challenge of integrating the refugees

into our society. Teaching language skills is not enough to meet this challenge. The identification and formal recognition of refugees' existing skills are of utmost importance to facilitate their access to the labour market.

The European Commission acknowledged this and is currently setting up a repository for approaches for identifying skills. Their "New Skills Agenda", introduced in June 2016, also highlights the importance of the assessment, development and formal recognition of skills in both migrants and the so-called low skilled, who in fact lack formal qualifications. Consequently, the EU Skills Profile Tool for Third Country Nationals (European Commission, 2017) a beta version²⁵ of which was launched on June 20, 2017 addresses this need, by providing a documentation tool for qualifications, skills, and interests of migrants and refugees. This useful tool, however, does not provide a method for identifying the skills that are to be documented in the first place.

The Bertelsmann Stiftung and seven non-statutory welfare organisations, responsible for immigration counselling for adult immigrants in Germany have been collaborating on the topic of analysis of potential (Potenzialanalyse) for several years. We developed the Competence Cards together, and with the support of the Research Institute for Vocational Education and Training (f-bb). Before describing the instrument, we will introduce the context of educational consulting and skills assessment in Germany.

Figure 1: Competence Cards Box



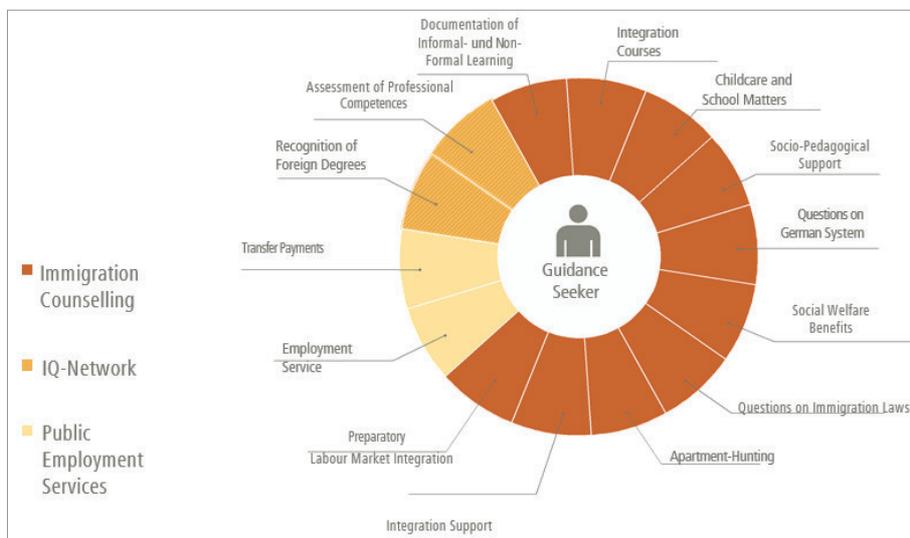
Photo: Bertelsmann Stiftung

25 See: <http://skpt-test.eu-west-1.elasticbeanstalk.com/#/> [Accessed: 23.06.2017].

2. The German migration guidance system

In Germany, three institutions share the responsibility of providing adult migrants with guidance and support. The first is the *immigration counselling* provided by the seven welfare organisations, like Caritas, Diakonie and German Red Cross. This system provides guidance on many issues, from accommodation to childcare, including the documentation of non-formal and informal learning. The second is the *IQ-Network*, which is in charge of recognising formal qualifications acquired abroad. The third is the *Public Employment Service*, which provides assistance in finding a job and executing overseas transfer payments (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Overview of German guidance system for migrants



Source: Bertelsmann Stiftung

For the development of the Competence Cards, we focused on the first system, because immigration counselling is most engaged in the identification of non-formal and informal learning and has the most holistic approach to the individual learner. However, representatives of both the IQ-Network and the Public Employment Service were part of the steering committee to allow for the best possible interoperability of the Competence Cards. The immigration counselling for adult migrants often uses a case management approach. Within the latter process, identification and documentation of skills and prior learning is an integral part of the first two stages (see Figure 3). It is here that the Competence Cards support the interaction between the guide and client.

Figure 3: Case management process of migration counselling

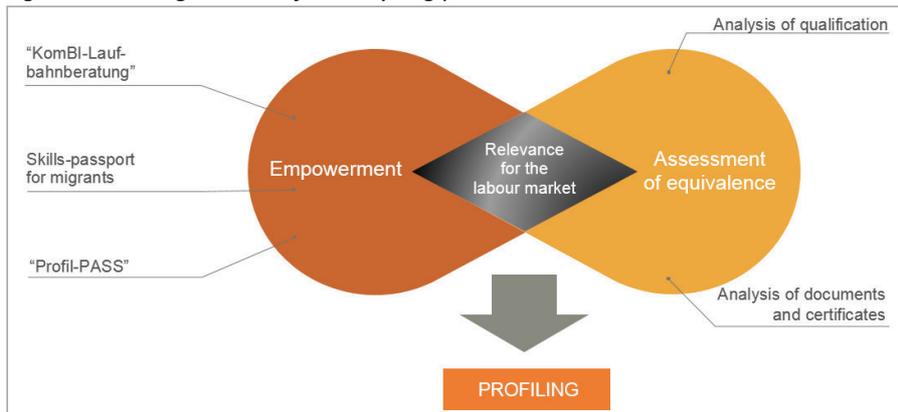


Source: Reis 2013, p. 16

3. Identifying skills and analysing potential

Skills assessment approaches can generally be divided into subject-oriented (or formative) and requirements-oriented (or summative) approaches which play a role in various phases of the skills recognition process (Cedefop, 2015).

Figure 4: Existing methods for analysing potential



Source: Bertelsmann Stiftung

Subject-oriented approaches aim at making the participants aware of their own competencies, skills, and abilities and support them in structuring their further professional development (IQ expert work group for skills assessment, 2008). Focusing on the person's own educational and personal biography and viable personal development options is a core component of these approaches. The precise measurement of skills plays a lesser role than empowering the person seeking advice, ergo, increasing their autonomy and personal empowerment. Instead, consultation is more focused on identifying and documenting existing potential and reinforces a resource-oriented point of view instead of a weakness-oriented point of

view; one might call it a bottom-up approach. Examples in Germany include a variety of portfolios such as the skills passport for immigrants and the profile passport (ProfilPASS), which the consultant and client develop and fill out together. Most of the methods for the analysis of a client's potential currently in use in Germany are subject-oriented approaches (Kucher & Wacker, 2011).

Requirements-oriented approaches more closely resemble a top-down approach. They are based on standards, reference frameworks and requirements of the labour market or the formal educational system and examine which of the required skills pertain to the client at what level of proficiency, as well as which skills are still lacking. The focus is not solely on the documentation, but also on the evaluation of existing skills, often in order to determine their equivalency to defined standards. This includes tests, technical assessment procedures or assessment centre procedures like the analysis of qualification (Qualifikationsanalyse). The analysis of qualifications, as regulated by the Qualification Recognition Act (Berufsqualifikationsfeststellungsgesetz, 2011), pertains only to immigrants who cannot document their formal educational degrees obtained abroad as a result of having to flee their country of origin. However, an adaptation of the method to informal learners without a migration background is currently being developed²⁶ with the support of the Federal Ministry of Education and Research. In contrast to the subject-oriented approaches, such methods are used to determine both the strengths and weaknesses of the candidate. The focus is on the compatibility of the skills with the established professional qualifications (cf. Döring, Müller & Neumann, 2015 for a detailed comparison of the analysis of potential methods).

Sometimes, both approaches are combined. This is the case, for example, within the public employment agencies' profiling system, which analyses the existing skills' relevance for the labour market (see Figure 4). The profiling procedure consists of the analysis of strengths (professional history, qualifications, expertise, skills and personal strengths) and the analysis of potential (personal profile and context profile) of the person seeking advice. In many cases, an initial analysis of a client's potential is already conducted outside of the public employment agencies, for example, at immigration counselling offices. There, the analysis serves to prepare clients for subsequent consultations with guidance and placement agents at the employment agencies. Ideally, insights gained and results compiled during the analysis of potential at the immigration counselling offices should, therefore, be prepared in a way to foster smooth integration into these later consultations. A survey we conducted among 23 experts and practitioners revealed, however, that the majority of existing procedures for determining potential is currently not directly compatible with the profiling system of the public employment agencies. This results in inefficient processes, which can turn an initial sense of empowerment into

26 See: www.validierungsverfahren.de/en/home/ (GFWH mbH, 2016) [Accessed: 23.06.2017].

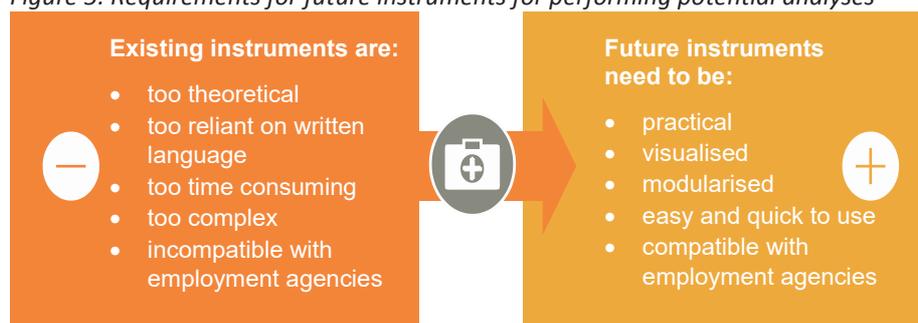
frustration. According to the counsellors, existing instruments had other disadvantages, too, resulting in very unsystematic use. This was the starting point for the development of the Competence Cards.

4. Requirements for practical instruments

Every consultation has its own purpose and every analysis of potential its individual objectives. Procedures, methods, and instruments for analysing potential have to be designed accordingly. The following attributes are important quality characteristics, according to the surveyed experts (see Figure 5):

- *Visualised and multilingual:* Unless a professional interpreter accompanies them, clients with rather limited German language skills can only truly profit from the analysis of potential when using multilingual instruments. In addition, there are clients with language difficulties or who have suffered trauma who open up best when using images rather than written words at the beginning of the counselling interaction.
- *Flexible and modular:* Most of the established procedures require several hours. In daily guidance practice, it is not usually possible to spend that much time analysing potential. Therefore, flexible instruments that can be used modularly are very important. With their help, consultants can decide on a needs-oriented basis how to perform a skills assessment and how much space to give it in the guidance process.
- *Transparent:* Another important factor is the transparency of the procedure. The execution and results must be easily understandable. Ideally, the concept of the procedure will be self-explanatory and therefore low-threshold. Using terminology already established in competence research is also recommended.

Figure 5: Requirements for future instruments for performing potential analyses



Source: Bertelsmann Stiftung

- *Valid:* Procedures that provide trustworthy results are required. Even if the validity of self-assessments is limited by nature, the procedures used should result in the documented qualifications and actual qualifications matching.
- *Documented:* The documentation of the skills determined during the analysis

of potential not only increases the immigrants' self-confidence, it also provides an orientation for labour market entry. In practice, the documentation of the analysis of potential is often neglected, especially due to time constraints. If documentation is compiled, it is often not passed on. Consequently, easy access documentation templates are required, to help overcome this obstacle.

- *Compatible*: As mentioned above, a high level of interoperability of the tool can bridge existing gaps between different institutions. Among others, common competence terminology is, therefore, key to the client's successful and empowering guidance journey.

5. The Competence Cards

In cooperation with the seven non-statutory welfare associations, we developed an instrument that would meet the aforementioned criteria. Over the course of one and a half years, we involved around 60 migration counsellors, labour market integration practitioners and skills assessment experts. Starting with a needs analysis, covering multiple focus group workshops and ending with a four-week test phase, after which the prototype was finalised (see Figure 6).

Target groups, contents, and methodology of the Competence Cards

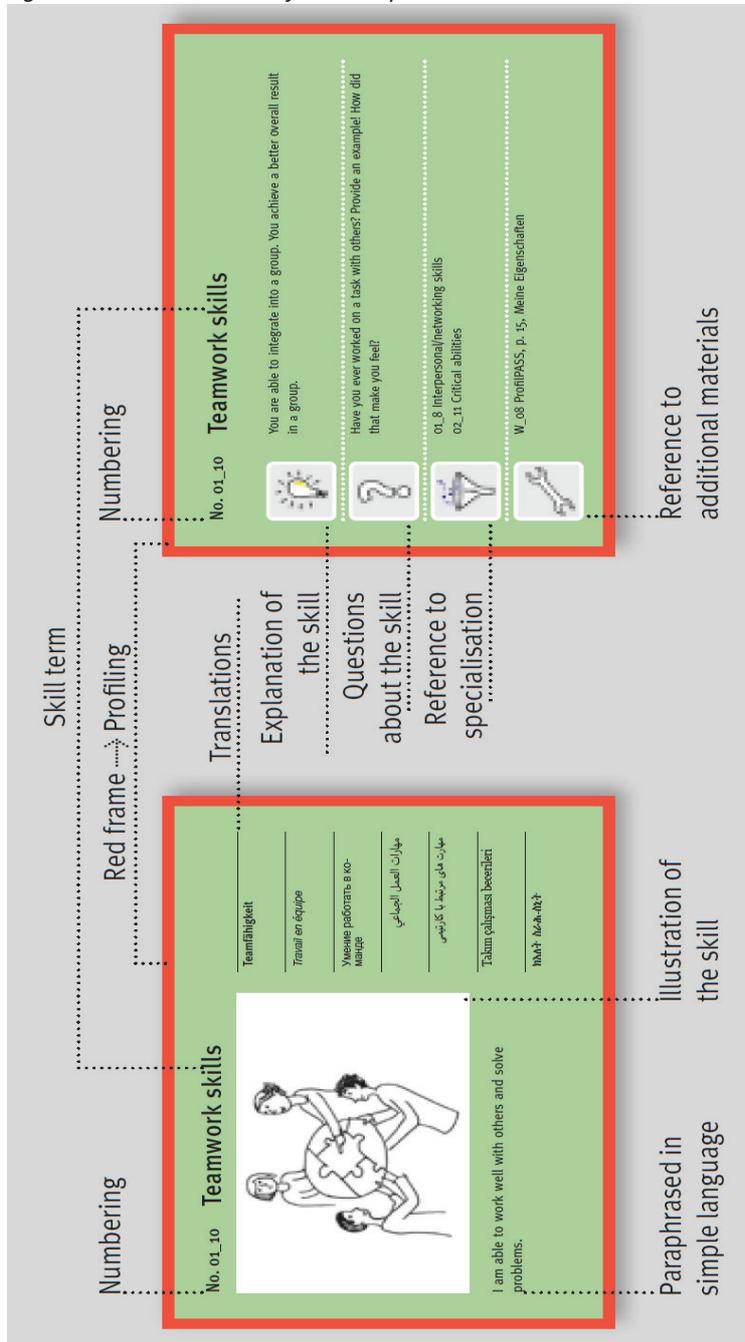
The 46 Competence Cards offer a flexible, low-threshold introduction to the topic of skills assessment. They are particularly suitable for immigrants and refugees but can also be used for other target groups. They illustrate social, personal and some technical skills. The cards use simple language descriptions, a visualisation and translations in seven foreign languages for each skill. In combination with the eleven interest cards, they can also be used beyond the direct purpose of skills identification, for instance, for professional orientation, for writing applications and CVs or to generally empower the client. People with migration experience, who have suffered trauma or who generally have low self-confidence profit in particular from this low-threshold approach.

Duration of the application and costs of the Competence Cards

The duration of the application of the Competence Cards depends on the objectives of the session and the counsellor's experience and available time. A short analysis of individual competence areas can be performed in 15 minutes. A complete analysis of potential can generally take up to 1 to 1.5 hours. Virtually no costs are incurred by the counsellor or the client since a printable pdf-version of the Competence Cards in both German and English are provided free of charge by Bertelsmann Stiftung.²⁷

²⁷ Printed version at-cost price (in German): <http://www.bertelsmann-tiftung.de/competence-cards>.

Figure 6: Front and back of the competence card



Source: Bertelsmann Stiftung

Analysis and results of working with the Competence Cards

Throughout the course of the counselling session, client and guide identify existing skills. The counsellor evaluates the plausibility of the self-assessment using questions on the back of the cards. For example, he or she might encourage the client to share a particular event in his biography when that particular skill became evident. Furthermore, the guide can ask the client to estimate the level at which he or she possesses a particular skill, using the provided +, ++ and +++ card. At the end of the process, the skills (and their levels) are recorded in a documentation template which clients can take with them and submit to a potential employer or their employment agency representative, for instance.

Validity of the Competence Cards

The survey at the end of the test phase, involving about 60 practitioners and experts, showed that in the large majority of cases, clients correctly interpreted the visualisations and explanatory descriptions. It also revealed that the additional explanations, questions and references were very helpful during the skills identification process. An external evaluation based on a survey of 202 users and consecutive in-depth interviews confirmed the added value of the Competence Cards far beyond the initial target context of immigration counselling for adults. The majority of counsellors used the cards in every fourth session and 57 percent plan to use them more frequently in the future (Grebe, Schüren & Ekert, 2016). Feedback directly from the clients/learners has been difficult to obtain, however, largely due to the protected client-guide interaction. However, guides tell us that the most clients really enjoy working with the Competence Cards because it is a playful approach that helps tease out skills that even the clients themselves were not aware of prior. Some counsellors report that clients also tend to lose their reservations regarding German public institutions and open up to the guidance process. This is sometimes rewarded in much faster labour market integration, than anticipated (see Breukelchen, 2017 for a report on a day in the life of a guide).

Requirements for using the Competence Cards

A 10-minute explanatory video in German and English as well as the instruction offer a sufficient introduction for guides to start working with the cards. With increasing experience, it becomes easier to identify hidden skills and compare the self-assessment of the skills level with the requirements of the German labour market.

Compatibility of the Competence Cards with labour market integration

Representatives from the public employment services were involved in the development of the cards. This resulted in 20 of the 46 Competence Cards illustrating precisely the skills used in their profiling system. Red frames around those cards easily distinguish them from the other cards. The cards have been found to be very useful for drafting application letters and résumés since they help identify and clearly describe both the personal strengths of the clients and their central interests and hobbies.

Dissemination of the Competence Cards

More than 9,000 copies are currently in use throughout Germany, more than 10 times as many copies as the initially targeted 835 for all immigration counsellors for adults. The Competence Cards are increasingly used, in guidance contexts, which focus on job placement or professional orientation; namely, in youth migration counselling, in integration courses, at professional schools for handicapped persons, by adult education providers, voluntary initiatives helping refugees and even directly at the employment agencies. The cards have also been available as a pdf, in English, since May 2016. Since then, the Competence Cards have also been licensed under the CCBYSA 4.0 open license, making it possible for anyone who is interested in translating or adapting the cards to do so, as long as the adaptation is shared under the same license. As a result, a Bosnian and an Italian version already exist, and a group setting adaptation has been developed in Slovakian, German and Czech. Interest has been shown also for translations into Danish, Norwegian and Dutch.

Use of the Competence Cards in practice

Job Coach Ramona López Salinas is a trained orthopaedic shoemaker. She has a master's degree in English studies, psychology and education and is a trained mediator and systemic coach. At the AWO Landesverband Schleswig-Holstein e. V., she helps refugees and other immigrants find ways to enter the German labour market. During the test phase, she got to know and appreciate the Competence Cards as a valuable instrument for examining potential in immigration guidance:

The clients are confronted with a picture; this is how they know the subject is 'family' or 'team'. It is easier to make things understandable using images first, and then language. Thus, the clients really understand what skill we are talking about and whether or not they have it. (I like to go through all of the cards with my clients and ask whether this card pertains to them. If yes, they consider whether they can do it well. In this case, I augment the card. There are three augmentation cards, + ++ +++ indicating whether they can do it well, very well, or if it is their passion, for instance, 'communication skills'.) We simply lay the cards to which clients don't relate aside and they aren't recorded. This is, in fact, an instrument that records the strengths, so we have a positive list and not a negative list of things the client can't do. For me, there are two ways to use the cards. First, specifically: if it's about specific professions or professional desires, for instance. Then, I look for specific cards in advance and determine, whether desire and reality correspond to each other. But I also like to go through all the cards with the clients during the first sessions; I get to know them well or learn what they can do and tease out hidden skills. The clients clearly recognise what they can already do and what they have already learned and that it can be valuable here too. Since we work very closely with the job centres [public employment services at the communal level] and write a report for them at the end, they can directly record and submit the skills we have recorded in their documentation which helps significantly with further counselling.

The use of Competence Cards can help refugees and immigrants take the first step toward having their skills recognised and thus integrate into the German labour market, but it cannot stop there. In order for the skills to be fully valued on the strongly formalised German labour market, they have to be measured against an applicable standard and certified in a manner that companies and individuals can understand and believe. Recent research comparing the German validation system to those of other countries has shown that, despite the European Council's 2012 recommendation to formally establish a comprehensive system of validation of non-formal and informal learning until 2018, the necessary framework conditions have yet to be established in Germany (Gaylor, Schöpf & Severing, 2015; Gaylor, Schöpf, Severing & Reglin, 2015). A survey of more than 300 VET experts in Germany confirmed this analysis and calls for action in five areas (Velten & Herdin, 2016):

1. Establishment of accessible and valid procedures and instruments for competence assessment
2. Distribution of responsibilities among VET and labour-market stakeholders
3. Provision of financial resources, particularly for disadvantaged learners
4. Organisation of easily accessible and highly professional support structures
5. Legal regulation of the access, process and outcome of the validation

Potential role in a national system of skills recognition

The Competence Cards are a contribution toward the development of innovative methods and can support the integration of existing guidance structures into a comprehensive support system. Such a system should introduce the client to the validation procedure and provide continuous support, for example, from educational guides throughout the validation process (Käpplinger, 2015). It should also be linked to a continuing education system which is able to fill the skills gaps that have been identified. This is another field in which Germany has some homework to do. Particular regarding the social inequalities and path dependencies of its educational system that are not mitigated but exacerbated throughout the course of an individual's life. Again, immigrants, refugees and the "low-skilled", but also atypical workers, are particularly disadvantaged with respect to their participation in continuing education in Germany (e.g. Frick, Noack, Blinn, 2013). One way to address this would be to make sure that the costs of participating in continuing education do not pose an insurmountable obstacle for the individual learner. Here the German public sector needs to strengthen its commitment, especially considering the long-term decrease in public investments (-41 % between 1995 and 2012) in continuing education and training (Noack, Frick, Hesse, Walter & Münk, 2015).

6. New developments

Both the success of the Competence Cards as well as the substantial reform deficits have motivated us at Bertelsmann Stiftung to continue working on supporting and

promoting the development of a German VPL system that specifically benefits migrants, people with low levels of formal qualification and other disadvantages learners. In particular, we are engaged in the development of further innovative instruments for the identification and self-assessment as well as objective assessment of vocational competences. In the following, we will briefly introduce three ongoing projects: the Profession Cards, a picture based vocational skills self-assessment web site and digital video and picture-based vocational skills tests.

Profession Cards for occupational counselling

After competences have been identified and documented with the Competence Cards, clients' positive lists of transversal skills creates a foundation for their further orientation towards internships, employment and/or vocational education and training. This is precisely what the Competence Cards are used for most frequently, as a survey of 549 users at the beginning of this year revealed (Täntzler, 2017). However, to better serve this purpose, an additional instrument was requested that would allow the identification of vocational skills. In fact, 95 percent of the respondents would appreciate a complementary instrument – Profession Cards – for identifying vocational skills.

To address this demand, we are currently developing such a tool again, in cooperation with the f-bb. Circa 50 cards will provide an overview of all the occupational fields in the German VET system. The core of the new card set is the more than 200 photographs, displaying people who exercise typical actions in recognised trades on the front of the cards. Operational fields like "Construction", "Health", or "Business" are translated into eight frequently-spoken languages of current immigrants to Germany, from English to Russian and even Tigrinya. The backsides of the Profession Cards provide useful information for the counsellor, for example, on the different sub-areas of activity and on existing professional qualifications in the respective field. In addition, the set will contain a sample of 30 cards on individual professions with information on typical action, workplaces and further training possibilities and the 10 most relevant transversal skills from the Competence Cards set. This makes it easy to combine both instruments and provide clearer perspectives for the next professional steps of a client. Additional support cards offer a quick overview of diverse practical application scenarios for the Profession Cards in the guidance context. Others display symbols that help identify the client's competence level, preferences or temporal scope of her or his professional experience within singular occupational fields or professions.

However, even a card with four different pictures for one profession has limits concerning the accuracy of skills identification. Which typical professional actions of a given profession in Germany can a client coming from another country already execute? How far does his or her experience reach? For a detailed analysis, one would need 20-40, rather than just four pictures per profession, which is clearly outside of the scope of an analogue tool. This is where our second project, the picture based vocational skills self-assessment web site, comes into play.

Multilingual web site for self-assessment of vocational skills (www.meine-berufserfahrung.de)

The basis for this tool are competence models that define 5-8 occupational fields of application for 30 professions, for example, electronics engineer. Professional experts developed these occupational fields and underpinned them with 3-8 typical occupational actions each. Then, they were reviewed in practical workshops with representatives from the regulative bodies (e.g. chambers of trade, chambers of industry and commerce, chambers of agriculture), masters, trainers and other occupational practitioners, as well as representatives from respective professional associations. Scientists from renowned research institutes provided support and reviewed the finalisation of the competence models. We are currently selecting photos for each of those 20-40 occupational actions in each of the 30 professions. The core of the website is the simple question: "How often have you done this?" The learner then can choose from four options for each picture.

After no more than 10 minutes of reviewing his or her own professional experience, the result of the self-assessment will be displayed and can be downloaded, printed or e-mailed. The client can switch between six website language options at any time: German, English, Russian, Farsi, Arabic and Turkish. The website *www.meine-berufserfahrung.de* presents the first ten professions in October 2017 and includes all 30 professions at the end of 2017. Again, the output of this instrument will be a positive list of the respondent's experiences in the occupational fields of application constituting a profession. It can be a useful basis for the counsellor and the client for decisions about further strategies regarding employment, training or even formal recognition. However, while the result of this self-assessment will cast some light on the learner's skills-set, in order to convince employers or even formal education institutions to recognise the prior learning, an objective external assessment is needed. This is where the third and last of our current projects on innovative skills assessments comes in.

Vocational skills tests: Multilingual, digital, video and picture-based

As the German labour market currently requests some kind of recognised proof of a learner's skills, in order to offer valuable occupational opportunities, the journey cannot end here. Our solution is to digitally measure informally and non-formally acquired skills and match them to job requirements. To integrate so-called low-skilled persons, migrants and refugees into the labour market, the Federal Employment Agency is planning to better identify occupationally usable, informally or non-formally acquired skills and use them to place people in apprenticeships or jobs. In cooperation with the Bertelsmann Stiftung and the f-bb, the Federal Employment Agency has therefore started the "Identifying occupational skills" project to develop objective skills tests. The skills tests shall help decide in which typical occupational fields of a given profession a learner's existing experiences can be used on the labour market. The skills tests take approximately four hours, are performed on computers and are proctored by a trained test administrator, for example, from the Occupational Psychological Service at labour agencies and job

centres. The tests will be offered in German and the most important native languages of refugees and migrants: Arabic and Farsi, Russian, Turkish and English. This way, skills are identified right away, as soon as a positive long-term perspective for staying in Germany has been established. The job search can then begin earlier and language courses can already be attended parallel to working.

During the tests, the participants receive approximately 20 exercises for each of the 5-8 occupational fields of application for the chosen profession. The exercises follow a standardised model: the participants see videos and images of typical occupational situations and are then asked technical questions. They are supposed to, for instance, put the work steps in the right order, identify errors in the illustrated situations, or answer technical questions about the work equipment or occupational safety. The test results document how well they do in the respective field of the occupation so it becomes clear in which areas a participant possesses actual skills. The skills tests thereby help placement personnel at labour agencies/job centres design a more specific placement strategy. The test results indicate whether and, if applicable, in which occupational fields an early integration into the labour market can be aimed for, either directly or after further qualification. The skills tests do not replace formal occupational qualifications and are not suitable as proof of comprehensive vocational action competence in an occupation that requires a formal degree, either. As tests of occupational action knowledge, they do not supplant the assessment of practical skills. Based on the test results, however, participants can better understand for which typical occupational fields of application in Germany they possess the relevant skills and where they might need some upskilling.

The skills tests supplement self-assessments with an initial third-party assessment and thus make searching for a job and custom-fit placement in a qualification programme, trial position, internships or jobs easier. In fact, the test results provide potential employers with an initial assessment of the applicant's skills and information about potential fields of application at the company. While this is not proof of occupational qualification, based on the test results, the occupational skills can be reviewed in practice and, if necessary, expanded by means of targeted training. The skills tests will be developed for 30 professions. In selecting those 30 professions, we took both the previous experience of the target groups and the demand on the German labour market into account, among other factors. The first tests will be rolled out at the end of 2017 to all 160 public employment agencies in Germany equipped with an Occupational Psychological Service. The tests will be free of charge for the participants.

7. Final remarks

Instruments like the Competence Cards or the digital competence tests put the

learner at the core of a validation system and can help empower learners while simultaneously increasing the transparency of skills demands and supply on the labour market. They can even contribute toward reducing existing social and educational inequalities and help secure the increasing number of specialists required in our societies as a result of digitalisation and demographic changes. However, in order for them to realise this potential, we need to embed them in a comprehensive system of validation of non-formal and informal learning in which singular elements build on each other synergistically and are mutually recognised by institutions involved in education and training as well as by social partners. And here, the work has just begun.

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