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EDITORIAL

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German vocational education and training: location factor and unique advantage!

Dear readers,

Recently the OECD criticised the quality of initial vocational education and training (IVET) in America and recommended that Americans should take a look at dual systems of IVET, as practised in Germany and Switzerland for example. At a vocational education conference held in May of this year at the Aspen Institute in Washington D. C. and attended by top-level delegates, German-based large and medium-sized enterprises took the lead in advocating the merits of practice-oriented IVET to the Obama government and to American industry. Meanwhile, the European Commission pours cold water on this enthusiasm by arguing, in its evaluation of the National Reform Programme 2012, that at least a proportion of those who qualify via the vocational route find it more difficult than graduates to adapt to the needs of the labour market in a fast-changing economic environment. Is it true that the German dual system lags behind the university system when it comes to sustaining, developing and making more flexible use of occupational competencies acquired by learners?

Quality attributes of the dual system

The claim that the dual system is in the ascendancy, especially internationally, is certainly not overblown. Germany earns worldwide distinction for its comparatively low rate of youth unemployment. Critics comment that the German statistics are flattered by the country's transition system, in particular. Learners on transition programmes between school and IVET do not count as economically active individuals, which statistically reduces the unemployment figures. The counter-argument is that in comparable countries, learners on full-time school-based IVET programmes are not counted as economically active either. Furthermore the statistics show that more than one young person in two who participates in a vocational preparation scheme goes on to begin an apprenticeship leading to a full vocational qualification.

Apart from the youth unemployment rate, close contact with the world of work is another quality attribute of the dual system that is internationally admired. For example, the EU Lifelong Learning Programme attaches great strategic importance to fostering cooperation between vocational education and training (VET) and the world of work. Specifically, it envisages stepping up job-specific activities within Europe's systems of IVET. The central focus of the German-Spanish Conference on Training held on 12 July in Stuttgart was how to make Spanish IVET more practice-oriented; yet more evidence of the growing interest in the dual system.

Action still needed

Nevertheless, there is no denying that work remains to be done to keep improving the functionality of the VET system. Implementation of both the German National Qualifications Framework (*Deutscher Qualifikationsrahmen*, DQR) and the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) will mean driving forward competence-orientation in IVET, with all the positive consequences for systematic quality improvement that that entails. There are impacts on permeability and the equivalence between vocational and general/academic education, the intrinsic principle being that qualifications from across all educational sectors can be ascribed to all levels on the scale, right up to the highest. Following implementation of the EQF and the DQR, the ISCED scale urgently needs to be adapted because policy to promote Germany as a business location in future will no

longer be concerned with raising the graduate rate but with increasing the numbers of individuals holding qualifications at higher levels of the DQR/EQF. Logically this requires appropriate involvement of the workforce in continuing education, with the desired effect of making top-level qualifications in Germany more attainable via the vocational training route.

Just as decisive – if not more so – for the reputation of the dual system as a location factor is an appropriate level of participation in IVET by companies. The current decline in the percentage of companies providing apprenticeships should alert us to the need for more specific analysis of the reasons, with a view to responding adequately to the problem. Not only are companies who provide training the cornerstone of the dual system, but a diminishing level of participation would further exacerbate the shortage of skilled workers at post-apprenticeship level – which the latest projections suggest will be more serious than the graduate-level shortage by around 2020.

For that reason, the future competitiveness of “Manufacturing – Made in Germany”, hitherto such an advantage of doing business in Germany, is currently at stake, and notwithstanding all the plaudits, we must be clear about that!

Translation: Deborah Shannon, Academic Text and Translation, Norwich