

BWP 1-2010

EDITORIAL

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Competence orientation requires valid competence measurement

Dear Readers

Competence orientation, competence development and competence measurement are terms which are currently playing a central role in educational policy discussion, particularly within the vocational education and training debate. The issue at stake is nothing less than a paradigm shift in the way the educational system and its sectors and elements are managed from largely “input” aligned to “output” and “outcome” oriented.

The main characteristic of this fundamental change in the observation and evaluation of the educational performance of individuals, institutions and educational systems is alignment to learning outcomes, irrespective of by which means and via which pathways these learning outcomes were achieved.

In educational policy terms, this change in perspective is being reflected in the development of qualifications frameworks, which could equally be referred to as competence frameworks, at both a European and national level. The principle of these qualifications frameworks is the alignment of competences to reference levels regardless of the way in which such competences were acquired. The expectation is that this will lead to greater transparency and comparability of qualifications and more permeability and mobility within the educational system and on the labour market across all educational sectors as well as in cross-border, national and pan-European terms.

Evidence-based management strengthens empirical educational research

In the educational sciences, including within the vocational and business education sectors, this realignment has resulted in an empirical turning point, not least of the reasons for this being the political pressure which has arisen in the wake of the PISA Study. A clear trend towards empirical research has been discernable for a number of years.

A different educational reporting approach based on indicators is not the only vehicle via which policymakers are providing support in this regard. There are prominent examples here in the form of the 2006 and 2008 National Education Reports and the BIBB Data Report to accompany the 2009 Report on Vocational Education and Training. Research funding is also supporting this change, as is evidenced by such examples as the Empirical Educational Research Programme conducted by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF), the establishment of a National Education Panel and the priority research programme on competence measurement being pursued by the German Research Foundation (DFG). A national research

initiative on occupational competence measurement being prepared by the BMBF following the abandonment of the original design concept for a planned cross-national project involving a large-scale assessment of VET should also be mentioned in this context.

This development is characterised by the fact that funding is no longer being provided for individual, singularly based surveys. The emphasis is now on working in conjunction with leading research institutes and institutions from trade and industry to design programmes and establish a database for multi-perspective studies.

Impetuses for competence diagnostics in vocational education and training

This constitutes the background against which the present issue of “Vocational Training in Research and Practice” (BWP) focuses its primary attention on the academic research debate and on the latest status of research regarding issues of occupational competence measurement. The papers presented here demonstrate that research into the measurement of occupational competences and into vocational competence now being conducted in Germany is taking place at a high academic level. They also illustrate, however, that gaps of a conceptual theory and empirical nature remain visible.

In light of the fact that competence orientation and competence development have become a key issue and guideline for important areas of vocational education and training policy, these gaps need to be closed as rapidly and as completely as possible. Valid competence measurement is a fundamental prerequisite for evidence-based management and evaluation of the changes emerging in the wake of this policy realignment.

The research programme proposal “Competence diagnostics in vocational education and training”, which has been developed by a group of established academic researchers and submitted to the BMBF, could also make a contribution in this area. A copy of the proposal is enclosed with the present issue. The central objective of this research programme, which complements the BIBB initiative on competence measurement, is “to develop empirically secure competence models and instruments which take account of the quality criteria of empirical social research within this context and which will also serve as the basis for the generation of explanatory models for competence development.”

The hope is that the BMBF will embrace this proposal or integrate it into its national research initiative in order to make it possible to create the prerequisites for policy activity secured via valid research investigation within the important fields of application.