

Quality control and employability: are the parameters of VET in Germany's dual system facing severe challenges?

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Training based on what is referred to as the Dual System is still the major non-academic route for German school leavers giving them formal access to the labour market as skilled workers, craftsmen or clerks. It clearly has contributed to limiting the number of unskilled employees to a constantly low proportion in the German labour market for many years although recently economic factors such as unemployment have had a negative effect on the quantitative dimension of VET supply in the Dual System. Unlike in other countries, VET in Germany is firmly rooted in the apprenticeship tradition and dual traineeships here exist in nearly all branches of the economy including the professions and parts of the civil service. In 1999, some 630,000 young people took up an apprenticeship. All in all, more than 1.6 million young people currently receive their initial training through the Dual System.

In general, the German VET system has to be described as a "historical product" and as a combination of four working or functional principles: (1) the dual or alternating structure of venues of training; (2) the vocational orientation of training schemes and qualifications; (3) the principle of state quality control and (4) the principle of consensus between social groups in terms of defining the structure and development of training schemes. The fact, however, that the Dual System is the major sub-system of VET in Germany can be related to the overall social and political importance which is given to employer participation as well as standards of qualifications and certificates. Both these parameters are directly associated with the four principles named above. Both aspects also appear as major prerequisites for the quantitative and qualitative contribution of VET to the German labour market.

Against this background, images of modularisation of VET in connection with "competence orientation" at first glance do not give the impression of offering a viable alternative to the "vocational principle". It is exactly the vocational or occupational segmentation of the German labour market which is accredited with a general stabilising effect on selection and allocation processes. For the "qualification supplier" (i.e. the skilled worker), this constitutes a relative autonomy from the firm, while it provides the "qualification demander" (i.e. the company) with reliable information on the manpower aspects of in-company labour structures. In this regard, international sociological research has unmistakably proved that vocational orientation tends towards the "decentralisation of competences" in the context of the division of labour. Thus, qualifications in the Dual System do not appear to be compatible with the image of "on-the-job training".

One of the interesting questions to be addressed towards the German system thus may be why employers actually offer traineeships on such a highly standardised level, but also how current changes within the economic environment of VET may exert pressure on the Dual System in terms of more flexible training schemes. By referring to these challenges it seems currently an open question whether and how modularisation may become linked to or even integrated within traditional apprenticeship schemes.