

## Quality management and certification requirements for animal assisted education/therapy on Austrian farms

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**Abstract:** *Animal assisted work using farm animals is gaining popularity. The combination of social services with rural activities opens up new sources of income for farmers in future. All establishments need to meet quality requirements if a reputable service is to be provided. The Austrian Council for Agricultural Engineering and Rural Development (ÖKL) has devised a system for the certification of establishments offering animal assisted work in accordance with specific quality guidelines. Farmers and their team partners from socio-educational or therapeutic fields need to have successfully completed the recommended ÖKL-LFI course (animal assisted therapy and education on farms) or a recognised equivalent, in order to permit further certification. Farmyard safety is a primary concern in order to minimise risks involved, especially when handling farm animals. Establishments are inspected to optimise keeping conditions and education/therapy animals are professionally examined to verify their suitability: vets attest appropriate health care conditions and specific assessments ensure that animals are responsibly prepared and adequately trained. Examination rules consider the needs of different client groups. The agricultural chamber and related federal ministries governing all nine provinces, the social insurance institute (SVB) and continued educational body for farmers (LFI) partake in the certification process as co-operating partners. Once certified, farms can apply for funding, provided they adhere to the national guideline for quality management and funding as devised by the ÖKL together with the Ministry of agriculture. Certified establishments receive a seal of approval from authorised institutions to confirm that service is qualitative and professional.*

**Keywords:** *ÖKL, animal assisted therapy and education on farms, examination rules for farm animals, quality management, certification*

### Introduction

At present approximately 30 rural establishments are offering animal assisted therapy and education on farms in Austria. We use the phrase animal assisted therapy and education (AAT/AAE), because we want to guarantee that only qualified persons (therapists, pedagogues, people who care for handicapped persons as well as social workers) offer AAT/AAE. The term “therapy” is protected by law in Austria. Therefore, if unqualified people offered animal assisted therapy without qualification they came into conflict with the Austrian law. That is the reason why we use the terminology AAT/AAE.

Around 500 clients are benefiting annually from this range of services. We assume that in following years the demand for such animal assisted work - with farm animals specifically - is increasing. Practical experience shows that evermore establishments and private persons are offering services without appropriate quality management or professional qualification. In some cases professionals from socio-educational or therapeutic fields are lacking additional training and appropriate know-how on the keeping of farm animals and handling of therapy animals. In other instances farmers are largely unsure about working with specific client groups or how to prepare their animals for specific therapeutic requirements.

The Austrian Council for Agricultural Engineering and Rural Development has established profound subject-specific criteria to prevent dubious practice within the field AAT/AAE on farms. This accommodates the request of social establishments and private clients for safety and professiona-

lism. Furthermore, certification requirements can safeguard the health and well-being of farm animals kept and trained in a species-appropriate manner.

The growing interest in animal assisted work opens up additional sources of income particularly for farmers who in turn contribute towards preventative and therapeutic measures valuable in managing diverse symptoms and disorders.

## **Main facts**

Certification includes three key aspects, elaborated as follows:

### **Qualification**

The following rudimentary qualifications must be combined in order to meet the requirements of diverse client groups (ranging from people with special needs, children with behavioural problems to senior citizens): Educational, therapeutic and medical fields are counterparts to rural qualifications and all of them must be linked in order to fulfil their common purpose.

Hence a „team concept“ derived especially for qualification purposes. It envisages the combined education and complimentary working together of farmers and persons with socio-educational or therapeutic backgrounds. Team partners attend the training course for „ AAT/AAE on farms“ together and should upon successful completion be adequately equipped to purposefully employ farm animals in assisting particular client groups. Normally two people form such a team, unless a single person holds both basic qualifications and therefore is entitled to complete the course without an additional partner. Practical implementation takes place on the rural team partner´s farm.

Aside from basic qualification requirements upon entering the course, certain personal prerequisites are highly significant: farmers should relate to socio-educational and therapeutic work by accepting various special needs and other target groups on their farm.

It is especially important that interested parties from social, therapeutic or medical fields should be open-minded in learning about farm life with all its requirements and certainly be interested in farm animals.

The course gives participants knowledge and practical skills with regard to following topics:

- Basic information on various client groups
- Farm animal behaviour
- Appropriate farm animal care (keeping, feeding, health maintenance)
- Selection and training of farm animals (via positive reinforcement and competent use of animals)
- Industrial and legal requirements
- Planning and practical application of animal assisted work with target client groups
- Marketing and Promotional Work
- Cost Calculation and Invoicing
- Safety measures
- Stable Construction for animal assisted work

2008 – 2010 the first „Animal Assisted Therapy and Education on Farms“ (German title: LFI-Zertifikatslehrgang für Tiergestützte Therapie und Pädagogik am Bauernhof) course comprising 240 teaching units was successfully implemented in the Austrian province of Styria. Due to great demand another two courses are due to begin in autumn 2010 and will run parallel in Styria and Salzburg to offer training nation-wide. Backed by the European Union, the Austrian agricultural chamber and its federal provincial ministries, courses are run and organised by the continued educational body for farmers (LFI) and the Austrian council for Agricultural Engineering and Rural Development (ÖKL) in co-operation.

Current negotiation procedures with other institutions offering comparable courses in animal assisted therapy have the aim of acknowledging courses aside from the one offered by the ÖKL as valid qualifications.

### **Animal management and examination rules for farm animals**

#### *Inspection of species-appropriate keeping:*

Standards provided by the animal protection act, its amendments and regulations most certainly need to be adhered to.

In instances where council regulations (EG) No. 834/2007 as per 28th June 2007 and commission regulations (EG) No. 889/2008 as per 5th September 2008 pay higher regard to the natural needs of animals than the Austrian animal welfare act, regulations in accordance with the bio act come into effect. Declaration as an organic farm is not necessary.

The primary indicators for species-appropriate keeping include: contact to fellow species (keeping of herds or similar groups), sufficient movement allowed for via ample stable space and animal runs, regular grazing opportunities, displays of comfort behaviour and positive engagement.

The following are seen as fundamental requirements for animal wellbeing: a constant source of fresh water, the ability to consume food and water irrespective of herd size or ranking, the availability of a comfortable resting place, a healthy stable atmosphere, ample daylight and slip-proof flooring.

There are particular aspects in which requirements exceed the Austrian animal welfare act and the regulations mentioned above. An example of this is the prohibition of confining an animal using tethering.

The Austrian agricultural chamber sends out an expert on stable construction for the obligatory inspection of keeping conditions for all farmyard animals.

Even if only selected animals are to be used in animal assisted work, the farm's entire animal population is to be kept in a species-appropriate manner.

Farmyard pets such as dogs and cats on the property also need to be kept appropriately. Dogs that are not directly used in animal assisted work nevertheless need to be well behaved and in no way may scare or threaten clients and their helpers.

The ÖKL can transfer the examining of dogs, cats or other domestic pets to selected specialists in the field if their suitability as therapy animals needs to be reviewed.

#### *Requirements for animal health:*

A crucial requirement for the successful and satisfactory implementation of animal assisted tasks is the health and vitality of therapy animals, guaranteeing their wellbeing. Hence only healthy animals can be employed.

Herds and individual animals need to be observed on a daily basis with regard to their general behaviour and their appetite. Observation is an important means of recognising health problems on time. Additionally, the eye is being trained to pick up on the behavioural expressions used by animals that later on can become helpful in recognising potentially dangerous situations before they become critical.

Under appropriate instruction, observational exercises with specific animals or the herd as a whole can be incorporated and prove to be a useful tool with various client groups.

Animals used for therapeutic purposes, need to be promptly checked and if necessary treated by a vet as soon as ailment is suspected, otherwise routine health checks are recommended twice a year. The outcome of medical examinations and treatments received should be documented. This is useful in the future assessment of each therapy animal.

### *Examination of farm animals – selection and training:*

The careful selection of farm animals in accordance with suitable character traits and specific capabilities is a significant criterion for therapeutic success.

In contrast to conventional agricultural production, which aims for maximum output (meat mass, milk yield, etc.), the main selection focus for animal assisted service is the animals' distinctive willingness to cooperate with its human partner and its display of characteristics such as being good-natured and approachable.

On safety grounds, it is of utmost importance that therapy animals display a calm and even-tempered nature when in close contact with clients. Aggressive or particularly nervous animals are not suitable for AAT/AAE purposes.

Previous experience has shown that, the competent selection and socialisation of individual animals rather than their breed-specific characteristics are decisive for therapeutic success.

Socialisation processes aim at the familiarisation and bonding of young animals with their prospective life-time social partner. With their distinctive willingness to intensively cooperate with clients and guardians alike, bonding with fellow species and human beings is equally sought.

Early social contact with various people in an affectionate and intensive manner enables farm animals to enter into a close and trusting relationship with people despite naturally possessing pronounced flight behaviour.

Ideally, socialisation requires us to be able to read the varying signals that farm animals use to express their current state or intention. Dogs, for example, have different expressions and in part use different body language to farm animals; a goat signals readiness to fight when it lowers its head, whereas the same gesture can be an invitation to play when used by a dog.

By now eight years of training experience with farm animals has shown that specific approaches are required.

When working with sheep, best results are achieved if their naturally strong group bonding (“home range”) is extended upon with the ability to separate single animals from the flock in a stress-free manner. As early as possible – preferably within the first few days of life, lambs should become accustomed to being separated from the others for a certain while. Separation should occur gradually and with caution so that the young animal can experience its short aloneness as being pleasant.

Larger animals such as cattle should for e.g. learn to walk on a lead rope within the first few weeks of life when their body weight is still easier to handle.

In preparation for AAT/AAE settings, farm animals are given specifically complex tasks to master beyond their behaviourally inherent repertoire. Via competent training animals are appropriately encouraged to do justice to the diverse tasks at hand. The method of using positive reinforcement guarantees that animals are freely willing and glad to participate.

The ÖKL has devised practice related rules for the examination of farm animals to assess their level of or progress in training.

To set concrete tasks in an examination proves difficult when taking into account existing differences such as the numerous species, the various therapeutic goals and the diverse settings at hand.

Certain animal behaviour may well be suitable for one AAT/AAE situation or desirable for one client, could nevertheless prove to be counter-productive in another AAT/AAE situation or with another client.

A good example is given via the following two instances: “When working with extremely physically handicapped adults, we need a horse to remain rooted to the spot for extended periods of time alongside the mounting staircase. It would be a catastrophe if the disabled person is trying to mount a horse which becomes impatient and walks away. When working with children displaying

behavioural problems, the same situation is viewed differently. Here the horse, which does not wait at the staircase for ages whilst children are arguing about who should get on the horse first, has a valuable lesson to teach. The kids complain about why the horse moved away and are told that it is because they could not reach consensus.” (Michaela Stegner, Austrian Board for Therapeutic Horse Riding).

It clearly makes no sense to restrict animal behaviour or to stipulate animal reaction in specific situations. In practice farm animals are required to appropriately react in accordance with the client group or the therapeutic or socio-educational goals envisaged.

Examination rules developed by the ÖKL consider the various contexts and are accordingly flexible and broadly conceptualised. Examiners check if those responsible have adequately prepared their therapy animals and at the same time take into consideration the specific demands of varying animal assisted applications.

Examinations relate to the following species: cattle, pigs, goats, sheep, horses, donkeys, poultry, lamas and alpacas.

Examinees have the option of allocating their therapy animal candidates to the following three categories depending on the level of intensity reached in each human-animal contact.

- Farm animals used for intensive client contact: In this intensive category, animals allow close body contact with humans, they have had many learning opportunities and trained behaviour can be reliably called upon. Therapy animals must meet high demands and require substantially skilled and consequent training.
- Farm animals used for extensive client contact: From an educational or therapeutic point of view, it is not always rewarding if animals tolerate the rough behaviour of clients. For children with behavioural problems it can be very beneficial if the animal withdraws itself when the manner of approach is inappropriate. Clients learn that close contact and the animal’s attention can only be experienced if their behaviour is adequately considerate, friendly, calm and co-operative.

The fact that specifically shy or reserved animals achieve valuable therapeutic effects with some clients, suggests that especially such animals should be used for therapeutic or educational purposes. In view of animal protection, it is of utmost importance in this category to heed that the animal does not get into a panic or feel permanently threatened by human presence.

- Farm animals used for observation: These farm animals are used only for observation purposes – direct contact with humans does not take place.

The observation of farm animals can fulfil multiple purposes in AAT/AAE: the social behaviour of animals can be viewed in relation to the social behaviour of clients; body language used by animals can be observed and used to develop more constructive communication patterns for clients.

It is therefore not necessary to specifically select these animals. They do not need to be socialised, nor habituated or trained for this type of animal assisted work. They merely need to be amicable among themselves.

Based on many years of experience and consequent insights gained in the training of farm animals, the ÖKL has chosen the following main aspects for examination purposes:

- Selection of animals: Animal keepers have to prove that the farm animals used are suitable in character and in good health. A check-list of selection criteria verifies that specific requirements are being met.
- Compatibility and social behaviour amongst fellow species: Based on therapeutic and educational considerations, criteria for social compatibility largely include a calm and peaceful conduct amongst each other, aspects that are equally important when regarding safety issues.

- **Behavioural Expressions:** Examination checks the extent to which animal keepers are familiar with the behavioural expressions of those farm animals they are intending to use in animal assisted work. In accordance with animal welfare and safety measures, it is necessary to correctly pick up on and interpret stress signals and other signals given by the animal.
- **Socialisation:** Examiners must perceive a trusting and solid bond between keeper and farm animal. Testing includes how the animal approaches its keeper as well as people in general and how it responds to being touched or approached. Examiners must ascertain whether or not sufficient socialisation exercises have been done with regard to animal assisted work intended.
- **Habituation:** Assessors have to be convinced that animals are accustomed to diverse environmental stimuli and can cope well with various situations. They need to feel assured that the animal has been amply exposed to exercises that habituate it for the work intended.
- **Desensitisation:** Desensitising the farm animal to being awkwardly touched or approached in a seemingly threatening manner by clients is of value for safety and animal welfare reasons. On the one hand the aim is to minimise situations in which people could potentially be injured as a result of the animal's natural instinct to „fight or flee“. On the other hand bad experiences could result in the animal losing interest in or being afraid of animal assisted activities in future.
- **Farm animal behaviour:** Testing checks if keepers are knowledgeable of the main functional areas of species-specific behaviour, which pertain to and can be correctly implemented in their animal assisted work.
- **Application:** This point takes into consideration the fact that farm animals are specifically selected to meet certain problems. Animals are very individually chosen and often display different reactions and abilities in accordance with the client and a given situation. For demonstration purposes, examiners or other persons slip into the client role and are called upon to display situations and activities most typically to occur with real clients. The handler points out which abilities and animal reactions are seen to be most valuable.
- **Training:** Before starting with a AAT/AAE programme, the farm animal needs to be given sufficient training and experience in what basic conduct is expected. Examiners place emphasis on handlers employing positive reinforcement rather than the use of pressure or punishment in their training methods. From a pool of around forty training lessons, previously learnt in the course for certification, candidates must choose a few lessons to demonstrate the capacity of their therapy animals. Tasks are divided into “basic and more advanced” categories, of which a certain amount of “basic lessons” are compulsory.

Detailed information on examination rules, important criteria and a description of the various tasks examined can be obtained from the ÖKL.

The examination and qualification of suitable farm animals is handled by the ÖKL or by their choice of representative experts.

### **Safety Measures**

Safety measures must be maximised as far as possible, especially in farmyard areas that are accessible to clients. These must most importantly include non-slip flooring and safeguard against tripping. Possible danger zones must be clearly demarcated and secured i.e. appropriate covering of pits and potholes and adequate insulation of electric cables.

The social insurance institute for farmers (SVB) can be called in to come and inspect an agricultural establishment. It offers suggestions as to where improvements must be made in order to obtain certification.

## Seal of approval

The three main areas mentioned above (qualification, animal management and examination rules for farm animals, safety measures) must be positively assessed to obtain certification. The establishment then receives a recognised seal of approval to prove that it is qualitatively a first-rate facility offering a professional service unlike other less reputable services.

If an establishment wants to qualify for funding, it has to be certified and must adhere to national guidelines for quality control and federal funding (Austrian programme for agricultural development 2007-2013, ÖKL in co-operation with the agricultural chamber).

## Conclusion

In promoting animal assisted work of quality, in setting high safety standards, in monitoring the correct handling of animals used as „co-therapists“, and last but not least, in encouraging professional working co-operations amongst interdisciplinary team partners, the ÖKL has developed nationally uniform standard for quality management in AAT/AAE on farms. For certification purposes substantial knowledge is needed from various professional areas, therefore it necessary to call upon experts in their field. Furthermore, certification processes form the foundation for future submission of an accredited professional image for AAT/AAE.

We have established criteria of certification for both team partners (farmer and qualified person as mentioned above) because it is important everybody involved knows how to act/react properly in every possible situation. The prevention of harm or injury of clients or animals can thus be controlled by these criteria of certification. As soon as these standards prove their worth in Austria, it is our aim to implement them in Europe.

The handbook ‘animal assisted therapy and education on farms’ is the result of the successful implementation of the pilot-project “animal assisted therapy and education on farms”, which was professionally accompanied and evaluated by the Austrian Council for agricultural engineering and rural development.

This highly qualified concept, described in the handbook, has been established for farmers, who accept this great and new challenge to train farm animals (for example goats, pigs and cows) as animals for therapy. The long pilot phase of the project showed that farm animals are suitable for animal assisted therapy and can be used for different groups of clients.

The handbook can be considered as an important guideline

- for the consultation offered by the Austrian Chamber of Agriculture
- for farmers, who have decided to do this responsible job and gain an extra source of income by offering this service
- for therapists and pedagogues, who offer this service in collaboration with the farmers

## References

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