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COMMENTARY

Continuing education: Time for guidance!

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Dear readers,

The last few years have been somewhat lean times for continuing education. Despite all exhortations and public statements on the great and ever-growing importance of continuing education, participant numbers stagnated. In some areas, especially further training for the unemployed, actually declined. In international comparisons, Germany attained only a lower mid-table ranking and finished up way behind the leading countries of Scandinavia. The explanation that continuing education and training needs are diminished as a consequence of dual-system initial vocational training cannot account for this entirely. Clearly the structural conditions in other countries set better incentives for formalised lifelong learning.

But more recently, there are tentative signs that the trend has taken a turn for the better. For two years, the numbers of entrants to continuing education measures financed by the Federal Employment Agency have begun to rise markedly. This has brought a new impetus to continuing education for the unemployed. In adult education centres, too, for the first time in three years participant numbers are beginning to take off once again. And given the rising employment figures and a distinct shortage of skilled workers in the economy, investment in human capital is on course for sustained growth. The improved labour market situation is as good a learning incentive as any for people in employment, because it holds out the renewed prospect of more worthwhile returns from continuing education. No wonder that sentiment among continuing education providers has brightened noticeably.

From that point of view, the German Federal Government's target to increase participation in continuing education from the current level of 43 percent to 50 percent by the year 2015 is important, ambitious, and by no means unrealistic. In its "Advancement through Education" qualification initiative, the German Federal Government has put together an important package of programmes in this area. Further detailed proposals were formulated by the Innovation Circle on Continuing Education and Training (IKWB) appointed by the Federal Minister for Education and Research. To summarise the measures with regard to continuing education, they can be assigned to four major fields of action:

Financing

A priority field of action is undoubtedly financing, because continuing education has to be financed by the participants themselves to a substantial extent. For people on low incomes and without assets, course fees therefore constitute a serious barrier to access. The announced introduction of a continuing education grant addresses this concern. Participants with low incomes and assets will be able to claim a grant towards continuing education and training costs in future. In conjunction with support for education savings schemes under the Capital Formation Act and low-interest continuing-education loans, this represents an important venture into demand-side financing mechanisms. The new system gives potential participants the means to exercise their purchasing power and consumer choice directly in the market for continued training.

Learning-time accounts

In view of the growing length of working hours and greater intensity of work, many employed people find it difficult to combine family responsibilities with work and a programme of continuing education. Empirical studies show that availability of time is at least as important as the availability of financial resources. Yet leave of absence from work is perceived as a serious barrier, not just by many employees but also by companies. The accumulation of overtime hours in time accounts, to be converted into time off for learning, would therefore be the best and least expensive way of dovetailing learning more effectively with work. As yet, far too little use is being made of this instrument. It would be a matter for companies and the social partners, making use of works agreements and collective agreements, to pave the way for broader access.

Penetrability

It is also hoped that improving lateral mobility between parts of the education system will create strong incentives to take up continuing education. Rigid entry and admission requirements are still improperly obstructing progression onto advanced training courses and examinations. What is needed are more flexible regulations, and the recognition and transfer of credit for vocational competencies, regardless of how and where they were acquired. Another relevant aspect is the certification of modules towards a qualification, since participants are not always willing or able to complete time-intensive courses.

Learning guidance

A flanking instrument would be a competent nationwide system of learning guidance, independent of particular providers. Its role would be, as the OECD states, to support individuals of all ages and at every stage in their lives to make their own educational, training and career decisions on a well-prepared and informed basis and to take responsibility for their own working lives. Elements of such a guidance service are already in place. Particular mention must be made of the career and training guidance provided by the public employment administration. Further examples are municipal guidance centres, guidance provided by chambers and industry associations, technology consulting centres and business consulting institutions. Yet all this is evidently not enough, because individuals and companies alike have complained for years about the lack of transparency in the continuing education and training market. Faced with such a confusing range of provision, they have great difficulty in assessing its quality and relevance to their own goals. In addition there are uncertain objectives and needs of potential learners, uncertain possibilities of application as well as elusive financing conditions.

The immediate necessity is therefore to integrate the different forms of learning guidance and to ensure continuity of provision of these services. Guidance means far more than merely pointing out possible continuing education opportunities. It also includes an analysis and assessment of existing competencies, information about the parameters of labour market transferability, and guidance on funding issues. In the past, many guidance institutions were set up using project support. But this meant they could only maintain their services for the duration of the funding period. What is needed, instead, is long-term publicly-funded backing. On this basis, the two further necessities – staff professionalisation and quality assurance in relation to guidance provision – could also be tackled effectively.

Everything now depends on putting the adopted measures into practice in the weeks and months to come. The German Federal Government cannot accomplish this alone. It will be vital to bring the relevant actors on board, particularly the German Länder and the social partners. A continuing education alliance – analogous to the National Pact for Training – may be a helpful mechanism.