

COMMENTARY

Recognising and developing diversity

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Dear Readers

A new management concept which has its origins in the Anglo-American linguistic area has established itself in German companies and German specialist terminology. Diversity. The primary meaning of diversity is that no discrimination must be permitted to take place when dealing with people of different genders, varying nationalities or differing sexual orientation. These basic principles have become an integral part of the day-to-day reality in many companies and organisations, even in institutions where no diversity concept is in place.

The new aspect of this field is that diversity concepts represent a vehicle for defining the diverse nature of people with regard to their competences and personal attributes, the values systems to which they adhere and their life forms in terms of the opportunities exhibited for in-company learning and corporate development.

Human aspiration and business thinking go hand in hand in light of the benefits diversity is able to bring to companies in such forms as a greater degree of work satisfaction on the part of staff, tapping into new customer groups and markets or simply by increasing production.

Implementing a philosophy of diversity does not in any way require new methods to be adopted. Such a process largely takes place via tried and tested instruments and procedures.

Indirect discrimination

Diversity emphasises the right of every single person to participate, to pursue their own individual development and to receive support.

This renders equality of opportunity an important major objective, an objective which according to the German Education Council will be realised when individuals are afforded a level of support enabling them to establish the conditions under which they can actually take advantage of their chances. By the same token, there are many indications of discrimination in our society. The OECD reports, the PISA Study and the National Educational report have, for example, made it sufficiently clear that access opportunities within the German educational system are unequally distributed. The same applies for vocational education and training, where the proportion of foreign trainees from a migrant background remains significantly below the ratio of young people from German background.

This is not merely a consequence of insufficient language knowledge or lower level school leaving qualifications. Even where school performances or qualifications are comparable, such young people progress to vocational education and training significantly less frequently than young people not from a migrant background.

This would be a clear example of discrimination according to the categories stipulated in the German General Equal Treatment Act, although accusations of conscious and direct discrimination against individual persons or groups may only be levelled in rare and infrequent cases. Discrimination tends to take place below the surface, and those acting in a discriminatory manner are often unlikely to be conscious of their actions. Such discrimination is to be found within structures exhibiting a discriminatory effect rather than taking on an arbitrary form. The German General Equal Treatment Act refers to direct discrimination which takes place via measures which in effect exert a discriminatory function although they may appear neutral (cf. the paper by ESSER). Using particular media to advertise training places may, for example, exclude certain target groups from the very outset. Certain language oriented applicant selection procedures may disadvantage applicants from a migrant background. Diversity is linked to the objective of scrutinising existing structures, instruments and procedures to check for discrimination.

A contribution towards values education

The world of work and occupations is not perfect. A wide variety of discrimination against individual people or whole groups takes place during the daily routine of working life. This may take the form of “picking on” young foreigners or the bullying of outsiders by their peers. Intervention on the part of training and teaching staff and also of line managers and colleagues is required everywhere such incidences occur.

Looking away is not acceptable! Acts of discrimination or defamation need to be addressed and dealt with communicatively with those involved, and strategies for the respectful treatment of one another need to be developed.

To this extent, diversity serves as a reminder that good vocational training always makes a contribution towards values education. The primary focus centres on how people deal with one another rather than merely being placed on the so-called secondary virtues. This is particularly relevant when the talk is of social competences, and this is an educational duty which also falls on trainees who are over the age of 18 and have thus passed the age where primary educational responsibility lies with the parental home and the school. Examples from companies make it clear that this constitutes an important starting point for vocational training and is an approach which has a further relevance for organisational and cultural development (cf. the papers by KELLNER and KIMMELMANN).

Diversity and support – not a contradiction in terms

Vocational training finds itself increasingly dealing with heterogeneous target groups. This requires the differentiated provision of support according due consideration to individual strengths and weaknesses. A target group specific support approach via such vehicles as training assistance measures or additional qualifications and the diversity objective do not in any way represent a contradiction in terms.

Notwithstanding this, the diversity approach extends beyond the equalisation of disadvantages and the provision of selective support to encompass nothing less than the exploitation, promotion and development of the potential of all staff.

Diversity concepts offer opportunities for vocational training if they are seriously implemented rather than merely adding a new label to existing support concepts mostly aimed at eliminating deficits. The papers contained within the present issue make it clear that the concept of diversity management or diversity education is linked to a clear commitment to differentiated support, particularly in respect of fostering areas of potential perhaps accorded too little visibility or appreciation thus far. This both makes the concept connectable to the topic of competence orientation, much debated in vocational training, as well as making it a very good fit for the concept of lifelong learning, which is also based on a strong reference to the individual. At the same time, consistent implementation of such an approach requires an opening up and a flexibilisation of the system in order to access promising development routes extending beyond the “standard biography”. This is an area where the diversity

concept can set the tone. This applies to such areas as varied structuring of teaching and learning processes and the exchange of knowledge and experience within the work process.

A contribution towards integration

Equality plans and diversity concepts are important, especially in the area of both internal and external communication. Effective measures and specific signals which make it clear that a serious approach is being adopted towards diversity are, however, of even greater importance. Human resources decisions, particularly on the filling of management positions, continue to emit signals. An increase in the proportion of women or in the number of people from a migrant background sends out a clear message, showing everyone that there is a real willingness for change and that endeavour and good levels of performance are worthwhile. Targeted support for training staff from a migrant background could take on a signalling function within vocational education and training. The same applies to obtaining female entrepreneurs and entrepreneurs from a migrant background to act as promoters of a dual system of vocational education and training (cf. the interview ATTIPETTY/KARA).

Esteem is also reflected in the way in which we deal with school and vocational educational qualifications acquired abroad. Previous practice has tended to resemble an obstacle course in which the outcome is uncertain (cf. the paper by ENGLMANN). This does not exactly serve to make immigration and the commencement of work an attractive proposition. Potential is wasted when immigrant skilled workers to this country are often forced to work in unskilled activities rather than within the occupations they have learned due to the fact that their certificates and qualifications are not recognised. A more generous practical recognition system is overdue. Supplementary requirements include validation of occupational competences gained abroad and more provision of bridging and supplementary courses.

In putting its signature to the “Diversity Charter”, BIBB has committed itself to the objectives of the Diversity Initiative. Concrete implementation is taking place via such vehicles as the Equality Plan. In addition to this, specific measures are being planned (cf. the paper by KANSCHAT), some of which have already been instigated, with the aim of further increasing the proportion of trainees and employees from a migrant background. These include planned cooperation agreements with schools in Bonn to inform young people about the VET opportunities and the occupational development possibilities at BIBB.