



**AVE in a professional perspective:
Assessing voluntary experiences**

Report of experimentation in Austria



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1. Introduction and specific situation in Austria

The fourth step of the project “AVE in a professional perspective”, consisted in the development and trialling (“experimentation”) of the method and tool for assessing voluntary experiences. While a common framework over all countries was agreed on, each country had the opportunity to develop a separate tool to be able to take into account the national contexts. In this phase, each of the partners had to develop and trial the tool and method, on the basis of the general framework agreed upon in London in November 2004.

The AVE tool consists of:

- a portfolio for the volunteers: this contains skills and qualifications acquired and presents them in such a way that they are assessable for professional purposes ;
- a guide for the users: information on the AVE project as well as explaining the AVE-process (portfolio) and its aims (integration in the labour market).

Following agreements were made over all countries for this phase:

- the portfolio should be trialled among volunteers that a) have ample experience in volunteering and b) that are aiming to enter or re-enter the labour market and would like to include their voluntary experience in this process ;
- the portfolio should contain the following points of a common general framework: presentation of the organisation ; tasks carried out by the volunteer in the organisation; competences/skills acquired and developed; the level of experience (self-evaluation); summaries: curriculum vitae of voluntary experience and training courses taken as a volunteer; possible additional documents (such as the leaflet of the association ..).

This report contains: the presentation of the portfolio used until now in Austria, the reactions of users as well as of people from non-profit organisations and associations as well as labour-market organisations (“experimentation”) as well as reference to the general framework agreed upon during the meeting in London well as main conclusions and proposals.

The specificity of our project work in Austria is that a portfolio has already been developed in the framework other projects by “Verband Österreichischer Volksbildungswerke”. Within this LEONARDO-project “Assessing voluntary experience” of the existing tool is being reviewed and revised.

The added value of the project with respect to the existing tool is:

- a) to revise the tool according to the agreements made in the meeting in London
- b) to revise the tool according the interviews with portfolio-users and reactions (“experimentation”) of associations and organisations relevant to the labour market
- c) to bring the extensive experience with the tool into the AVE-project
- d) to compile a handbook for users who will be using the revised tool

Within this phase we have made examples of the Austrian tool available in English and we have interviewed users of this tool as to their aims, experiences and suggestions for improvement and have also collects associations’ and labour market relevant organisations’ views of this tool. On the basis of this we have compiled issues for discussion concerning the original tool and following this concrete suggestions for revision with respect to the AVE-project.

2. The Austrian portfolio of competencies - Overview

The existing „Portfolio of competencies for volunteers“ is an instrument which aims to assess and systematically document competencies gained within volunteering. The main method it uses is accompanied self-evaluation. That means that volunteers are supported by certified “portfolio-coaches” to develop their personal portfolio. This support is given according to the individual needs of the volunteer. The main function of the “portfolio coach” is to help the volunteer become aware of the informal learning processes he or she has gone through during his or her volunteering. However, the

actual evaluation of the competencies and their level is mostly done by the volunteers themselves.

The aim of compiling a portfolio is to be able to use the competencies that the volunteer has become aware of and that are documented for:

- Job applications within the labour market (e.g. with the “proof of competence” – a short version of the portfolio which can be adjusted according to an individual job application)
- Planning an individuals’ further education and training
- Personal development,
- Looking for and developing new perspectives within volunteering
- Initiating development processes within voluntary organisations
- Raising awareness for volunteering and it’s opportunities for formal and informal learning among the business sector, but also among the public in general

3. The structure of the portfolio

The portfolio is a collection of documents containing:

- 1) The actual portfolio-format (5-7 pages)
- 2) Documents about the organisation (e.g. leaflet, articles, statutes)
- 3) Proof of training / further education activities
- 4) Proof of special activities carried out by volunteer (e.g. projects, events, articles)
- 5) Short version of actual portfolio – streamlined for job applications

The actual portfolio-format has following structure (see tool):

- (1) **Data** about person and about the voluntary activity: name, birth-date, area of volunteering, functions, duration of volunteering, amount of time spent a week/month for volunteering (1 page) (*no equivalent in London-minutes - could possibly be added for all?*)
- (2) **Table** with basic training and further education as well as professional and other activities that are or have been relevant to the individual’s volunteering – this table includes three columns: time in which activities took place, type of activities, competences that were used, acquired or developed within these activities. This table should not be more than one page (*corresponds to 5. Synthesis document: Curriculum vitae, training followed during voluntary experience*).

- (3) **Portrait of volunteering** (overview of association and activities): Description of the volunteer activities including description of organisation, motives, key experiences, people who have been models for the individual, specific successes or failures, main activities, additional activities, favourite tasks and less favoured tasks, expectations and hopes for the future, etc. The portrait of volunteering can be formulated quite freely but should not be more than one page long (*corresponds to 2. Missions fulfilled in the organisation and partly to 1. Presentation of organisation*).
- (4) **The profile of competences**: This is the main part of the portfolio with respect to usefulness for the labour market. The basic structural element is the scheme of basic competences (“Grundkompetenzen-Schema”) which is commonly used in German-speaking countries. This scheme includes (1) Skills in specific thematic areas (2) methodological skills (3) social and communication skills (4) personal skills. An important aspect of this scheme is that it is compatible with the division of competencies as found in the EUROPASS-Curriculum Vitae. The individual competences elicited during the portfolio-process (see below) are later summarized in these categories. The main result of the portfolio process are the individual competences that are described in 2 to 5 lines. The short descriptions also include where and when the competences were used, acquired or developed. The questionnaires and tables used to elicit these competencies also encompass the level of the skills the individual has acquired. However, to date this is not included in a formalized fashion, but within the verbal description. The profile of competences currently is app. 1-2 pages long. (*corresponds to 3. Competencies acquired and developed and partly to 4. level of experience – but not in a formalized fashion*)
- (5) The action plan: This is a table with three columns which includes planned actions, how to go about these strategically and when. Usually there are at two to five activities planned and the table is approximately a half a page long (*no equivalent in London-minutes*).
- (6) The portfolio user (volunteer) and the portfolio coach both sign the portfolio stating that they both agree with the contents (*roughly corresponds to 6. possible letter from organisation saying they have read the folder and agree with it – signed or stamped*)

There is also a specific short version of the portfolio, which is specifically for job applications and which is called “**proof of competencies for job applications**”. This can be prepared after the portfolio-format has been completed. It is usually prepared jointly by the portfolio user and the portfolio coach. It can be streamlined to fit specific vacancies, is usually to pages long and contains the following information:

- (1) Data on the individual, on the area of volunteering, and on the duration of the volunteer activities (1/2 page)

- (2) Short portrait of the volunteering activity and the organisation in 3 to 5 sentences. This is taken from complete portfolio-formats' portrait of activities and is adapted to the specific job profile that the volunteer would like to apply for (1/2 page)
- (3) Profile of competence: those competences and their descriptions are taken from the complete portfolio-format, that fit to the specific job profile at hand
- (4) Signature of the portfolio-user and the portfolio- coach.

Problems, open questions:

- A fourth column „certificates, documents and proof“ should be added to the table with basic training and further education as well as professional and other activities. The documents named should be collected in the overall portfolio-folder.
- Systematic information on the organisation in its own right has been missing until now. There should be a separated category in the framework of the portrait of competences called “Information on the organisation”. This should include at least aims, main activities and structure of the organisations (*this would correspond to 1. Presentation of organisation*).

4. The instruments used to create a portfolio (see tool)

All instruments can be accessed through an Intranet-platform by the portfolio coaches. They can download them either as a PDF or a WORD-file. Portfolio coaches can use the Word-files as a basis and adapt the instruments to suit their own needs or the needs and language of specific target groups.

The **instruments** for the **portfolio-coaches** are:

- (1) **Interview schedule:** The schedule includes six thematic areas: „My paths to volunteering“, „Key events and experiences“, „Activities and tasks“, „Meaning of volunteering“, „Questions about the filled in questionnaires“ (see below), „My future in volunteering and in professional life“.
- (2) **Open questionnaire: „Personal strengths“:** The volunteers have the opportunity to fill in five personal strengths that are especially relevant to their voluntary activity. They then rank the strengths according to their meaning for them from 1 to 5. In addition to this they state how much this strength has changed in the past 3 to 5 years from 0 (no change) to 5 (strong change). It is also possible to infer the level of the respective competency using this questionnaire.

- (3) **Open questionnaire „Strengths of the organisation“:** The volunteers also have the opportunity to fill in 5 strengths of their association. They then ranked the strengths according to their relevance and also state how much this has changed in the past.
- (4) **Questionnaire „Soft skills“** Volunteers evaluate their level of competence concerning 16 „soft skills“ that are listed in the questionnaire. They can give themselves points on a scale from 1 (not very skilled) to 5 (very skilled). These skills are: team work, ability to communicate, organisational skills, flexibility, mobility, emotional intelligence, motivation, ability to assert oneself, creativity, analytical and logical thinking, willingness to learn, willingness to reflect, ability to solve conflicts, conceptual abilities, stress resistance, ability to deal with criticism (*Corresponds to 4. Level of experience*).
- (5) **Lists of competences:** (more explanation) Portfolio- coaches receive a list of definitions and explanations concerning the scheme of basic competencies as well as lists of descriptions and examples for key competences.
- (6) **Background material for portfolio coaches:** Short articles of about 1-2 pages on e.g. „Volunteering in Austria“, „Volunteering in Europe“, „Informal learning“, „Developing competences within volunteering“, „Volunteering and paid work“ as well as a list of publications links etc.

Instruments / tools for the portfolio users (volunteers) are::

- (1) **Portfolio-format:** The portfolio- format has 5 to 7 pages and is designed in such a way that each part can be filled-in individually, but at the same time allowing a formalized and structured appearance.
- (2) **Proof of competencies for job applications:** This format has two pages and can also be sent to the portfolio user by the portfolio coach as a PDF-file per email.
- (3) **Guidelines how to complete the portfolio:** This is a framework for the completion of the portfolio, that the portfolio-coach completes for the respective portfolio-user based on the portfolio-interview and the pre-evaluation. This is always adapted to the language of the portfolio-user. These guidelines are sent to the portfolio-user by the portfolio-coach together with the pre-evaluation. In many cases some of the guidelines are communicated in written form and some of the guidelines in telephone conversations. This means that every portfolio-user receives their individual set of guidelines that are tailored to their own specific situation.
- (4) **Lists of competences:** The volunteers are shown different types of lists of competences, that they can see that there is not one binding competence scheme that they have to use. They are encouraged to use the competence vocabulary openly and according to their needs and specific situation.

- (5) **Examples of portfolios:** To help volunteers understand the portfolio process and outcome they are offered examples of portfolios of people volunteering in similar areas. Of course, these examples are anonymous.
- (6) **Further background material:** According to the needs and wishes of the volunteers, the coaches' background material can also be accessed by the volunteers.

Problems, open questions:

- From the AVE-project it has become clear that this tool does not have enough information on the volunteers' organisation. This whole area "Information on the organisation" including aims, main activities, structure of the organisation, etc. will be added to the interview schedule.
- At the moment the portfolio coaches complete the technical – layout version of the portfolio. It might be useful to enable the portfolio users to take on this task.

5. The portfolio process

Methodologically the portfolio-process used in Austria is an accompanied self-evaluation. It includes following steps:

- 1) **The interview on competences:** The interview/ conversation with the portfolio-coach takes approximately 1,5 to 2,5 hours. It is at the core of the portfolio-process. It's main purpose is help the volunteer become aware of the competences that he or she has acquired informally while volunteering.

The portfolio-coaches use the above mentioned interview-schedule, questionnaires and checklists (also see tools) and take notes during the interview. The point of departure of the portfolio-process are not the competences but the experiences, skills and characteristics of the volunteers. The portfolio-coaches do not introduce the language of competences themselves. The reason for this is that this terminology is not used in the everyday lives of the volunteers and it might distract them from the actual contents of the portfolio interview. Most volunteers find this interview very interesting and feel that they learn a lot from it (see below –evaluation). Most volunteers say that they have not asked themselves these questions before and have never before spoken about their volunteer activities in such detail.

- 2) **The pre-evaluation:** Soon after the interview, the portfolio- coach compiles a pre-evaluation using the results of the questionnaires and his or her notes. The results of the pre-evaluation are written down as key word in the portfolio-

format. The portfolio-coach writes down quotes and important issues in the form of half sentences for the **portrait of activities**.

The results of the questionnaires “personal strengths” and personal skills and characteristics are taken as a basis for the **competence profile**. These single competences are then categorised within the scheme of basic competences (mentioned above). The individual competences are described by the portfolio-coach using the „material“ collected in the interview.

The relevance and level of the individual competences and skills is inferred from the open questionnaire „personal strengths“ and the questionnaire „personal skills and characteristics“. (sh. Instruments and compilation of tools). The level of competence becomes visible in the portfolio-format in two ways: a) through the order in which they are stated within a basic competence category and b) through the way they are formulated e.g. „this skill was developed“, „was developed substantially“ etc.

3) **Finishing the portfolio**: The pre-evaluation (suggestion) is sent to the portfolio-user by email or mail by the portfolio coach. Guidelines how to finish the portfolio and additional material (see above) is included. In the cover letter and/or in personal telephone conversations the portfolio coach makes very clear to the volunteer that the version the volunteer is receiving is only a suggestion and that it is very important that the final version of the portfolio should be substantially created by the volunteer. Experience has shown until now that the portfolio interview (conversation) at the beginning of the process contributes to building trust between the partners involved in the portfolio process. This has a positiv effect on later communication by telephone and email.

Problems, open questions:

- One of the main questions and problem we are dealing with is what the ideal relation between the time spent for the portfolio by the portfolio-coaches are in comparison to the time spent by the portfolio-users. Our interviews with portfolio-users within the AVE-project (see below) shows that the average time portfolio-coaches need for one portfolio is 5 to 7 hours and the average time that volunteers use is 3 to 6 hours. Although we have already succeeded in reducing the amount of time portfolio coaches need by providing the pre-evaluation in key words and through providing more material for portfolio-users, so they can also work on their portfolios on their own, the time portfolio-coaches need is still quite high. We hope to find further solutions to this problem in the framework of the AVE-project.
- We have noticed that sometimes there is too much focus on the trendy area of “key qualifications”, sometimes leading to the fact that too little attention is paid to the actual thematic competences in the specific areas of volunteering. Our experience

until now shows that volunteers lack the awareness of being experts in specific areas. This issues should also be explored in order to improve the portfolio to place a greater stress on theses specific experiences.

- One problem is how directive the portfolio coach should be in the portfolio process. The idea is that the portfolio coach accompanies the portfolio user in his or her self-evaluation. However, portfolio coaches repeatedly find themselves in the position of offering advice to the portfolio user. This is especially pertinent when it comes to the “proof of competences” for the specific job applications.

Providing a „proof of competences“ for specific job applications

After the portfolios are completed, it is possible for portfolio users to compile one or more “proofs of competencies” together with the portfolio coaches. This can be done up to year after the completion of the portfolio. This proof of competencies is a short version of the portfolio which can be streamlined for specific job applications (see above.). Usually the portfolio user sends the portfolio coach the job The two of them then discuss over the phone how to adapt the portfolio in order to fit the job announcement. Usually the portfolio user then writes the proof of competences on his or her own or the coach provides a draft, that the volunteer can then complete. Within this process – also with respect to the fact that proof of competences are sometimes provided months after the completion of the portfolio - it becomes especially clear how important a trusting relationship is between the portfolio user and the portfolio coach.

The competence workshop

A workshop has also been developed in which the portfolios are compiled in small peer groups. It can be used by volunteers of different organisations as well as by volunteers of the same organisation. The aim of these workshops is to get to know the portfolio method and to be able to compile one’s own portfolio with the help of a portfolio – coach if needed. The workshops usually last a day and consist of three modules of 2.5 hours. The modules encompass “stories, experiences”, “volunteer activities” and “competencies”. The results of the group work are documented on cards and then posted on pinboards. Using these cards the portfolio coaches (at the same time “workshop leaders”) make suggestions for the individuals’ portfolios. After the workshop they send the volunteers the suggestions and can be contacted by telephone and email if the volunteers need assistance completing their portfolios.

6. The portfolio coaches

A training programme was developed and trialled for portfolio coaches. Trainers are certified portfolio-coaches that have been chosen by the management of the training.

Following **prerequisites** are necessary to participate in the training for portfolio-coaches:

- Professional or voluntary function in the „Ring Österreichischer Bildungswerke“ (these are a variety of organisations in the areas of adult education).
- At least three years of experience (as a volunteers or paid) in adult education
- At least three years of experience as a volunteer or as a volunteer coordinator.

Structure of training:

- 3 1,5 day workshops
- Compiling one's own portfolio
- Coaching at least five people to compile a portfolio on a trial basis

The workshops contain theoretical introductions (1/3) and practical parts (2/3). The theoretical parts contain for example information about volunteering in Austria, developing competences through volunteering, trends on the labour market. The practical parts contain: communication techniques, role play and analysis of the portfolio coaching process, analysing portfolios together.

Problems, open questions:

The level of **qualification** of the coaches is quite varied although all of them have experience in adult education and as volunteers. It might be good to choose the participants more carefully and possibly to introduce an instrument for this choice (e.g. interviews with trainers).

Opening the training: Also, it might be helpful to give the opportunity to individuals or members of other voluntary organisations and associations to participate in the training. .

7. Interviews (“experimentation”) with volunteers

In the course of 2 years approximately 50 portfolios were trialled (experimented) with volunteers of different organisations. In the framework of the AVE-project 9 of these volunteers were interviewed using interview-schedule designed by the authors of this report (see annex). While given the aims of the Ave-project mostly those were interviewed who went through the portfolio process with the aim of finding a paid job,

we also talked to a couple of people for whom this was not in the middle of attention. This was done in order to be able to find out which other aims can be connected to compiling a portfolio, in order to put things in a broader context. Volunteers were interviewed by telephone. The interviews lasted on average a half an hour to 45 minutes.

How were you contacted?

Five of the volunteers interviewed were personally by portfolio coaches and asked whether they were willing to trial the instrument. One interview partner found out about the offer through a leaflet of the Lower Austrian organisation for village and city development. Two volunteers got the idea to participate in the portfolio-process through a workshop that was offered on the subject.

All in all it became clear, that the target group until now was unspecific and mostly people with personal contacts to portfolio coaches were asked to trial the portfolio. This shows that it is important to target specific groups of volunteers (such as job seekers in the AVE-project) in the future and to develop streamlined methods to inform the respective target groups.

Time between first contract and portfolio-interview

Most interview partners report that the time between the first contact with the portfolio coach and the interview was fairly quick (e.g. 2-3 weeks). Nobody complained that there was too much time between these points of contact.

Expectations, aims of volunteers

Four of the interview partners had the specific aim of getting support in looking for a job or orientation on the labour market from the very beginning. Five volunteers did not know exactly what to expect from the portfolio-process and were willing to try it. Four people mentioned that they also expected to become aware of their volunteering – two of these mentioned wanting to know how they spend their time and all four wanted to reflect on what they have been doing.

Where did the portfolio-interview take place?

Three interview partners reported to have done the interview in the portfolio coaches office, two in their own home, one in his own office and three in public place (e.g. restaurant). Interestingly, everybody reported being very satisfied with the place and thinking that this was the ideal place for such an interview. Thus, it becomes clear that the portfolio-coaches are quite flexible in the choice of the venue of the interview and the volunteers have a say in deciding which place is convenient for them.

Satisfaction with the distribution of roles: portfolio-coach/portfolio-user

All nine of the interview partners were very satisfied with the way the portfolio-process progressed and with the tasks the portfolio-coach carried out. Everybody appreciated that the portfolio-coach took notes and that the volunteer received a draft of the

portfolio, that he or she could then revise. While some volunteers reported that they spent some time revising the portfolio, others said that they changed almost nothing.

In three cases the time that passed between the interview and the finished portfolio was seen as being too long. There is general agreement that the portfolio should be completed no more than a couple of weeks after the interview, so that the volunteer still remembers the process.

Time needed by portfolio-user

All interview partners were satisfied with the amount of time they invested in the portfolio-process. This was between 3 and 10 hours, on average around 4-5 hours. As mentioned above it seems that the portfolio-coach still spends at least as much or more time on the portfolio-process than the user.

Satisfaction with portfolio-coach

Interview partners spoke very positively of the portfolio-coaches. They mentioned that they were competent, especially in communication and interview techniques and they also mentioned that they felt comfortable with the portfolio-coaches. Also, several volunteers mentioned that it was important to be able to trust the portfolio-coaches with personal information, which seemed to be the case with all interview partners.

What did you learn through portfolio-process?

Interview partners report having learned a lot during the portfolio process. One portfolio-user reports that she learned to see things more positively and liked the focus on personal abilities. Another interview partner learned that even activities that she took for granted were volunteer activities and that she needed special skills to carry them out. Two interview partners report that they became aware of how much time they spent for volunteering and that they need to improve their personal time management. One portfolio-user stated that he was surprised how many competencies one gains through volunteering, this is something he never thought about before. Two people reported becoming more aware of which areas of work are interesting for them and that this had an effect on the choices they made with respect to job-seeking.

What have you gotten out of the portfolio?

These two aspects of usefulness for professional and vocational development and more awareness for the individuals volunteering were also focussed on when participants were asked what they have gotten out of it. Concerning the professional aspect. Four people reported using or planning to use the portfolio for job applications. Three people reported that the portfolio process helped them to clarify their future perspectives. One of these said that her “dream job” has become much clearer to her. Other than that it was mentioned that the portfolio-process provided motivation for the individual and helped to think about oneself and one’s future development. For one interview partner developing the portfolio had the effect that she is now training to become a portfolio-coach. One interview partner mentioned that he thought the action plan was very good, but not directly relevant to job applications.

Did you experience any problems?

Most interview partners did not experience any problems in the portfolio-process. Three users reported that the time span between the portfolio-interview (“conversation”) and receiving the completed portfolio was too long. One person reported that it was quite hard for her to say how many hours she takes for her volunteer activities.

Satisfaction with the product?

All the interview partner were satisfied with the portfolio as a product. They all found the layout adequate. In one case from Styria, it was mentioned that the Logo of the Styrian organisation is too big.

Proof of competencies

Those who used the short version of the portfolio („proof of competencies“) for job applications were satisfied with it. They like the idea that the proof of competencies can be adapted to the job application at hand. One interview partner received positive feedback from her potential employer that she had included the proof of competencies in her job application.

Did you show anyone the portfolio or talk to anyone about it?

When asked whether they showed their portfolio to others, four portfolio-users said that they showed it to their family or partner. One interview partner mentioned that her husband could not place the portfolio and could not imagine what its use was. One person mentioned that she showed it to some of her friends. They had not known about this type of thing and were quite interested. Two interview partners have tried to encourage other people to participate in the portfolio-process. One of them said that he mentions it in meetings that volunteers from different organisations take place in. Until now there has not been too much interest, since there are mostly older people in the rural area that he lives in and the aspect of professional orientation and job seeking is mostly not relevant to them.

Would you do it again?

The five interview partners who were explicitly asked said they would go through the portfolio process again.

Would you recommend it to others and if yes, to whom?

All interview partners would recommend developing a portfolio to other people. Seven explicitly say that they would especially recommend it to people who are looking for a job or who need help in vocational orientation. Six people also mention that taking part in the portfolio-process is good for volunteers who want to know what they are achieving, for strengthening volunteers self-confidence, but also for making the public aware of what volunteers contribute to society. One interview partner would recommend it for “women who carry out tasks that are usually not valued”. Another one mentions that it is appropriate for those who have a large amount of voluntary experience, not for those who just do very little volunteering.

Would you pay for it and if yes, how much?

Some interview partners were also asked if they would pay for having a portfolio developed. Five said that they said that that they would have paid in principal. Three named very small sums between 10 and 30 Euro. Two said one could expect people to pay up to 100 Euro.

Suggestion for change?

Interview partners were asked what they would improve in the portfolio and its development. They were also explicitly asked whether they could imagine that the process can be done through the internet and whether they think it could be done within organisations.

Concerning adapting the instrument to the internet, nine people mentioned that internet alone would not be enough. They all found the personal conversation to be very important for the portfolio-process, three of these thought that some parts of the process could possibly be done by internet. Most interviewed portfolio-users said that the personal conversation and the trust built up through it were the core of the portfolio process.

Two people thought that the process could also be done within organisations. However, the portfolio user has to be taken serious and the portfolio-coaches need training. One person thought that it is not good if it is done in one's own organisation because people know each other too well and an aspect of personal distance is also useful in the portfolio process. Another interview partner thought that associations may not be competent enough to initiate and carry out this process by themselves. One portfolio user mentioned that she thought it might work in other, larger organisations, but not in her small tennis club.

Other suggestions for improvement were to ask users to prepare their documents beforehand or to make sure the time between the interview and the completion of the final product is not too long. One interview partner said that the area of leadership was missing in the scheme of competences and that this should definitely be added. Three people suggested to make the portfolio more known and to improve public relations. One of these also was of the opinion that the portfolio should be given an official meaning e.g. by a signature of a provincial or national politician or by the official EU-logo. Two people suggested it would be interesting to talk to portfolio-users in a few years time to find out how things developed for them and which effect the portfolio-process had on their mid-to long-term personal development. One interview partner suggested to work more closely with companies to implement the portfolio further.

8. Experimentation with businesses and labour market service

Exchange with businesses: Cooperation and exchange with businesses took place throughout the development of the instrument and also now in the experimentation phase:

- Positive aspects of the portfolio that were seen by businesses that were interviewed in Lower Austria were the „more realistic self-evaluation of volunteers“ and a „better presentation of volunteers’ activities“. In this connection, they mentioned their experience that job applicants normally either do not mention their volunteering at all or put too much emphasis on it in an unproductive way.
- Businesses in Lower Austria participated in an early phase of developing the portfolio: The presentation of the profile of competencies in the portfolio as well as the short versions of the competencies are mostly the results of the businesses recommendations. They said that nowadays the terms „soft skills“ and “key competencies“ are used far too much and that everybody has different ideas what these are. The short descriptions of competencies are very precise and solve this problem.
- The businesses we have contacted mentioned that they were more interested in realistic and detailed descriptions of competencies that gave them a realistic idea of the skills of the individual than in a less detailed official certificate.
- A staff member of the company IBM had participated in a competence workshop which was organized by the Verband Österreichischer Volksbildungswerke. This resulted in a longer cooperation with IBM’s new department “Community on demand”, which promotes and supports IBM staff to volunteer. In this framework several portfolios were developed with IBM-staff that are active volunteers. These portfolios will be analysed together with the “Community on demand” department and the human resources department.
- Despite many positive interactions with businesses, we encounter doubts by businesses and the chamber of commerce. They seem to fear that using the proofs of competence within job applications could become compulsory.

Exchange with the Austrian Labour Market Service and several Sub-divisions in the Austria provinces (AMS) has elicited the following issues:

- In principal the Austrian Labour Market Service has a positive attitude towards introducing the competence-portfolio in Austria. They have offered to allow for advertising the instrument on their homepage, in their publications and within their events.
- The use of portfolio methods and valuing competences acquired informally is a new area for the Labour Market Service.
- The Labour Market Service has stated explicitly that it is not and cannot be their responsibility to promote volunteering.

- If the Labour Market Service would take any role in financial support for the portfolio process it would have to focus more on supporting groups of people who are disadvantaged with respect to the labour market.

9. Experimentation with organisations

Close contacts with several voluntary associations existed during the development of the portfolio as well as now in the experimentation phase. Involved organisations were e.g. „Volunteer Service Lower Austria“, „Volkshilfe“, „Caritas“ and the “Red Cross”.

All those organisations asked thought the portfolio is a good idea but that the costs of the portfolio the way it is at the moment as an external service are too high. While it is easier to find public subsidies for this type of activity in some provinces, in others it is very difficult.

Some organisations have already thought about developing their own instruments or waiting for the official proof of competence which is being developed by the Austrian Social Ministry.

It also became clear that the issues of informal learning, the vocabulary of competences, portfolio techniques as well as linking volunteering with the labour market are fairly new for these organisations and will only slowly gain acceptance.

Some organisations are thinking about using instruments, that are also relevant for their paid staff as well as for their volunteers.

All in all one can say most organisations are interested in participating in developing the assessment of voluntary experience further in Austria.

10. Summary of issues relevant in the AVE-framework

From the description of the Austrian portfolio and the reactions from volunteers, businesses, labour market service as well as other voluntary associations it becomes clear that the portfolio developed and used here is a very useful tool to help volunteers and organisations gain awareness for competences gained while volunteering and to use these in the framework of job applications. Also, one can see that the tool contains many aspects relevant to the AVE-framework and that it is also a useful reference for other less developed and trialled tools.

However, the results of the experimentation phase show, that a) there are still some weak points of the tool and b) some changes need to be made to accommodate the agreed framework of the AVE-project:

- 1) **Aims of portfolio:** While one of the aims of the Austrian portfolio development was always to promote job applications and labour market participation, other

aims are also being followed, such as personal development, looking for and developing new perspectives within volunteering or raising awareness for volunteering and its opportunities. Within the framework of the AVE projects, those aspects of the portfolio-tool need to be strengthened that concern orientation with respect to the labour market and job applications. Especially the “proof of competencies” – a short version of the portfolio that can easily be included in job applications should be considered in the further development of the AVE-project. This tool was seen as very useful for those looking for jobs.

However, the other benefits of developing a portfolio, especially the aspect of awareness raising for the individual with respect to skills and strengths, improving one’s self-confidence, but also gaining a more realistic perspective of one’s own volunteering should be taken into account within the AVE-project.

- 2) **Target groups:** This issue is very closely connected with the people targeted to trial the portfolio-process. While it was useful in the first phase of developing the tool to trial it with volunteers of all ages, both genders and a variety of life situations, in further steps it will be important to define specific target groups – in this case job seekers – and cater to their needs. In this connection it will be important to explore whether certain adaptations need to be made for sub-groups of job seekers who volunteer, such as youth, women re-entering the labour market or the long-term unemployed.
- 3) **Public relations, making the tool known:** Another issue which is related to the question of aims of the instrument and target groups is how to make the instrument known and how to encourage individuals, organisations and businesses to use it. While folders and invitations have been revised continuously, it is very hard to access those interested in the portfolio-process. One reason seems to be that the area of informal learning, competence-vocabulary in general and the link between volunteering and the labour market is still quite unknown in Austria and is still regarded sceptically by many actors. The whole question of dissemination and targeting users, that can benefit by the tool should remain in focus throughout the AVE-project and should be a matter of exchange between the project partners.
- 4) **High costs – personal coaching:** A specificity of the Austrian portfolio is the important role of the portfolio coach. The role of the portfolio coach and his or her tasks were seen very positively by the volunteers who were interviewed. The personal contact and conversation are seen as a core aspect of the portfolio process. However, this high level of coaching is also connected with high personnel costs. This poses a big problem, especially from the point of view of voluntary organisations who are to adopt the tool. Also, the extent to which the portfolio coach “interferes” with the portfolio-process needs some rethinking, since it seems that sometimes they take on a role which is too directive.

5) **Description of organisation**

While documents about the organisation in which the volunteer is active are included in the whole collection of documents in the framework of the Austrian portfolio, the description of the organisation is contained in a quite unsystematic way in the actual portfolio-document. This is still missing with respect to the AVE-framework.

6) **Level of competence**

The level of competence is included in the Austrian portfolio through the checklists (see no. 2,3,4 on page 7) used and through appropriate formulations of the extent of skills and competencies. With respect to the feedback of the volunteers as well as businesses and organisations, this seems adequate to the Austrian situation, and no immediate necessity is seen to include a more formal assessment. However, this remains to be discussed by the AVE-consortium, whether some further development in this respect is needed.

7) **Scheme of competences**

The scheme of competences used in the Austrian portfolio (see page 5, no.4) seems to be accepted by all of those involved in the portfolio-process and can be said to be a useful categorization. Also, it is compatible with the categorisation of competences within the EUROPASS – Curriculum Vitae.

11. Revising the tool in the framework of the AVE-project

- 1) **Aims of portfolio:** The aims that pertain to relevance for the labour market will be stated more clearly on all documents and leaflets concerning the portfolio. On the other hand, the usefulness of the tool for other aims will be transported to the partners of the AVE-project and brought into future discussions in partner meetings.
- 2) **Target groups:** While job seekers as a group will be targeted more explicitly in the future, we will also explore whether adaptations need to be made to accommodate certain groups who are disadvantaged with respect to the labour market. The proof of competency as an instrument will be promoted especially as this is especially relevant for the labour market. In the next partner meeting of the AVE-consortium it should be discussed in how far a short version of a portfolio which can be added to job applications is relevant for other countries. Furthermore, we will be exploring further methods of formalising the portfolio results with respect to the labour market, such as adding an external assessment process or presenting the portfolio-results in front of a commission of experts.

- 3) **Public relations, making the tool known:** This aspect will be further developed in the further course of the AVE-project in cooperation with the international project partners.
- 4) **High costs – personal coaching:** Ways are being explored to simplify the process, while at the same time preserving the element of personal interaction that is very important and at the key of the Austrian portfolio method.
- 5) **Description of organisation:** The description of the organisation will be included in the actual portfolio-format in a systematic way such as suggested by the French partners and coordinator.
- 6) **Level of competence:** In accordance with the project partners, it will be decided whether changes are necessary in this respect.
- 7) **Scheme of competences:** The scheme used here is considered highly useful and will be kept up.
- 8) **Synthesis document:** A fourth column „certificates, documents and proof“ should be added to the table with basic training and further education (synthesis document) as well as professional and other activities. The documents named should be collected in the overall portfolio-folder

These are the aspects relevant in the framework of the AVE-project. Apart from that, there is the idea to develop the portfolio further as an “ePortfolio” with partners in Austria.