

International Expert Conference
New Approaches for Lifelong Learning in Vocational Education and Training
Certified IT Qualifications and Blended Learning

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Summary

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Dr. Gisela Dybowski

We have come to the end of a three-day workshop in which we discussed new paths towards sustainable initial and continuing education and training in the IT field.

The workshop focused on how innovation and rapid change in the IT field are changing work activities and requirements in industry and how new forms of learning and a new quality of certification of what is learned can keep up with these developments.

The symposium concentrated on focal themes regarding

- IT qualification
- Skills assessment and validation
- the importance of informal learning
- the development of qualification standards
- And approaches to blended learning.

These have been three days of highly interesting papers and an equally intensive discussion in which these topics were illuminated from various perspectives and from various cultural backgrounds.

At the same time the meeting turned out to be a learning process with a dynamics of its own and a process of learning from one another that initially must be practiced and communicated. For behind terms that seemed very clear at first, a multitude of different meanings emerged, as conversely different cultural approaches, practices and points of emphasis turned out to be not so wide apart once one disengaged oneself from one's own national structures and systems.

In my view, and in Jim's view as well, I believe, it is impossible to summarise those processes and present conclusions and outcomes from them. For we would never be able to reproduce the dynamics of that process of information and discussion at the experts' meeting, and I believe it would be awfully boring.

As a precaution we have therefore noted some aspects of and questions concerning the five focal themes of this meeting on the wall charts here. They will be made available to you at the end of the meeting and are intended to stimulate further cooperation.

I would like to inject some of these questions into the final discussion once again.

1. There is the first question about the need for standards and for a qualification and reference framework. How flexible would standards and such a framework have to be to stand up even in the medium term against the rapid changes in the IT field?
2. Then there is the question about the efficiency of the procedures and tools for determining the requirements of business, the definition of the competencies and learning outcomes required and their validation and certification. This discussion came to a point

in the question of how these processes are evaluated so as to optimise and innovate them.

3. The third central question is: How can one optimise learning processes and certification procedures? How far does that go beyond improved technology that makes more simulation possible and also permits self-regulation of learning? But can the requirements of the world of work really be reproduced through simulation or does that require learning in the process of work as well?
4. The fourth and last question is about the efficiency of certificates with regard to
 - increased mobility,
 - openness of the system to individual education careers/interchangeability,
 - portability and transferability of the skills acquired.

Dr. James F. McKenney

Finally, it should be noted that our private sector participants in the workshop brought some unique opportunities to the discussion. CompTIA is in the advanced stages of creating an entry level apprenticeship for the IT industry. This is one of several efforts funded by the US Department of Labor that is aimed at expanding the scope of occupations that can be accessed through the apprenticeship model. Presently, this model is being piloted in several US community colleges. This model holds promise and could provide a linkage to European dual system generated IT apprenticeship models through International IT companies operating on both sides of the Atlantic. In concert with their presentations on blended learning models, both DaimlerChrysler and Siemens brought advanced program models in net-based integrated training and blended learning with the intention of piloting their models in American plants through collaboration with US community colleges. Also, the conference generated intense conversations between IBM, CISCO Systems, Microsoft, CompTIA and the educational/training providers on the potential for creating even a limited system of benchmarked IT skills that might be of potential value for the gathered companies. In this case, participants left the conference convinced that there was enough agreement to continue a collaborative work effort when they returned to their respective countries.

Thus, the workshop raised interesting questions for continued exploration in the future, but it also generated potential company-based projects that could provide a foundation from which to examine some of the questions raised in the conference. Moreover, the active engagement of companies in the entire process raises the likelihood that some of our questions will be answered and directly applied to the advantage of educational providers, student/workers, and the productivity of the aforementioned companies.