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EDITORIAL

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Time to see the GQF across the finish line!

Dear readers,

A notable amount of dedicated work in recent months has been invested in the development of a German Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (GQF). The working draft was approved on 22 March 2011 by the jointly-led Federal Government and Länder GQF Working Group, whose members represent the most important institutions of the German education system. The challenge now is to resolve the final points of contention so that the GQF can be mapped across to the European Qualifications Framework by the end of 2011.

THE DRAFT OPENS UP PERSPECTIVES FOR REFORM

The way in which the current GQF proposal is conceived gives it the capability to promote greater integration between subsystems of the education system, and to foster permeability on the national level. On the international level, mapping the GQF onto the EQF has the potential to build bridges with education and employment systems in the other EU member states. Again, this is a way of fostering agreement about common qualification standards in Europe. In tandem with the European Economic Area, further development of the single European Education Area could follow. In terms of vocational education and training (VET) policy, certain equally significant principles are incorporated into the draft GQF: the principle of the recognised occupation, the principle of access to all levels of qualification via vocational, general and academic pathways, and the framing of the level descriptions in terms of “occupational competence”. Thus, the definitive category of vocational education has been integrated explicitly into the framework, laying a foundation for recognition of the equivalence between vocational and general education by society at large.

WHAT IS LEFT TO RESOLVE?

The implementation of the GQF can only succeed if the assignment of qualifications to the levels of the GQF in the different subsystems of the education system is carried out according to standard criteria and coordinated procedures. Key aspects of this have already been agreed in the

GQF Working Group. An overwhelming majority of the GQF Working Group, however, disagrees with suggestions from representatives of the Standing Conference of Education Ministers of the German Länder (KMK) to assign the upper vocational school leaving certificate (subject-specific higher education entrance qualification) to Level 4 and the general university entrance qualification to Level 5. The KMK representatives, for their part, are uneasy about the VET experts' proposal to assign qualifications acquired during initial vocational training mainly to Levels 3 and 4, and not to consider any of them as meeting Level 5 criteria. The Board of BIBB has adopted a unified position and expressed its view in recommendations on this issue, dated 10 March and 28 June 2011. The Standing Conference of Ministers of Economic Affairs passed a resolution on 25 August 2011 in the same vein. Accordingly, both bodies agree that for the purposes of the GQF there are insufficient grounds for differentiating between the subject-specific and the general university entrance qualification. It is therefore justifiable to assign both these qualifications to Level 4, along with three-year and three-and-a-half-year initial vocational qualifications in recognised occupations. In support of this position, both institutions made reference to corresponding practices in other EU member states, where qualifications comparable to the general higher education entrance qualification are assigned to Level 4 almost without exception.

WHAT MATTERS NOW?

All stakeholders involved are wisely counselled not to jeopardise everything that has been achieved so far by engaging in unnecessary confrontations so close to the finish line. From a VET policy perspective, further sound arguments are now called for to support the position of the BIBB Board. One such argument may be, for example, that Level 5 is already spoken for by the demanding qualifications of the first "upgrading training" level, which differ distinctly from the qualifications acquired during initial vocational training. This distinctness can be maintained by imposing binding quality criteria with which all relevant regulations, examinations and certificates must comply. Another argument is the prospect that short-cycle study programmes may be introduced in Germany, in which case those qualifications would be assigned to Level 5. Higher education programmes of this kind, which have already been introduced in some European countries, hold particular appeal for applicants with vocational qualifications as a low-threshold mode of entry into higher education. All the more so if the relevant qualifications can be credited towards Bachelor's degrees, and equivalent qualification opportunities can be found within the VET system on the first "upgrading training" level. If the general higher education entrance qualification were assigned to Level 5, this option would be squandered.