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Nothing will remain the same: regional educational markets in demographic upheaval

Dear readers

The diversity of providers and provision in initial and advanced vocational education and training may be viewed as a mark of quality of the German VET system. Public and private providers ensure that a close knit network of initial and advanced VET opportunities which offer virtual nationwide coverage is in place. Many projects and initiatives bear witness to the creativity and innovative ability of regional stakeholders. This creativity and innovation will also be required in order to deal effectively with the demographic changes which are on the horizon.

SPECIALIST CLASS PRINCIPLE AT RISK

Decreasing numbers of school leavers are making it more and more difficult to deliver effective VET provision in the regions. This applies to both part-time and full-time vocational schools and also exerts an effect on capacities in inter-company vocational training centres as well as having implications for supplementary training supplied by independent providers. In specific terms, this means that vocational schools are finding it harder to form single-level specialist classes. In occupations which attract fewer trainees, such classes will often only be viable at a federal state level. Differentiation within vocational training, such as separation according to occupational specialisms, will also be extremely difficult to retain in its present form. Both the above mean that the quality of trainees' school-based learning will suffer.

In addition to this, demographic development means that it is likely that existing regional disparities will tend to widen still further. The fact is that structurally weak regions in particular are affected by an exodus of younger people with higher level school leaving qualifications as well as feeling the impact of the fall in the birth rate.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT PLANNING

Concepts which can counter demographic change are required. There is a necessity for development planning processes which are based on regionally differentiated data and which increasingly need to be viewed as part of a regional marketing plan and of a regionally focused business development approach. For this reason, such planning processes can only be developed and implemented with the agreement of local

stakeholders. This will involve the establishment and further development of cooperation agreements and networks.

Adaptation of capacities in line with demographic development cannot, however, be a sensible solution either for the individual providers or for vocational education and training as a whole. Years in which training cohorts decline in terms of numbers also offer an opportunity to bring about improvements in quality via such vehicles as the formation of smaller learning groups and the provision of more intensive learning support. The various forms of e-learning and teaching staff qualified to the appropriate level could also make a contribution towards the long-term securing of ongoing high-quality vocational school teaching which takes place in accordance with the specialist class principle. We should make the most of these opportunities, especially in light of the fact that the focus over the coming years will need to be on integrating weaker learners and disadvantaged young people more fully into vocational education and training whilst at the same time providing qualified young people with training at a high skilled worker level. There are many approaches towards achieving improvements in terms of quality. Our task is to discover these approaches and develop them further.

RESTRUCTURING OF THE FUNDING SYSTEM

Over the past few years, the main focus of public finding has been on the creation of company-based and extra-company training provision. The easing of the situation on the training market means that funding policy will need to change in future. The Federal Cabinet has decided that existing funding programmes will be subjected to scrutiny and critical review. This is certainly a justified course of action given the fact that even experts find it difficult to keep track of the plethora of funding programmes offered by the Federal Government and the federal states. Notwithstanding this, it is likely that many of these programmes will be able to justify their existence in future, particularly those which concentrate on the funding of structures and general conditions, the integration of disadvantaged young people or the matching of supply and demand in general terms.

Our aims must be better exploitation of existing areas of VET potential, better positioning of vocational education and training within the competition to secure applicants, increased permeability and better interlinking of vocational training with innovation transfer from academic research and from regional business development.

Translation: Stuart Martin Kelsey, Global Sprachteam Berlin