

BWP 5/2008

COMMENTARY

Learning from one another – global systems consultancy

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Dear readers,

Many countries are faced with the task of reforming vocational education and training systems predominantly organised along school-based lines to meet the requirements of trade and industry for qualified workers and the needs of the population for training which is relevant to employment. Ideas and role models for this are sought abroad, the spotlight falling on Germany owing to the worldwide recognition its dual system is accorded as a benchmark.

The differentiated spectrum of the research and development work undertaken by BIBB means that the expertise the institute is able to deliver is in demand across a large number of countries. BIBB's statutory duty to seek involvement in international cooperation within vocational training has established a basis for the expansion of its activities and competences in international VET cooperation over the course of recent years. Individual activities are integrated into a medium-term strategy which is coordinated with the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF).

Public institutions, political decision-makers and relevant VET stakeholders are the main object of the consultancy services offered by BIBB. Further development of the respective national system or system elements constitutes the core of the advice provided.

This means that the advisory services provided take on the character of systems consultancy. The spectrum of activities ranges from short-term consultancy deployments to joint projects with a duration of a few months or several years and extends to encompass the establishment of ongoing network forming structures which facilitate sustained exchange of information and experiences.

Systems consultancy services are in demand from developing countries and emerging third world nations as well as from neighbouring European states. The level of requirements and demand usually far exceeds the capacity BIBB is able to deliver in terms of time and human resources. This means that restrictions, the establishment of main focuses of activity, networking with other organisations and coordination with Federal Government policy are all necessary in order to fulfil the requirements and wishes of our partners.

BIBB's understanding of the term consultancy and of the way in which it should be practically delivered does not, however, constitute a one-way street. The findings and experiences which emerge from international cooperation may be of assistance in further developing vocational training at a domestic level. Targeted feedback processes act as a vehicle for even more effective use of the returns from these projects for German VET.

Development of requirements oriented concepts

Experience has taught us that simple and standardised solutions cannot be applied to the educational and vocational education and training problems across various countries. The only way of developing concepts and strategies is to act within the prevailing respective economic, social and cultural

conditions as these appertain within the individual states. This means that the initial phase of every new consultancy project must involve engaging in a process of familiarisation with our counterparts in the respective partner country and working in conjunction with stakeholders to conduct this analysis at a local level. Only when this procedure has been completed is it possible for this to serve as the basis for the development of tailored design concepts and of measures which are aligned to relevant circumstances within the countries in question. Systemic VET consultancy thus requires a high degree of openness, flexibility and competence on the part of the institute delivering the advisory services.

Providing assistance for system development and the degree of success consultancy services deliver also depend, however, on the extent to which institutions and stakeholders in partner countries are able to drive forwards the necessary changes and to establish a foundation for these changes in the form of targeted organisational development measures (capacity building).

Two examples of good practice

The example of Turkey: BIBB has been advising the Turkish Textile Employers' Association in the development of vocational curricula, the structuring of examinations, the planning of equipment and the continuing training of teachers since 2003. The first inter-company training centre for initial and continuing vocational education and training of skilled workers in the Turkish textile industry opened near Istanbul in October 2007. BIBB is monitoring and evaluating the centre's activities, providing support for the design concept of the continuing training courses it offers, for example. Further VET centres are being planned in other cities, and this is another area where BIBB will continue to offer its support and consultancy services.

The example of Vietnam: In the autumn of 2000, the Vietnamese Ministry of Labour sought support for the development of a VET strategy to run until 2010. The first stage of the process involved the drawing up of joint theses on improving the vocational training information basis, the quality of vocational training, system development and general institutional conditions. This led to the establishment of the Vocational Science Research Centre (VSRC) at the end of 2000, and this has acted as a BIBB partner institute ever since. Cooperation is integrated into the existing structures maintained with the German Agency for Technical Development Cooperation (GTZ) and the Vietnamese Ministry of Labour.

Early recognition and curriculum development

Many countries are articulating a growing need for action regarding the greater alignment of the provision of vocational training measures to the requirements of the labour market. The lack of reliable instruments and information for systematic labour market and requirements analyses is being exacerbated in a large number of states by the difficulties smaller companies generally experience in defining their future requirements for skilled workers. There is also a shortage of information on the fields of economic growth towards which vocational training provision needs to be aligned in future, and for this reason, an increased need for consultancy services has been expressed in the field of qualifications research. The early recognition instruments and procedures developed by BIBB have proved to be of assistance as countries seek to use comparable methods for their own analyses and prognoses. Monitoring this process provides information on how early recognition

instruments can be adapted to a range of general conditions and how they can be rendered capable of deployment for the specific requirements of individual countries.

Many countries are still lacking a uniform system of vocational standards to provide a point of guidance for training programmes and to serve as a basis for the examination and certification of competences which have been acquired. For this reason, working in conjunction with the relevant stakeholders, particularly those from trade and industry, to develop a national standardisation, examination and certification constitutes a core area of VET reform. This is a field where BIBB has brought its expertise to bear and succeeded in highlighting pathways towards the curricular and qualifications related structuring of vocational training courses.

Ecology and sustainability

An increasing degree of significance is being accorded to the treatment of ecological topics given the fact that the environmental sustainability of products and production processes is beginning to form an important location factor. Notwithstanding this, the integration of vocational training and sustainable development constitutes largely uncharted waters for many developing, emerging and transition countries and is an area where implementation remains at best rudimentary even in the industrialised countries. The main demand from BIBB is for concepts and practical examples to promote employability skills for sustainable business practices on the part of both trainees and skilled workers. An equally urgent level of demand is being experienced for training and teaching materials which are tailored to practice whilst also affording educational staff the opportunity to familiarise themselves with the topic.

Networking of activities

The broad competence profile which BIBB enjoys means that it has good chances of establishing a leading position in a future oriented field such as international consultancy services. The aim for the future needs to be to expand this potential in an even more targeted manner and market it in an even more pronounced form. The Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) has already put a support structure for the export of German initial and continuing VET provision in place in the form of the service agency iMOVE, which is located at BIBB for organisational purposes. In addition to this, BIBB is working in conjunction with the German Agency for Technical Development Cooperation (GTZ) and INWEnt on an initiative commissioned by the BMBF and the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) which aims to increase the effectiveness of German VET cooperation abroad and tap into areas of potential as yet unexploited. The objective is to establish a joint presence under the umbrella of the "Edvance" brand to act as a vehicle for the securing of better opportunities for German VET stakeholders on international markets.

The provision of support services for visiting academics from foreign institutes of higher education and cooperation with German universities on the design concept and structuring of international courses of study represent further opportunities as yet unrealised. In the near future, we plan to step up activities taking place within the context of cooperation agreements.