



Quality is the best recipe!

At a time when in-company training places are in short supply, it may seem surprising to be putting the issue of quality on the agenda. Some will wonder whether it would not be better to direct all efforts towards creating sufficient apprenticeship places. Yet on closer consideration, quality and quantity of initial vocational training need not be a contradiction in terms. For the better that initial vocational training fulfils defined quality standards, the better its chances of gaining acceptance and the greater the willingness to offer training places. Clearly enterprises see no contradiction in terms, given the current competitive environment in which the quality of their services depends crucially on the skills of their workforce. For this reason, according to a study by the Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training (BIBB), the majority of German firms believe that quality development will be of increasing significance within their own enterprises.

German policymakers take a similar view. Thus the Bundestag called upon the German federal government to work with the social partners and the German Länder, supported by BIBB, to develop methods for the external evaluation of quality assurance practice in initial and continuing vocational education and training. The aim is to support all those involved in vocational education and training (VET) to develop their quality assurance practice, and to provide them with appropriate and practical instruments for continual quality assurance and quality assurance management. On this basis, BIBB has established a working group on "Quality assurance in initial and continuing vocational education and training". The group has taken stock of all work on quality assurance in VET to date, and published the results in the BIBB German-language series "Wissenschaftliche Diskussionspapiere" ("Research consultation papers", www.bibb.de/de/5720.htm). Furthermore the theme of quality represents a main focus of BIBB research programmes for 2006 and 2007.

If quality is to be discussed and assessed, or even measured, target and norm values are needed; we have to define what we mean by (good) quality. This would be easy if we had clear and unequivocal concepts of what quality is and how it can be measured. In reality, though, differing concepts of quality are found both among academic researchers and among vocational practitioners, and no dependable methods and instruments exist for determining quality in a clear-cut and reliable way. In the end, therefore, the only way to work out which particular definition of quality is being used is on the basis of discourse, using processes of social interaction and assisted by negotiation techniques. This is undoubtedly the origin and one of the key explanations of the German "consensus model" in vocational education and training.

Wholly in keeping with this principle, in the amended German Vocational Training Act the legislator assigned responsibility for continual development of the quality of vocational education and training to the Länder committees for vocational education and training and the vocational training committees of the competent bodies. Although these bodies always have been responsible for quality development, this statutory mandate provides the impetus to define this role more precisely and to develop corresponding methods and instruments. The prime concern is to improve cooperation between the partners in the German dual system at local level on the "learning regions" model.

Produced in consensus between the social partners, the initial and further training regulations are an important quality management instrument. A great deal has been done over the years to speed up the reform process and to develop new recognised occupations. Between 2000 and 2006 alone, new regulations were passed for 146 occupations, and 42 new recognised occupations were developed. Today these processes can generally be completed within one year in most cases. Nevertheless, there is still room to optimise some aspects of the procedures. Also, the role of research within the regulatory process must be strengthened; for example, by improved networking with research into the early identification of qualification developments. The BIBB Board has set up a working group to deal with all questions relating to regulatory procedures, and to make proposals on quality assurance. This begins at the stage of preparatory research, includes consultation between the social partners and analysis of the roles of the actors involved, and finally addresses the implementation of the regulations in vocational training practice. The aim is to arrive at clear agreements on procedures, which will be reinforced in recommendations from the Board.

For a long time, input quality was at the forefront of the quality debate. Discussions were instigated most notably

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by the German Education Council's 1969 study on improving the initial vocational training of apprentices ("Zur Verbesserung der Lehrlingsausbildung", Deutscher Bildungsrat 1969).

Then, as now, thorough and systematic initial vocational training programmes, the ratio of instructors to apprentices, the occupational and teaching qualifications of training staff, and the suitability of training resources and workshops were deemed to be relevant quality indicators. Having been incorporated into laws and regulations, they have now become standards for in-company training. This has contributed to lasting improvement of the quality of initial vocational training.

Input criteria determine which enterprises are entitled to provide training, but by the same token, other enterprises are effectively excluded from doing so. Ultimately only about one firm in two fulfils the prerequisites to provide a full initial vocational training programme. The input criteria are therefore subject to growing criticism. At times they are characterised as mere formalities to be checked off; indeed, almost as bureaucratic barriers to training. Logically this culminates in the demand for the removal of regulations constraining initial vocational training. The prime focus of criticism was the Ordinance on Trainer Aptitude (Ausbildereignungsverordnung, AEVO). In August 2003, this was suspended for a five-year period. So far this appears not to have had a lasting effect on the willingness of enterprises to provide training. The Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) has commissioned BIBB to evaluate the suspension of the AEVO. The central question will be the extent to which suspending the ordinance has succeeded in generating additional training places, and what consequences the suspension has had on the quality of training. Findings are expected to be available in the summer of 2007.

From the outset, process quality has always been an important consideration alongside input quality. Thus pilot schemes have repeatedly provided the impetus for testing new initial vocational training arrangements and transferring them into practice. Process quality is also a central tenet of ISO standards and other certification procedures. The underlying philosophy is not merely to measure quality, but also to develop quality in the framework of a learning, constantly self-reviewing and changing organisation. This immediately shifts the perspective from the system level to the level of corporate processes. Clear evidence of this shift is seen in the way that initial vocational training is now being integrated into business processes rather than organised separately from the work process. Certification procedures have contributed to more systematic planning

of initial vocational training in companies and closer alignment of training with the needs of internal customers.

Hence greater attention has been paid over the past few years to output and outcome quality. Not that quality criteria are any more likely to be justified on the basis of vocational pedagogy; the prime consideration is the concrete benefit to the training enterprise. For companies and in-company training staff, the ultimate clinching factor is the satisfaction of internal customers with their services and the "pay-off" of training for the company. This is legitimate and, in the end, just reflects the expectation that initial vocational training will transfer occupational proficiency and prepare learners to carry out tasks competently at skilled-worker level.

At the same time, a fundamental field of conflict becomes apparent: on the one hand, initial vocational training is expected to train people for occupations, a term which implies broad occupational fields of work. On the other hand, it is in the interests of enterprises to prepare skilled workers to be the best possible fit for company-specific positions. From this point of view, a programme of initial vocational training is of high quality if it fulfils company-specific requirements. The repercussions of this approach tend to involve demands for greater differentiation of the regulations, preferably dispensing with time stipulations, reducing obligatory content, significantly cutting back on training resources, and giving the enterprises greater involvement in final examinations. Taken together, the above changes would lead to the "business annexation" and destandardisation of training.

However understandable these demands may be in the interests of the acceptance of initial vocational training within companies, there is a hint of estrangement from, if not outright rejection of, the principle of the recognised occupation (Berufsprinzip). The challenge in future will be to grant more latitude for differentiation and corporate flexibility without compromising this principle. To this end, however, it is also necessary to call a halt to requests for specialised occupations limited to narrow occupational fields and with minimal opportunities for development. ■



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