

COMMENTARY

Flexibilisation and the principle of the regulated occupation – a contradiction in terms or two sides of the same coin?

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Dear readers,

Knowledge based work and work requiring the intensive application of knowledge are on the increase. The specialist requirements to which the activities of skilled workers are subject are growing ever more complex, and an increasing degree of significance is being accorded to interdisciplinary competences. The proportion of skilled jobs in which international and intercultural occupational competences are needed is rising. European vocational education and training policy is very much coming to the fore. Although there is a perception of the opportunities for transparency, comparability, equivalence and recognition of vocational qualifications which the European Qualifications Framework and a European Credit Transfer System will bring in their wake, equal reference is made to the attendant risk that recognition of partial qualifications may result in the dissolution of the principle of the regulated occupation. The first main effect of demographic change will be to lead to ageing workforces, a discernable shrinkage in the number of persons employed not occurring until from 2020 onwards. The demand for and supply of skills are being thrown out of kilter by the fact that up-and-coming young talent is thin on the ground and insufficiently qualified and also by dint of the fact that participation in continuing training is too low in overall terms. For all these reasons, a growing shortage of qualified skilled workers is imminent. Such societal and economic tendencies have been coinciding with developments within the vocational education and training system to trigger a broadly based debate centring on flexibilisation.

The integrative power of the dual system is in jeopardy

An oversized “transitional system” enables sensible provision to be put in place to improve training opportunities, although such a system also involves futile “waiting loops” in many cases. Evidence for this is provided by the BIBB transition study (cf.

www.bibb.de/de/wlk16029.htm) and by the second National Education Report to which BIBB made a major contribution in the form of extensive special evaluations.

The chances of concluding an in-company training contract directly upon the completion of schooling have significantly declined, particularly for pupils with a lower secondary school leaving certificate or from a migrant background, due to the changes in training and employment requirements and the selection practice companies have adopted. The dual system is losing its power to compensate for the disadvantages caused by a highly selective school system. Young people who have obtained the intermediate or upper secondary school leaving certificate are virtually the only beneficiaries of the significant expansion of school-based vocational training, and disadvantaged young people are already the losers within the context of these developments both within the school system and the vocational education system. Their integration into training and employment via the dual system no longer takes place as a matter of course, and they are also unable to benefit from the expanded school-based vocational training.

Challenges for the (vocational) education system

We need a (vocational) education system which is able to react appropriately and speedily to the changes in skills requirements and which facilitates a wide scope of higher level training whilst also actually securing the necessary breadth of training for young people, in other

words "training for all". Within this context, the debate surrounding the issue of flexibilisation may be viewed as a reaction to this challenge. The essential content of this debate, something which is reflected in the articles contained within the present issue of "Vocational Training in Research and Practice" (BWP) may be described in terms of a few axioms.

PERMITTING ALTERNATIVE PATHWAYS TO COMPREHENSIVE EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS

Vocational training which provides successful preparation for working life does not merely impart occupational skills within the narrow definition of the term. It also constitutes education which provides a broad-based development of personal, social and methodological competences.

The principle of "training for all" needs to be secured!

None of the contributors to the present issue would cast any doubt on this principle. There are, however, differing views on how labour market and training objectives can be achieved in equal measure. One camp clings to the vital necessity of retaining a self-contained course of training, the elements of which are developed and implemented in a holistic manner, whereas the opposing view is that such mechanisms as training modules may also serve as a vehicle for the acquisition of full occupational competence. Both these opinions are well founded, although neither has been thus far subjected to empirical investigation.

Notwithstanding this, the obvious fact that neither classical dual vocational education and training nor full-time school-based VET is in a position to guarantee "training for all" renders an open-ended investigation of alternative concepts and a valid academic research comparison more than overdue.

OPENING UP AND EXPANDING THE VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING SYSTEM IN FAVOUR OF SCHOOL-BASED VET

The attendant expectation of creating a flexible combination of school-based vocational education and training and the classical form of dual VET is that this will provide a means whereby previous deficiencies within the vocational education and training system can be eliminated. A greater degree of participation in and recognition of school-based VET could lead to the development of a training system which is able to resist economic downturns and secure the flexible provision of the broadly based training we require, even in times when in-company training places are in short supply. At the same time, the changed nature of the balance between systematically imparted knowledge and knowledge which has been acquired via experience and the way in which such knowledge acts as the basis of occupational competence presents an argument for the establishment of school-based VET provision or for the development of new combinations of in-company and school-based VET for able young people. This represents a reason for taking action at both ends of the training demand spectrum. Vocational schools and companies could work together to develop more attractive provision for able young people, although they would also be required to open up to a much greater extent for the less able. The fact is, however, that eminently suitable practice oriented school-based concepts, such as the production school concept, have hitherto not been deployed on a broad basis either for training preparation or for vocational education and training itself. And using the recognised dual training occupations as a point of guidance for the establishment of school-based vocational training as an equally successful vehicle for the imparting of employability skills is an issue which is occasioning doubt even amongst the supporters of the dual system. This is another area where it is time to subject a variety of models to more broadly based piloting and empirical investigation.

STRUCTURING VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING COURSES IN A COMPETENCE AND OUTCOME ORIENTED MANNER

The criticism levelled at outcome oriented training provision is that competence orientation almost always results in lower quality partial qualifications and “skills training” which lacks educational rigour. Although the concept for competence oriented training regulations developed by BIBB is also based on training modules, it is, however, able to incorporate the educational aspect of VET in a convincing manner. The aims of the supporters of competence and learning outcomes based training are not merely restricted to the facilitation of flexibility within in-company training. They are seeking to structure training regulations in a way which makes them less dependent on the learning venue, thus enabling all available training capacities to be incorporated and made use of. Such contrary and apparently irreconcilable assertions should also be subjected to empirical investigation in the form of well-founded comparative studies.

CREATING PERMEABILITY AND EQUIVALENCE

Only one percent of students embarking on a higher education course of study are not in possession of a higher education entrance qualification. There is virtually no dovetailing of the new Bachelor courses of study more aligned towards the development of practical occupational skills and the high-quality advanced vocational training examinations. Although more dual courses of study are available, the accreditation of competences acquired vocationally towards higher education study requirements is almost entirely absent.

Notwithstanding the rising number of high-quality VET courses and advanced vocational training examinations, opportunities to accord such provision equivalence to such qualifications as the Bachelor courses are lacking. The fact is, however, that we need to find a recognised and ideal way forwards for vocational training. The necessary expansion in training and higher levels of qualifications is not achievable by an increase in higher education qualification quotas alone. Paradoxically, however, Germany is also suffering from a lack of permeability between school-based vocational training and in-company VET. Those same groups rightly demanding a greater degree of permeability and equivalence between vocational education and training and higher education are in denial when the issue is the accreditation of competences acquired in school-based vocational training or admittance to the so-called chamber examinations.

In the light of the intention of the Qualifications Framework, such views represent anachronisms which prevent flexibility and act as a considerable barrier to more and higher level training. This is an area where political decisions are required at federal state and Federal Government level to remove outmoded hurdles to lifelong learning and advancement through training, principles which the federal states and Federal Government have signed up to within the shared philosophy of the European Qualifications Framework and the stated aims of the intended German Qualifications Framework.