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COMMENTARY

The competence of training personnel: The basis for the quality of vocational education and training

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Dear Reader,

Vocational education and training in Germany has faced and continues to face enormous challenges. Rapidly changing, often growing demands being placed on jobs, increasing internationalisation, the growing diversity of vocational education and training's target groups, shortages of young workers and skilled labour, and new process and competence-based vocational training concepts are just a few of the keywords that describe the current situation.

Mastering these challenges depends greatly on the quality of the work done by and the competence of the skilled workers who provide training, persons who work as vocational trainers in addition to their regular occupation, full-time vocational trainers, heads of training and instruction personnel at part-time vocational schools and other vocational training facilities. The professionalisation of VET personnel and the development of their skills play a crucial role in the quality and progressive development of vocational education and training.

This issue of BWP examines this subject from two different angles. First of all, the articles point out the demands being placed on the training that instruction personnel receive and how these demands arise from changing conditions and new needs; secondly, this issue describes qualification pathways which have developed in different contexts and have their own specific objectives.

Put new life into minimum legal standards

The few binding provisions that the Vocational Training Act contains regarding the quality – or rather, aptitude – of vocational training personnel refer only to skilled workers who instruct

trainees and to vocational trainers. This might come as something of a surprise given how important training personnel are for the quality of vocational education and training. Furthermore, the minimum standards formulated by the law tend to be vague and need to be spelled out in more concrete terms.

Vocational education and training in Germany is steered primarily to reflect the market. This certainly explains the legislature's restraint regarding provisions that go beyond what is indispensable for protecting youth from insufficient quality in vocational training. However, a study on the effects of the temporary suspension of the Ordinance on Trainer Aptitude (AEVO) which BIBB published in 2007 shows that the quality of the work done by VET personnel cannot be ensured without concrete and verifiable (minimum) standards.

When the Vocational Training Act was amended in 2005, the German Bundestag called on the German government to develop, together with the social partners and the federal states and with BIBB's support, external evaluation procedures that would help all those involved in vocational training to progressively develop the practice of quality assurance on the ground and give them suitable and practicable instruments for this task (see Bundestag Drucksache No. 15/4752, p. 24 f.). This wording makes it clear that the legislature is relying on voluntary quality assurance. However, the "suitable and practicable" instruments which it called for back then have been available only for parts of the out-of-school vocational training field to date.

And when it comes to the aptitude of vocational training personnel in out-of-school vocational training in general and in in-company vocational training in particular, such instruments and standards exist only in rudimentary form, with the exception of the planned re-introduction of requiring instructors and trainers to sit an updated trainer aptitude examination to prove their aptitude and the provisions set forth in funding law. Given the demands that the working world places on the quality of vocational education and training, this could become the Achilles' heel of the German vocational training system. This is also the case in connection with the European quality discussion, in which skills development and the training of vocational training personnel play an important role.

For this reason it is urgently necessary that skill standards be developed for vocational training personnel and that education service providers foster an infrastructure for supporting quality assurance and development – particularly in initial and continuing in-company vocational training offered by small and medium-sized enterprises. For those cases in which publicly-funded education providers are involved, funding law should make such standards binding.

The prospects of a multi-level training model

BIBB pursues the approach of a multi-level national continuing education system for vocational training personnel that extends from the trainer aptitude examination to vocational trainer certification¹ all the way to vocational educator certification. This approach is well suited to establishing skill standards for vocational training personnel who work in various positions and provinces.

Work being done on the provisions that BIBB developed together with the social partners has advanced quite far and will probably be finished in the next few months. BIBB is striving to coordinate and incorporate these provisions into an integrated concept in a way that gives rise to multi-level development paths with possibilities for credit transfer. This concept reflects the variety of job profiles – starting with functions that individuals discharge in addition to their primary occupation, all the way to senior/managerial and staff positions – to be found in the in-company and extra-company vocational training system.

The multi-level structure not only makes it possible to differentiate according to task. By incorporating these provisions into an overall concept, this structure also opens up development opportunities for vocational training personnel.

This will be an important factor in increasing the attractiveness and standing of this undertaking. Linking the third level (vocational educator) with specialised courses of study would enable the development of special skill profiles for quality managerial positions in the field of in-company and extra-company vocational training. And finally, this type of professionalisation concept enables integrated programmes that combine university studies and continuing vocational training for all persons working in the initial and continuing vocational training field. Thus, not only can these individuals' development opportunities and deployment options be improved as a result, collaboration between learning venues could also be intensified.

Were the German Bundestag's intentions to be put into practice, the standards that these provisions would set could also provide parameters for the voluntary auditing of enterprises that provide in-house vocational training and, in the process, contribute to the quality assurance and quality development that is being called for.

Skilled workers who provide instruction deserve special attention

However, skilled workers who provide instruction – and who are not covered by the above plans – play a major role in in-company vocational training. Pursuant to the Vocational Training Act, these persons may participate in the provision of vocational training under the responsibility of a full-time vocational trainer or a person who provides vocational training as a secondary occupation. Without these workers, it would be impossible to conduct in-company vocational training. However, under the Vocational Training Act they are only required to have the personal qualifications and the vocational skills and knowledge necessary for teaching vocational training content – in contrast to vocational trainers who have to have teaching skills as well.

The provision of vocational training within the work process is a fundamental feature of 'dual' vocational training (which combines part-time vocational schooling with practical work experience). Skilled workers who provide vocational instruction ensure that the instruction being provided has the requisite practice-orientation – an aspect of training quality. This must be pointed out time and again, particularly in light of the international discussion.

Adding to the number of formal requirements being placed on skilled workers who provide vocational instruction could make it substantially more difficult – and perhaps even impossible – for firms to provide in-house vocational training. It should be taken into consideration that skilled workers who have experience providing vocational instruction – like vocational trainers for whom training is a secondary occupation and full-time vocational trainers – have often (informally) acquired extensive teaching skills in the course of the vocational training process. However no procedures exist to date for determining an individual's skills, procedures that could make this visible as a mark of quality in in-company vocational training. It would be sensible and necessary to support the informal acquisition of such skills on a comprehensive, systematic basis, above and beyond the measures and instruments that are already available. Here, targeted assistance for "learning within the vocational training process" that uses information and communications technology, web portals, coaching and other such tools could be considered, analogously to "learning within the work process". Concepts and good examples for this already exist.

Thus, just advancing the professionalisation of vocational trainers using the planned continuing training concept is not enough. Comprehensive measures and schemes that are incorporated into the vocational training process must also be developed to support skilled workers who provide vocational instruction and develop their skills and competence.

1 This is a working designation that is being used for this qualification in the presently ongoing regulatory process. A final decision has yet to be made about the formal designation of this qualification.