



Parity between advanced training qualifications and university degrees: ultimately the labour market decides

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► Recent years have seen a marked increase in the numbers completing the transition into higher education. The target of 40 per cent of an age cohort embarking on a degree programme has not only been achieved but surpassed. It is only a matter of time before this trend pays off in the form of higher numbers of graduates in the German labour market, exposing skilled workers who have qualified via the vocational pathway to heightened competition. As yet, it remains to be seen what impact this will have on different occupations and sectors. Meanwhile it is all the more important to make progress in the direction of permeability and parity between educational pathways, so that people with vocational qualifications can take advantage of the opportunities.

ADVANCED TRAINING QUALIFICATIONS FACE MORE INTENSE COMPETITION

The structural reform of degree courses introduced as part of the Bologna Process, particularly the introduction of Bachelor's degrees, is bound up with the aspiration to deliver qualifications that are relevant and desirable in the job market. Whether this aspiration can actually be fulfilled

led now appears somewhat doubtful, for many of the more than 6,000 Bachelor's degree courses are geared towards narrow labour market niches. There is a lack of transparency, permeability, and the necessary element of practice. Work placements are no substitute for the acquisition of experiential knowledge, of the kind that is indispensable to meet the practical demands of the workplace.

Nevertheless, the labour market is sending out positive signals. Enterprises are classifying Bachelor's and Master's graduates as applicants with an academic qualification profile (cf. BRIEDIS et al. 2011). Therefore they are generally being hired in place of graduates with the Staatsexamen (state examination for entry to professional practice) or traditional Diplom or Magister degrees. Hence the vast majority of the new qualifications are not in direct competition with qualifications from the vocational system. This is all the more true, given that a proportion of them cover subject disciplines without close equivalents in the vocational education system. Also the majority of Bachelor's degree holders pursue a higher academic qualification by studying for a Master's.

The most likely outcome is that increasing competition with Bachelor's graduates can be expected at the level served by advanced training qualifications, because advanced training and higher education programmes impart different but, in terms of labour-market relevance, entirely comparable qualifications. This is shown not only by curriculum comparisons but above all by analyses of the activities and requirements of specific occupations (cf. WHKT et al. 2011). Viewed through the eyes of the labour market, there is a broad array of jobs which can be done both by university graduates and by skilled workers with advanced vocational qualifications. This is especially true for management functions in small and medium-sized enterprises and a range of specialised skilled functions.

The projection model constructed jointly by BIBB and IAB to assess the developments in occupational fields and qualifications until 2025 comes to the conclusion that the share of employed people with a recognised advanced training qualification will decline slightly in relation to the share of graduates (cf. HELMRICH/ZIKA 2010; BOTT/HELMRICH/ZIKA in this issue). The key reason for this is that at least some university graduates, particularly those with Bachelor's degrees, will infiltrate areas that have previously only been staffed by people with vocational qualifications. Another significant factor is that the number of advanced training examinations has stagnated for years, so that advanced training qualifications have quantitatively lost ground to university degrees and will continue to do so.

Thus it is all the more important to maintain and even boost the attractiveness of advanced training qualifications

where possible. Areas for action on this front include better dovetailing of initial and advanced vocational training, greater systematisation of advanced training qualifications, modularisation of advanced training regulations, competence-oriented examinations, a convincing system of quality assurance and, crucially, more permeable pathways into higher education.

ENSURING THE PERMEABILITY OF ROUTES INTO HIGHER EDUCATION

In its Resolution of March 6, 2009, the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Länder in the Federal Republic of Germany (KMK) liberalised access to higher education for holders of qualifications from initial and advanced vocational training, thereby giving a first important signal of the parity of qualifications from higher education and the vocational system. It enables holders of advanced training qualifications to obtain a general university entrance entitlement in all subject disciplines (as conferred by the Abitur). Since then, this resolution has largely been implemented by the federal states (Länder) into their higher education laws. On its own, the removal of formal hurdles may not make a long-term difference to the rates of entrance to higher education in this group, which accounts for just 1 per cent of students. Over and above the matter of university admission, numerous other deterrents are inhibiting take-up of this option. The Board of BIBB has issued a recommendation containing proposals for better permeability between vocational education and university studies (Hauptausschuss 2010).

Improving credit transfer options: Transparency about admission requirements, the demands made by a degree course and the possibilities of applying for credit transfer, i. e. to have qualifications attained during vocational education or occupational practice credited towards a degree programme, would need to be improved distinctly. Now as ever, case-by-case assessment is the dominant approach: degree-course applicants must first enrol at a higher education establishment, and only then discover what credit will be awarded for their vocational qualifications. It is also known from experience that very little use is made of credit transfer mechanisms. In this light, a degree course looks like a barely calculable educational pathway, paved with stumbling blocks. A necessary remedy would be the creation of standardised credit transfer procedures, combined with skilled advice and a system of bridging courses.

Degree programmes tailored to target-group interests: Another issue is the organisation of study, which is geared towards a notional full-time student. Study programmes that can be attended in tandem with employment, which are crucial in enabling working people to participate, are

barely offered as yet. But there is a healthy level of interest among holders of advanced training qualifications. Equally, the growth of individual course offers, particularly from private providers, signals the great potential to be found here.

The development of accessible study programmes tailored to the interests of target groups requires the collaboration of all actors. It is therefore essential to further expand and foster cooperation between the vocational education providers, higher education establishments and enterprises. For instance, providers of adult education can offer pre-degree preparatory courses. Companies are called upon to encourage their staff to study in tandem with employment by granting leave and/or awarding grants.

Access to Master's programmes: A strategic objective should be not only to rank advanced training qualifications at the same level as Bachelor's degrees, but also to make it possible to use them as the foundation for a subsequent Master's degree at a university of applied sciences. The "Common structural guidelines of the federal states for the accreditation of Bachelor's and Master's study courses" passed by the KMK at the beginning of 2010 opens up this possibility. Some German federal states such as Rhineland-Palatinate are already making use of this option. Others should follow their lead.

PROVIDING DEVELOPMENT AND PROMOTION OPPORTUNITIES

Ultimately the value of certain qualifications is decided by the labour market. But particularly against the background of the skills shortage that is expected in certain sectors, employers in both the private and the public sectors must offer attractive development opportunities to qualified individuals from the vocational pathway. This applies to work tasks, staff development, earning opportunities and career prospects. ■

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