

COMMENTARY

Vocational Training Reform Act – New Impetus for Vocational Training after 35 Years

The Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training has always clearly stated, in public, that it was and is in full agreement with first the draft and then *a fortiori* with the adopted version of the Vocational Training Reform Act. But objectively as well we pay high tribute to the Federal Ministry of Education and Research and its staff for this legal initiative.

It is an extraordinary achievement that the Vocational Training Reform Act and in particular the revised Vocational Training Act was passed like 36 years ago from a veritable “great vocational training coalition” and that, unlike 1976 and 1981 with the Apprenticeship and Vocational Training Promotion Acts, the Federal States immediately, as it were, gave their approval in the Federal Council to this Federal Government Act. If only we had this great coalition of the reform-minded not just in vocational training but if possible in other spheres of policy as well!

Of course not everything that was desirable was achieved in this case either. Information about this is provided in the present BWP issue in the interview with Elmar SCHULZ-VANHEYDEN, Ursula HERDT and Günther HOHLWEG. From the standpoint of the Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training as well, certain provisions of the Act could have been more succinct and more far-reaching, but vocational training policy too is the art of the possible, of the feasible, of compromise. And in that respect we are very pleased, for the new Vocational Training Act contains several opt-out clauses allowing further reform developments in the German vocational education and training system.

This issue of our journal “BWP – Berufsbildung in Wissenschaft und Praxis“ gives priority attention to the Vocational Training Reform Act. Thomas SONDERMANN, perhaps the main father of the new Act, gives an authentic description of what is new. Johanna MÖLLS explains which provisions regarding the Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training contain serious changes and reforms. It is especially gratifying that after its “excursion” into its own establishment act of 1981, the Vocational Training Promotion Act, the Federal Institute has now returned to the bosom of the mother Act as in the Vocational Training Act of 1969. We should also mention that we in the Federal Institute insisted that the BIBB bureaucracies be dismantled, the number and size of committees in the Institute reduced, the organisation of our work be made simpler and more streamlined, and a new BIBB institution, the Scientific Advisory Council, be set up alongside the influence of the social partners on our vocational training research work to provide a new form of checks and balances.

Gisela FELLER deals with the status of the specialized vocational schools in the new Act in this edition of the BWP. Of course the teachers at vocational schools and their associations expected more: additional upgrading of the status of specialized vocational schools. BLBS, VLW and GEW have made their critical positions clear here and elsewhere. With reservations, these critics are right. The Final Chamber Examination provided for in the new Act for graduates of full-time school vocational training courses can only be a first step towards a future equivalence of certain courses of vocational school training. But the limitation has to be clearly marked as well: The full-time vocational schools, especially the specialized vocational schools, have to take on more duality, have to move from relatively worthless short-term periods of vocational and company practical training to company practice phases that create a new type of specialized vocational school in a system of alternation with full-time vocational training phases, the “specialized vocational school plus”.

This is intended not as an alternative to or replacement for the tested, established Dual System of Vocational Education and Training but as a supplement for certain occupations, branches or students, especially in the modern service industry field. For competition stimulates business; competition can only be good for our high-performance Dual System and spur it on. Why then the

fears and cross-fire of the employers' associations and most of the trade unions with the exception of the GEW? Do the critics of this concept of the "specialized vocational school plus" have so little confidence in their cause that they employ flimsy arguments to boycott this forward trend which has not only proven its worth in Austria and Switzerland but is constantly being expanded in other countries with the enrichment of dual, that is, in-company elements?

Act provides more flexibility, openness and development potentialities for vocational education and training

The Vocational Training Reform Act contains many more good innovations: Parts of the training that take place abroad can now be more easily recognised and given credit for in the German training course. The graduates of non-company vocational education and training courses (not just the full-time school ones) can be admitted to the final Chamber examination. It is to be hoped that the Chambers and their boards of examiners will soon make sovereign, generous and objective use of these new possibilities. Instead of the interim examination, a part of the final examination could be brought forward to the middle of the training period in the framework of the concept of the "elongated examination" in the new training ordinances for the 350 government-recognised training occupations within the Dual System. Irmgard FRANK reports in detail in this issue on the innovations in the examination system.

It is now clear what "training by stages" means, and that makes the work on the revision structure easier. The new Act confirms that partial qualifications acquired at the beginning of a course of training now count quite legally as credit for the subsequent in-company vocational training. The simplification of the testing of new training forms and training occupations is especially welcome.

In the end, unfortunately, the "Regional Vocational Education and Training Conferences" to improve regional dialogue and the instruments for increasing efficiency in the local and regional apprenticeship situation for the benefit of young people fell victim to the final parliamentary skirmish and the necessary quest for compromise with the associations of the social partners and the federal states. That is highly regrettable. It is comforting, however, that such action groups, organisations and institutions exist on a volunteer basis as well-functioning alliances and unions in many states, districts and regions, and there is reason to hope they will be expanded. The Federal Ministry of Education and Research can pursue meritorious sustainability here with further energy through the more efficient design of its structural promotion programmes, even without legal stipulations. We know that concrete work is already being done on that, which is good.

In particular, the most important objective of the Vocational Training Reform Act has been attained: More flexibility, openness and development potentialities for the future than was possible under the old Vocational Training Act of 1969. This lets us hope that in future our tested German vocational training system will continue to adapt flexibly, supply and continuously to social and technological changes, to changes in business structure, business cycles and work organisation and to the qualification wishes of young people.

It is important that the "occupation principle" (the "occupational concept") be retained and that within the occupation principle far-reaching modularisation remains designable in accordance with the demands of the companies and the young people. The new Act thus offers the warranty of sustainability of our initial and continuing vocational education and training with the combination of vocational practice and technical theory in accordance with our dialectical thesis:

*"Because the occupational concept is becoming more and more obsolete for the actual subsequent vocational **activity**, it is of increasing importance for the **first**, fundamental vocational education (initial vocational training) and with its imparting of vocational and inter-subject **qualifications**, of **vocational maturity** and **competence** it remains constitutive for vocational socialisation, continuing vocational education, life-long learning, mobility and flexibility."*

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