



Provincialism or a world-class system? Is German vocational education and training fit for internationalisation?

The advancing internationalisation of business relations calls for an international outlook and international competitiveness in vocational education and training (VET) systems. No doubt all the actors responsible for vocational education and training in Germany will subscribe to this tenet of vocational education policy.

There is also widespread agreement that in VET practice, it primarily equates to the teaching and development of intercultural competence. At system level, the German VET system and the programmes it comprises need to be made more compatible from an international and, above all, a European perspective.

LEARNING OBJECTIVE: INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE

There is more to intercultural competence than the mastery of foreign languages. It encompasses the knowledge, attitudes, skills and behaviours which are conducive to appropriate and successful (professional) communication and interaction between members of different cultures. Focused efforts to develop intercultural competences, defined in this comprehensive way, have been a less than conspicuous feature of German VET practice to date. In initial vocational education and training (IVET), stays abroad – the ideal way to acquire intercultural competences – are something of a rarity, particularly in comparison with higher education. Longer phases abroad are the preserve of school-based IVET programmes; as yet, despite the – modest – expansion of funding under the EU Leonardo da Vinci programme, little use is made of them in IVET programmes within the German dual system (i.e. in-company training combined with part-time vocational school). It is too early to predict whether this situation will be altered appreciably by the much improved options, introduced by the German federal government in the new Vocational

Training Act (Berufsbildungsgesetz, BBiG) for integrating phases abroad into company-based IVET (§ 2 (3) BBiG).

Foreign language skills – at least at a receptive level – are now included in a whole range of training regulations for particular occupations. But active promotion of vocational language learning is limited to the few training regulations for which communication in a foreign language is a core element of the vocational qualification (e.g. in foreign trade). Beyond this, vocational foreign language teaching is viewed within the dual system as a matter for the part-time vocational school, yet without necessarily allocating it an adequate time budget to accomplish the task.

In short: there is agreement in principle. It is now widely accepted that in future, for very many people, intercultural competence will be a far more significant aspect of their vocational proficiency and long-term employability than it is today. Yet there is not only a lack of concrete provision in VET practice, but also of coherent concepts for fostering this important competence within VET, e.g. for integrating stays abroad and foreign language courses into company-based IVET.

Naturally, the reluctance of enterprises to absorb the time and cost implications of providing intercultural training for their apprentices is logical and understandable. Nevertheless, this attitude is short-sighted. In order to overcome it, governments at national and EU level should support foreign stays in the IVET sector with the same resolve as in higher education. Industry associations should also be bolder in pointing out that foreign stays and foreign language learning are in the interests of the enterprises themselves, to a degree that far outweighs short-term cost considerations.

INNOVATIVE COOPERATION BETWEEN LEARNING VENUES

In order to move forward, thought should be given to developing and promoting cooperation models whereby vocational schools with the requisite experience and with partners abroad assist interested companies with the preparation and organisation of training stays abroad. To this end, more creative and collaborative use could be made of the new options under the Vocational Training Act which allow for completion of IVET wholly or partly at full-time vocational school together with extensive phases of company-based work experience (§§ 7 and 43 (2) BBiG). This would be a way of integrating intercultural competence into IVET programmes which appeal both to the industry and to young people. At the same time, it would encourage the building of additional training capacities.

Unfortunately there is no indication that such initiatives might spring up in large numbers. Currently, it is being stressed on all sides that the phenomenon of internationalisation demands a broad-based form of IVET which includes generic as well as specialist and occupation-specific competences. At the same time, however, citing companies' increasingly specific needs, shortages of training places, and school-leavers'

EQF and ECVET – an opportunity for transparency

lack of the necessary maturity for an apprenticeship, there is growing reliance on narrowly specialised training pathways. Vocational schools perpetually call for more willingness to cooperate. Meanwhile, any kind of school involvement in IVET programmes covered by the Vocational Training Act is discredited as unfair competition or as a time-consuming and unduly didactic distraction from workplace practice.

INTERNATIONAL COMPATIBILITY

The prime concern at system level is to ensure the international compatibility of (vocational) education programmes. Qualifications and competences acquired in the German vocational education and training system should lend themselves to smooth and barrier-free transfer to foreign, especially European, labour markets and to other countries' (vocational) education systems. Of course the converse is also true: a (vocational) education system with an international outlook must be structurally capable of accommodating the transfer of qualifications and competences acquired abroad into the domestic education system. The European Commission is therefore striving for the rapid introduction of a European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and a European Credit System in Vocational Education and Training (ECVET). The EQF and ECVET are intended to support and facilitate the transparency, permeability and competence-orientation of qualifications throughout Europe, with the ultimate aim of mutual recognition and credit transfer. The German federal government, the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Länder (KMK) and the Board of BIBB have staunchly supported this process. Above all, they view it as an opportunity to redress the undervaluing of in-company vocational training in Europe.

COOPERATION INSTEAD OF COMPETITION

The philosophy of the qualifications framework requires the education system to be viewed as a whole. Its various strands (schools, dual system and school-based IVET, vocational and general continuing education, higher education) need to have better linkages at their points of contact, and more relevance to one another in terms of content. However, some of the weaknesses of the German education system lie in this area: there are no systematic interface structures between general education and vocational education; dual system and school-based initial vocational training have developed and are still developing along parallel trajectories almost without coordination; and reliable transitions between vocational education and higher education are still in their early days. Relationships between the different educational sectors in Germany tend to be more competitive than cooperative. The notion of making school-based IVET carried out on the dual principle more easily transferable, e.g. admitting successful vocational school-leavers to chamber examinations, is seen by the protagonists of dual system IVET as an attack on established structures rather than an opportunity to forge better links between the two systems. But even the German Länder,

which are responsible for school-based IVET, show little inclination to push for more extensive involvement of social partners in these arrangements.

A similar relationship holds between VET and higher edu-

cation institutions. The two-phase degree structure (bachelors' and masters' programmes) and the European dimension introduced by the European credit transfer system (ECTS) are not being used with confidence as an opportunity to build wider bridges between challenging IVET and CVET programmes and tertiary-level study, nor for the recognition of equivalences. Each side perceives the other as a competitor for school-leavers and/or employees with active continuing education needs. They are only willing to cooperate to a limited extent. Qualifications frameworks and credit transfer systems also appear to clash with a system of IVET which imparts a comprehensive range of specialist, methodological, social and personal skills for occupational proficiency in broadly-drawn occupations. They impose an urgent requirement for the competences and qualifications covered by these types of IVET and CVET programmes to be defined and then classified for credit transfer purposes. Moreover, in qualifications frameworks divided into levels, recognised training occupations would be assigned to different competence levels depending on the difficulty of the demands they make, rendering the fiction of equivalent qualifications untenable.

Against this backdrop the German debate vacillates between nervous defensiveness and uncritical adoption of foreign models. What is necessary is a constructive yet critical willingness to allow greater flexibility of pathways, in keeping with the principle of phases and modules. Germany, after all, has a system of recognised, broadly-drawn initial and advanced training occupations to refer to. In international terms, this is a key competitive advantage. This should be adhered to as a reference point for the description of competences which lend themselves more easily to recognition and credit transfer, both nationally and internationally. At the same time, the consensual goal should be to keep the VET system broadly based, even where educational pathways are phased or modular for the sake of better and more flexible linkages between learning venues and educational courses in all phases and on all levels. The success of reform initiatives in this direction may well determine whether Germany retains its "world class" stature as an internationally recognised model for high quality VET provision, or gets left behind and succumbs to "vocational education provincialism". ■



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