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ACADEMISATION OR VOCATIONAL DRIFT?

International developments in the tertiary sector of education



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Herausgeber:
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Veröffentlichung im Internet: 27.08.2014

The OECD data show an enormous increase in the number of participants in academic courses of education for the period from 1995 to 2010. In the same timeframe, occupation-related and practice-related courses in the tertiary sector of education are stagnating. The article deals with the question of whether it is justifiable to talk about an academisation in this context or whether the content of the tertiary education programmes is rather drifting into a »vocation-oriented« direction.

Dynamic developments in the tertiary sector of education

In recent years, courses of education have evolved or gained importance in the tertiary sector of education which contain elements of both vocational and academic education or have been expressly developed for vocationally qualified persons. Their goal is to either increase the attractiveness of vocational education and training or to open up access to university programmes. One of the reasons for changes in the supply of educational programmes, in particular in countries with a high percentage of university graduates, is the increasingly apparent mismatch between the qualifications imparted and the demands of the labour market. By developing and expanding practically and vocationally oriented higher education programmes, an attempt is made to meet the demands for a more pronounced orientation towards the labour market and to make the transition from training into the labour market easier for the graduates. Questions about desired and required learning outcomes and the »employability« of graduates of higher education programmes have become key topics of education policy (Lutz 2003; Kraus 2008).

Quantitative development of certificates

Generally, the developments in the tertiary sector of education are diverse and inconsistent (OECD 2008; Cedefop 2011; OECD 2012; OECD 2013), with a heterogeneity regarding both the quantitative development of educational programmes and the models of educational programmes in the tertiary sector of education as recorded by the ISCED-97.

While the share of tertiary A level certificates in the number of all first degrees has increased everywhere when comparing the years 1995 and 2011 in the countries selected (cf. Table) – the OECD average has increased by 19 percentage points; in Switzerland, Germany, Austria, the Czech Republic and Finland it has even more than doubled –, the developments regarding tertiary B level certificates are more subdued. A marked increase of the first degree proportion has only been recorded in Spain and Ireland (and also in New Zealand and the USA; not shown here). In Finland, however, vocational education and training programmes have been allocated to ISCED level 5A exclusively after the introduction of the polytechnics (universities of applied sciences). Only moderate increases have been recorded in Germany, Denmark and Switzerland. The OECD average in the tertiary 5B sector has stagnated at approximately eleven per cent.

The numbers thus suggest that an academisation of the education systems is taking place. Delplace (2014), however, is talking about a »vocational drift«. At first this doesn't seem to make sense in view of the data.

The empirical data according to ISCED-97

The international ISCED classification records the institutional educational programmes and educational pathways statistically and makes them internationally transparent.¹ According to the ISCED-97 classification, the tertiary sector of education starts with level 5. ISCED 5B covers occupationally or practically oriented courses of study at technical schools, colleges of advanced vocational studies and the likes. The ISCED 5B educational programmes differ from those at the ISCED 5A level also by their shorter duration (at least two years, usually up to three years) and are generally not oriented towards an advanced university degree but rather towards immediate entry into the labour market. Master craftsman and technician certificates are statistically recorded only if they have been acquired in the context of a school-based educational programme.

The 5A level covers higher education below the doctorate level (e.g. at universities of applied sciences) while level 6 covers tertiary education as qualification for research activities.

Table

Comparison of first degrees at ISCED levels 5A and 5B (1995 and 2011, in %)

Country (selection)	Tertiary A (first degree)		Tertiary B (first degree)	
	1995	2011	1995	2011
Ireland	30*	43	15*	22
Spain	24	32	2	18
Australia	36*	50**	not specified	17
Switzerland	9	32	13	15
Germany	14	31***	13	14***
United Kingdom	42*	55	7*	13
Austria	10	35	not specified	12
OECD average	20	39	11	11
Denmark	25	50	8	11
Czech Republic	13	41	6	5
Poland	34*	58	not specified	1
The Netherlands	29	42	not specified	0,5
Finland	21	47	34	0

* survey year 2000; ** survey year 2010;

*** break in the statistical survey between 2008 and 2009 due to a changed allocation to ISCED 2 and ISCED 5B.

Source: OECD (2013)

¹ ISCED: International Standard Classification of Education of the UNESCO as stipulated in the 1997 version.

Changes in the content of the educational programmes

That it may indeed be possible to assume a more pronounced vocational and practical orientation in the tertiary sector of education, even if it does not become apparent from the international OECD statistics, will be illustrated below using the examples of Finland, Switzerland and Australia.

Finland

The »polytechnics« (universities of applied sciences, UAS) are a relatively new educational institution in Finland. They were introduced at the beginning of the 1990s in order to improve the quality of vocational education and training in the tertiary sector. Starting in 1996 they gradually became an integrated part of the Finnish system of higher education. They were intended to create a vocationally oriented educational pathway as a parallel to the traditional universities. The prerequisite for access is alternatively an upper secondary school-leaving certificate, a passed examination for acquiring a university entrance qualification (matriculation certificate), a vocational qualification or corresponding foreign qualifications. In 2013 there were 138,000 students at the UAS, compared to 167,000 students enrolled at universities at the same time.² To make sure that the qualifications relate to the labour market and the regional demand for skilled labour and innovation in the desired way, practical phases are an obligatory part of the courses of study. The cooperation between educational establishments, regional institutions and enterprises takes different shapes and forms; consequently, the models of practical training vary widely. The educational programmes at the Finnish UAS are allocated to ISCED level 5A although they are expressly assigned to the area of vocational education and training.

Switzerland

Technical colleges in Switzerland are – unlike in Germany – higher education institutions explicitly established for doubly qualified applicants with professional maturity certificates.³ Professional maturity, as a complement to a Swiss Federal Certificate of Competence (completed apprenticeship after three to four years of dual training), permits access to a course of studies at a university of applied sciences without an entrance examination. In 2008, a total of 58.3 per cent of all persons with professional maturity certificates have made use of this option (SBFI 2014). In 2013 the number of students enrolled at Swiss universities of applied sciences was 87,291, compared to 142,170 students at universities and similar institutions.⁴

The university of applied sciences as a type of higher education establishment in Switzerland developed since the mid-1990s. The technical college reform had the special aim of improving the quality of the Swiss vocational education and training system by connecting it with the tertiary higher education sector. The origins of today's universities of applied sciences lie in the former higher technical schools, some of which have been integrated into the new universities of applied sciences. Up to that point the system of vocational education and training did not contain a connection to higher education institutions. The Swiss universities of applied sciences offer both bachelor and master degree programmes. However, unlike Finland, Switzerland still offers the so-

² Cf. Statistics Finland, www.tilastokeskus.fi/til/kou_en.html (as of: 12.06.2014)

³ It is currently controversial whether upper secondary general school graduates should continue to be required to complete a practical year before commencing their studies. Model regulations for exceptions to this rule already exist.

⁴ Cf. Swiss Statistics, www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/portal/de/index/themen/15/06/tab/blank/uebersicht.html (as of: 12.06.2014)

called »higher vocational training« as a parallel to university-type institutions and universities of applied sciences (The higher vocational training is allocated to ISCED level 5B).

Australia

Higher education programmes combining academic and vocational elements or theoretical and practical learning have evolved in the Anglo-Saxon countries, as well. A common feature of these countries is a very high proportion of graduates from ISCED 5A programmes (2010): Australia 50 per cent, UK 55 per cent, Ireland 43 per cent.

In Australia, the so-called associate degrees (ISCED 5A), which are understood to be both academically and vocationally qualifying, have been introduced as a qualification in recent years. They have been integrated into the Australian Qualifications Framework in 2004. The educational programmes leading to an associate degree are open to all those who have acquired a vocational qualification (Certificates III or IV), as well. The programme duration is two years. Access to a bachelor degree programme is possible after completion; the bachelor course can be shortened through crediting regulations. Associate degree programmes are offered both by universities and by vocational education and training institutions such as the TAFE (technical and further education). An intense nation-wide debate about the character of the associate degrees, which may also be described as a hybrid qualification due to the combination of academic/theoretical with specialized/practical content and elements of »work-based« learning, is currently underway (Smith 2013). In particular since the 1990s, a trend towards promoting permeability and facilitating transitions can be observed in the educational establishments, as well. To achieve this objective, so-called »dual sector universities« have emerged, some of them as successors of vocational colleges such as the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) which has been granted the status of university in 1992. These »dual sector universities« offer educational programmes leading both to vocational qualifications and to academic degrees.

Increasing practical vocational differentiation of tertiary educational programmes

The question about the learning outcomes of a higher education programme has become more relevant owing to the growing number of students and the increasing diversification and internationalisation of the higher education sector. In particular, the relation between key qualifications (general skills) and vocational skills is of central importance, but also the degree of orientation towards the demands of the labour market, the share of practical learning phases in the companies and the organisation of and responsibilities for curriculum development. A wide range of models has evolved from the desire to create stronger links between academic and professional/practice-related learning, increase permeability and make the pathway of vocational education more attractive. These models do not become statistically visible in the current methodology of the ISCED classification. This is caused, on the one hand, by the national allocations and, on the other hand, by the way the ISCED classification is structured. It remains to be seen whether the restructuring of the tertiary education sector in ISCED 2011 will at least increase transparency and thereby facilitate a clearer statistical differentiation between the very different educational programmes and their orientation towards different fields of education.

In any case, academisation can currently indeed be observed insofar as the statistical numbers of graduates are clearly growing in the field of the ISCED 5A programmes. A »vocational drift«, however, can be identified as well when the content of the programmes with explicit labour market

orientation is examined. These programmes are characterised by a cooperation between education providers and external partners in the field of practice or by their function as academic »bridging« and further education programmes for vocationally qualified persons.

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