

Issues for the future of vocational education and training



FRIEDRICH HUBERT ESSER
Prof. Dr., President of the BIBB

In looking at issues for the future of VET, we are conscious of the fact that many topics relating to the further development of the dual system have a long tradition. The four topics that I will examine in greater detail below – digitalisation, matching problems on the training market, integration of refugees and internationalisation – do not, therefore, pose any questions that are entirely new. Nevertheless, it is necessary to localise these issues in the present and the future. This means clarifying their current relevance for the profiling of vocational education and training and the associated process of illustrating prospective action options.

Using the opportunities offered by the digital shift

The digital shift is accelerating the constant structural change being brought about by technical progress. Employers and employees are both being confronted with changes to work tasks and skills requirements, some of which have been of a fundamental nature.

However, the latest academic research findings and experiences from practice tell us that digitalisation is linked with an opportunity to strengthen the attractiveness of initial and continuing vocational education and training in Germany. It seems important to recognise and seize this opportunity.

In order to do so, developments identified at the system level need to be addressed at the earliest possible stage and implemented within modernised or new initial and advanced training regulations. Within the scope of vocational orientation at schools and guidance services at Job Centres, we need to succeed in stimulating young people's interest in VET in the context of digital work. And when it

comes to structuring future-oriented company-based training, the competent bodies will have the task of supporting small and medium-sized enterprises in particular in identifying and implementing their own company digitalisation strategy. Within this process, it is important to create the kind of general conditions that will enable dual training to remain an attractive prospect for SMEs under the changed requirements brought about by digitalisation. This will be particularly successful if firms providing training take the vocational education and training system into account in a systematic manner within the process of finding and realising their own company digitalisation strategy and prepare company-based training staff for the new tasks and requirements of dealing with digital learning arrangements. In trade and industry and in society, digitalisation is perceived as a shift which is associated with uncertainties. However, regular prognoses of the quantitative and qualitative requirement for skilled workers may help to highlight conceivable developments and thus also create the necessary security by making possible consequences of the change an object of planning and preparation.

But a degree of risk taking and experimentation is also necessary. This may, for example, involve:

- linking VET with the imparting of additional qualifications,
- having the foresight to include new training occupations in company-based training, changing or re-interpreting an existing general training plan in the current context,
- providing greater flexibility in terms of scheduling and organisational structure by using new teaching/learning methods,
- granting learners more activity and autonomy in the learning process and using learning environments that have been virtually enriched to a higher degree in order to support them in becoming familiar with more complex demands.

Countering matching problems with attractive training places

Matching problems on the training market lead to a situation in which relatively high numbers of training places remain unfilled at a national level whilst a multitude of training place applicants remains unplaced.

Given the current supply situation, one way of reducing matching problems would be to bring about a significant strengthening of the occupational flexibility of young people. Vocational orientation provision which enables young people to focus more on the broad spectrum of available occupations would be an initial step in this direction. At the

“In order to alleviate matching problems, we need to turn our attention to the development of attractive occupational labour markets which offer regional career prospects.”

same time, we could increase the attractiveness of training occupations by designing occupations in a wider way without relinquishing specialisations. The concept of occupational groups and occupational families offers options in this regard and should be used much more robustly than in the past. Young people wish to keep as many options as possible open when they enter the first phase of their training. The narrower and more specialised an occupational field is and the fewer recognition opportunities associated with a vocational qualification are, the less attractive they will find the occupation. Representatives of the professional associations and all those involved in re-regulation procedures need to take this into account. Secondly, with regard to the unfilled training places, there needs to be a particular focus on small companies and the smallest category of companies. Although such firms have previously been the backbone of the German training system, they are increasingly withdrawing from training in light of the growing problems in filling places. If we wish to mitigate or even halt this trend, we need to initiate more wide ranging considerations. In order to win out in the competition against major companies or institutes of higher education and boost numbers of young trainees once again, the smallest companies should adopt approaches such as pooling resources and creating strategic alliances on their respective specialist markets. This is the only way of successfully compensating for disadvantages that are caused by company structure and of operating a policy for recruiting young talent that is used by as many small firms as possible. In order to realise this, however, support is needed from a self-organisational model which provides assistance, services and direction. This involves network management and the right back-up from the chambers, district craft trade associations and guilds. Initiatives which generate

new and innovative impetuses in the regions are indispensable in this regard.

Professional qualification creates integration

In 2015 and 2016, around 1,170,000 persons migrated to Germany in search of protection and were registered as asylum seekers. There is no doubt that educating and training these new arrivals and preparing them for working life in Germany or in another country constitute central societal tasks which are currently creating major challenges for the educational system and for trade and industry. The crucial factor, both from a qualitative and from a quantitative point of view, will be to put appropriate provision in place that accords due consideration to the different prior learning and life situations of the refugees.

Only small numbers of (young) refugees have entered the training system thus far. The high

language requirements of the training programmes are the main hurdle here. However, young refugees are significantly more likely to take part in vocational orientation and vocational preparation measures. Coherent, internally differentiated and flexible provision is particularly required in order to avoid once more producing a system of waiting loops. In specific terms, this means:

- abandoning the large number of individual measures and aspiring to longer term regular provision which ensures ongoing support and assistance and fosters language skills in every regard;
- managing cooperation between educational institutions and stakeholders at a local level via local government coordination;
- expanding second chance training leading to a vocational qualification for refugees aged over 25 in particular.

For this purpose, the whole of the funding system should be scrutinised in order to identify the extent to which existing regular provision can be opened up. The Federal Government-Federal States-Federal Employment Agency Support Group is making an important contribution towards a harmonised funding policy within the scope of the Education Chains Initiative.

Alongside these funding measures, the labour market-related training delivered by the dual system also offers great integration potential. It is able to build a bridge to the world of work and to society, especially in circumstances where the practical side of training creates friendly family-style links for the trainees. This is particularly possible to achieve in smaller craft trade companies. The results of a BIBB survey of SMEs in selected occupational areas prove that small and medium-sized companies display a high degree of willingness to train refugees. As early as the first

quarter of 2016, one in ten SMEs had taken the initiative by offering practical placements or training places to refugees. However, the companies are also signalling that assistance is required, particularly with regard to supplementary provision to offer individual help and learning support.

Introductory training and assisted training are instruments which are already being used and which should continue to be deployed to a greater extent.

Future issues in an international context

Migration and flight are not the only things which have changed our society. Globalised markets and worldwide networking via modern information and communication technology have long since ensured that the exchange of goods, knowledge and experiences no longer stop at national borders. Despite the fact that national educational systems exhibit differences in some respects, issues for the future of vocational education and training are being dealt with at an international level. This is frequently to the benefit of all those involved.

The programmes and strategic processes of the European Union are playing a central role in this regard. Firstly, they provide a framework to learn from and with one another at the various system levels. They are also facilitating the reaching of agreement on transnational educational policy objectives and their implementation.

For many EU citizens, learning across borders is becoming a reality via the mobility programmes offered within the scope of Erasmus+. These enable learners and teachers from the member states to undertake a stay abroad. Funding numbers in vocational education and training have more than doubled since 2009 and have even increased six fold compared to 2006. From a domestic point of view, this is a welcome tendency which needs to be continued. Nevertheless, it should be stated that vocational education and training still has a lot of catching up to do compared to other educational areas. For this reason, targeted incentives need to be put in place with regard to all three learning venues – companies, schools and inter-company institutions – in order to lend greater emphasis to networking.

The main focus of strategic processes initiated in recent years has been on combating youth unemployment. Both the EU and UNESCO, the latter in its revised recommendation from 2016, are placing their faith in the model of work-based learning. This is perceived as offering considerable potential for the resolving of structural problems and for strengthening economic and social development in many countries, particularly outside Europe. And demand is high!

Since the establishment of the German Office for International Cooperation in Vocational Education and Training (GOVET) at BIBB, both the Federal Government and German VET stakeholders have expanded their commitment in numerous countries within and outside Europe. They are making valuable contributions to the development of high-quality vocational education and training provision and are working on strategies to structure VET systems which provide VET in line with economic needs. GOVET implements and provides advice to the bilateral BMBF Cooperation agreements and consultancy projects which are currently in place with five European and thirteen non-European countries.

However, dealing with vocational training in an international context also requires consideration of the tertiary educational sector. Educational provision attributable to this sector is expanding as a response to the growing complexity of work requirements, and it is an area which is indeed undergoing considerable growth. There is a particular rise in demand for provision which links vocational training with general or academic education, fosters permeability and thus offers new educational opportunities by opening up access points. In light of these developments, the question as to the importance of advanced vocational

“In order for training to be capable of building bridges to the world of work and to society, we need to view it as a long-term investment in integration in Germany.”

training in an international context once again arises. In future, such training will need to hold its ground against dual and in-service courses of higher education study in order to have international connectivity. Its status is also significant because the opportunities it provides for advancement and career progression contributes to the attractiveness of vocational education and training in overall terms. This finds particular expression in the fact that advanced training programmes are aligned to levels 5, 6 and 7 in both the European and German Qualifications Frameworks. Vocational training pathways across all educational levels will only become an alternative to general and higher education for high-ability young people if such a route offers career opportunities without needing to be supplemented by a higher education qualification.

Extensive debate on these and other topics with international cooperation partners needs to continue to take place in future. In this regard, responses to questions on the prospects for vocational education and training also always take on a global dimension! This is precisely why it will remain particularly interesting to continue to look at these topics. ◀

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