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COMMENTARY

Degrees for working people: a 'quantité négligeable'?

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Dear readers,

In defiance of all the voices of gloom, there are a variety of transition routes between vocational education and the tertiary sector in Germany. These days around 20 percent of students at universities have completed a programme of initial vocational training. At universities of applied sciences even one in two holds a vocational training. After all, all of Germany's Länder have regulations in place whereby working people who complete a recognised programme of upgrading training are entitled to direct entrance to a university of applied sciences. Little progress has been made, however, regarding access for working people without a formal higher education entrance qualification. Less than one percent – fewer than 3,000 first-year students – gain entrance to higher education each year via this route. By international comparison, Germany is way behind other countries in this respect. The equivalent percentages in France and the UK, for example, are 9.2%, respectively 7.7%.

Transparency of access

The reasons for this much lamented situation are many and varied. Restrictive admission regulations in the German Länder are constantly cited as a major reason. But this is only part of the truth. In fact, the admission regulations have been liberalised. Often the details are not very well known, however, even to the experts, let alone potential candidates. Even less well known is how the different regulations are implemented, what procedures the universities use in selecting applicants, and to what extent vocational qualifications are credited towards a degree programme. But once applicants have obtained all this information and explored their various options, their chances of gaining admission are usually good. But better information is certainly needed, to make fuller use of the system's existing potential. First, this calls for academic analysis and research, but then the resulting information must be adapted to appeal to the relevant target groups.

By the same token, the universities also have a lack of knowledge: what the contents of a vocational training are and how the capabilities of people with initial vocational qualifications are, is in the majority of cases not known. More communication between stakeholders in vocational education and training and the universities would be helpful, because those working in initial vocational training naturally have more experience with learning outcomes and competencies acquired in the course of working life. On the other hand, it is also important for the vocational sector to gain a better understanding of the educational objectives pursued by universities on bachelors' degree programmes.

Guidance and assistance options

Uncertainty prevails among potential candidates as to whether their competencies will be sufficient to cope with higher education. The spectrum of competence among working people who have completed a vocational qualification is indeed a broad one. At one end of the scale are those for whom gaining an initial vocational qualification can already be seen as a success in itself, for whom going on to attempt a degree course is unlikely to be advisable. At the other end are those

who have gained a general school-leaving certificate and an initial vocational qualification with very good grades, who are continuing with their own learning and who have opportunities to learn within the work process. The proposition that specialist, social and personal competencies gained in this way can equip them for higher education – specifically at universities of applied sciences – is hardly controversial these days. What is debatable, if anything, is how they should be assessed. Suitable and reliable instruments which could be used in university selection procedures are only available in rudimentary form. A certain amount of development work remains to be done in this area. The same applies to guidance provision, tutorials and bridging courses to ease the process of entrance and transfer for working people.

Expansion of university courses for people in employment

The very low number of students without a formal higher education entrance qualification in Germany is in no small measure due to the predominance of full-time, campus-based degree programmes. International experience suggests that the proportion of working people would rise significantly if degree programmes were organised more flexibly. To this end, more degree programmes need to be structured so as to accommodate studying in conjunction with employment. This is a challenge for higher education institutions, first and foremost! A degree course for people in work is not the same thing as a part-time degree programme in the form already familiar to the many students who take jobs during their degree courses to support themselves and fund their course fees. It presupposes a different organisation of studies whereby seminars are held on evenings and weekends or in the form of block sessions. Permissible course lengths need to be extended, and vocationally acquired competencies recognised. There is still considerable ground to be made up, and once again, a need for research.

There are only the scantest opportunities to study in conjunction with employment in Germany's public higher education institutions. The same applies to academic continuing education. In view of rising student numbers, capacities which are stretched and perhaps overloaded from the universities' viewpoint as well as dilapidated facilities in some cases, there is not much interest in attracting additional students. Private universities of applied sciences have noticed this gap. They offer study programmes for working people which lead to a higher education degree over comparable timescales to full-time programmes of study. This comes at a price, however: the course fees are significantly higher than those at public universities. But the investment seems to pay off. The private universities are not complaining of any shortage of students; especially if companies support this form of continuing education as part of their human resources development measures, whether by granting leave of absence or by paying the costs.

Advancement grants for talented individuals in VET

In the search for political strategies to assist particularly talented individuals with an initial vocational qualification to proceed onto degree programmes, their profile of interests and their life situations must be taken into account. Their interest in a degree course coincides with a time of life when most will be married or living in a stable partnership. Some will have children, and some will have taken on financial commitments. For this group, embarking on a full-time degree programme cannot hold much appeal since it means giving up employment, relinquishing a regular income and making drastic adjustments to their life circumstances. Unless the cost of living can be financed with a partner's income or in some other way, a degree course is virtually impossible.

As part of its Qualification Initiative the German Federal Government has announced a programme to provide financial assistance for vocationally qualified individuals to take up degree-level studies. Young people who have demonstrated special talent during initial vocational training and at work can be offered an additional incentive to commence a degree programme, in the form of an advancement grant. This is envisaged as a non-repayable grant of EUR 650 per month. In addition

to this amount, need-based family supplements will also be paid. The implementation of the programme has now been assigned to the foundation *Stiftung Begabtenförderungswerk berufliche Bildung* (SBB) which already administers further training assistance for this group of individuals.

So far, only the general outlines of the envisaged assistance programme are emerging. Many questions are still unresolved. It remains to be clarified, for instance,

- how the target group will be defined,
- by what criteria and methods their special talent will be assessed,
- how the selection procedure will be designed,
- how the assistance will be coordinated with other forms of assistance, and
- which non-material assistance measures will be integrated.

In any case, the programme is a real step in the right direction. It will be important to develop a selection procedure which is as transparent and unbureaucratic as possible. Use should be made of criteria which are relatively easy to verify and to define, such as a good further training qualification, much higher than average grades in the journeyman's examination, and several years of employment experience. Beyond this, a diagnostic analysis of the competencies acquired in vocational practice is also of value. This would not only support the guidance provided to the target group, but would also send an indicative signal to higher education institutions.