

Complementarity instead of competition

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Dear readers

The switch to Bachelor and Masters courses of study at institutes of higher education is far advanced. As of the winter semester 2009/2010, Bachelor and Masters degrees already accounted for around 80 percent of all courses. This changeover to a new structure of study is linked in with the objective of imparting vocational qualifications which are capable of use on the labour market. Whether such an objective can be achieved seems, however, to be more than doubtful. The fact is that many of the rising number of Bachelor courses of study – a figure which has reached nearly 6,000 – are aligned towards narrow niches in the labour market. There is lack of transparency, of permeability and of the necessary practice. Practical placements cannot replace the kind of acquisition of know-how required for deployment in occupational practice.

Bachelor degrees not in competition with vocational education and training qualifications

Notwithstanding this, the signals from the labour market are predominantly positive. Most companies categorise Bachelor and especially Masters graduates as applicants with an academic skills profile. For this reason, they largely take the place of employees in possession of the traditional German academic qualifications of “State Examination”, “Diplom” or “Magister”. This means that the new qualifications are seldom in competition with vocational education and training qualifications. This is even more the case by dint of the fact that some Bachelor and Masters degrees cover subject disciplines for which scarcely any equivalents exist within the vocational training system. The majority of Bachelor graduates also seek to pursue further academic qualification via a Masters course of study.

Having said this, statements made thus far regarding employment opportunities have been largely based on estimations. Numbers of graduates are still low, meaning that employers have had little experience of the new qualifications. We will, therefore, need to wait and see how the new study structure is actually accepted within the various segments of the labour market and which employment opportunities arise for Bachelor graduates in particular. Research will be required to monitor and analyse this process.

The most likely outcome is increased competition between Bachelor degrees and advanced vocational training qualifications – the area where the greatest overlaps exist, both in terms of the curricula and occupational positions. This should not, however, be a cause of fear for vocational education and training. Quite the contrary. The key focus will be on making decisive use of the opportunities which have arisen as a result of the new study structure. The papers contained within the present issue illustrate routes via which this may be achieved. Relevant areas include the development of dual courses of study, access to Bachelor courses for those in possession of vocational qualifications or better accreditation of competences acquired via vocational education and training.

Taking advantage of the opportunities provided by the new study structure – improving interlinking and accreditation!

The higher education sector is largely unfamiliar with vocational training qualifications, the profile of such qualifications and the associated level of competence. For this reason, institutes of higher education have their own individual processes for the recognition and accreditation of vocational competences. These procedures have a deterrent effect. They are also sometimes costly and fail to establish reliable structures. There is a requirement for the creation of packaged accreditation procedures which are linked with qualified consultancy provided by interested parties from practice and with a system of bridging courses.

In the long term, however, it will not be sufficient simply to call for more openness and permeability from the institutes of higher education alone. We also require structural reforms within vocational education and training. Such reforms relate to better interlinking between training and advanced training, stronger systemisation of advanced training qualifications, modularisation of advanced training regulations and the piloting and introduction of credit points. Although much has already been achieved, much remains to be done in order to position advanced vocational training appropriately.

The implementation of the German Qualifications Framework will have an important role to play in all of this. Alignment of recognised advanced training qualifications to reference levels

five, six and seven would deliver a transparent system which facilitates accreditation and recognition conditions. This would mean, however, that advanced training regulations in some areas would need to be updated, adapted and formulated in more competence oriented terms.