

COMMENTARY

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The effective establishment of educational chains!

Dear readers

One of the characteristics of the German educational system which is also one of its structural weaknesses is the fact that educational establishments view their main task to be the achievement of qualifications whilst according scant attention either to the connectivity of such qualifications or to the further destination of learners in continuing education or on the labour market. Such tasks are put in the hands of the employment agencies, of the educational counselling services or ultimately of the individual him or herself. And yet a timely alignment towards the requirements of the systems receiving the learners and better structuring of transitions would, in this case, constitute an important outcome oriented quality attribute.

Overcoming the functional weaknesses of the educational and support system

For this reason, cooperation and networking – both of stakeholders and educational provision – rightly form one of the leading ideas within many reform concepts. This is allied with the hope of bringing about at least a partial cure for the weaknesses of an education system which is too rigidly vertical in institutional terms and which features a barely comprehensible funding and educational provision support mechanism. If we also consider the landscape of vocational training networks extending beyond the initiatives presented within the present periodical, this acts as the main driving force behind networking at local government and regional level.

The main focus is normally on establishing a joint understanding on the part of network stakeholders of the interlocking educational phases which promote and support lifelong learning in structural terms. Further aims are to achieve closer coordination, better linkage and more efficient use of regional educational provision and capacities, such as between school-based, extra-company and in-company vocational training, between in-company and non-company continuing training or between vocational training and higher education. Considerable significance is also accorded to the consistent development and implementation of regional funding and support strategies.

In more general and abstract terms, the focus is on achieving a better degree of vertical and horizontal permeability between educational phases and areas, the aim being to prevent educational diversions and unproductive waiting loops in favour of establishing “educational chains” for the purpose of avoiding the waste of learners’ time, the inefficient deployment of resources and unsuccessful learning pathways wherever possible. Opening up the educational system to the social, cultural and economic environment of a region is a basic prerequisite for this process.

Avoiding losses of momentum – creating win-win situations

Networks which have set themselves the objective of achieving improved regional management of both the transition from school to vocational training and of regional concepts for

continuing vocational learning are particularly important. An aim which virtually always features is to bring about a reduction in the losses of momentum and efficiency which occur at the interfaces between educational phases and areas within an educational system which is highly structured and rigidly vertical.

The generation of win-win situations in which all individuals, stakeholders and institutions benefit from the synergy effects produced by the adoption of a cooperative and coordinated approach are characteristic of successful networks. Such approaches involve the following.

- Individuals whose success when accessing and completing educational courses is jeopardised by regional, social or personal factors. The educational pathways of such persons should be structured in a more seamless and successful manner.
- Companies whose requirement for skilled workers should be met in a more tailored way in quantitative and qualitative terms.
- Educational establishments which are seeking to achieve their tasks in a more targeted and efficient fashion and, not least,
- stakeholders who bear responsibility within the associations, in local government and in political institutions who are able to fulfil their respective mandates significantly better via a coordinated approach organised within networks.

For this reason, the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) has rightly been funding the establishment and piloting of educational networks and of vocational education and training networks in particular for some considerable time. Current examples include relevant projects forming part of the “Jobstarter” training initiative in which the Federal Government has bundled together a number of BMBF programmes (German language website www.jobstarter.de), the “Vocational Qualification Perspective” (German language website www.perspektive-berufsabschluss.de) and “Local Learning” (German language website www.lernen-vor-ort.info). The BMBF uses these programmes and projects as a vehicle for initiating the recommendations of the “Innovation in Vocational Education” Working Group.

Cooperation and networking need to happen as a matter of course!

A consideration of successful vocational education and training networks funded within the scope of previous BMBF programmes or established on the initiative of federal states, local government authorities, the chambers, the social parties and others tends to lead to the conclusion that we have now gained an extremely precise knowledge of the type of networks required to facilitate smoother and more successful educational pathways. Such findings have, however, unfortunately not yet been implemented to anything like the necessary extent let alone on a nationwide basis. To this extent, the considerable ongoing scope of support afforded by the BMBF in particular via its programmes for the piloting and dissemination of successful network concepts is both welcome and necessary. Notwithstanding this, we also need to rain on this particular parade by levelling a degree of well intentioned criticism in respect of a number of issues.

Why, for example, are the organisation of a cooperative system of regional transition management, the bundling of regional vocational education and training capacities for the purpose of balancing out regional training place deficits and the coordinated and tailored deployment of funding instruments and systems not the statutory duty of organisations such as local government? Of course it is true to say that the cooperation required for local stakeholders to work together successfully needs to be based on voluntariness and an equal partnership rather than being something which is capable of being forced. Nevertheless, securing a commitment on the part of local government to create the optimum prerequisites and general conditions across all regions to enable this cooperation and coordination to take place could be of assistance.

§ 13 of German Social Security Code VIII (SGB VIII – Assistance for Children and Young People) at least provides a legal basis for the group of young people which is socially disadvantaged. This states that vocational orientation, vocational preparation and vocational training measures for such persons are to be funded within the scope of youth welfare services and in coordination with the school administration authorities, the Federal Employment Agency, providers of in-company and extra-company training and employment providers.

It is, of course, a good thing if networks assist in establishing cooperation between general schools, vocational schools, companies and VET establishments in the field of vocational orientation and training preparation. At the same time, however, this justifies the question why the federal states cannot make it compulsory for schools to engage in such cooperation. And it is, naturally, also a good thing if VET providers offering measures to the employment agencies are integrated into local networks. This in turn gives rise to the question as to why regional integration and networking is not a central criterion when the provision of such measures is the subject of an invitation to tender.

An even more fundamental issue is whether it makes sense for locally based network stakeholders to expend high degrees of funding and commitment to ensure that the distortions, inaccuracies and frictions produced by our educational system are at least partially compensated. It is, of course, beneficial that networks are able to balance out some of these deficiencies. A better approach would be, however, to remove the structural causes which occasion such problems as the fact that a considerable proportion of school leavers fails to acquire the basic competences and directional skills required for a course of vocational training.

Although the list of such questions could certainly be added to, the intention is in no way to cast doubt on the significance and value of the many networks which are operating successfully. It would, however, be desirable if the work of networks could be focused on the generation of added value rather than concentrating quite so much on the “repair” of deficits, as demonstrated by the development of a training culture in new and growing fields of employment. In other words, cooperation and networking need to happen as a matter of course and must form part of the perception of the tasks to be performed rather than being relegated to a mere appendix to be pursued as long as funding is available to do so.