

VET Support Systems for Disadvantaged Young People in Germany – Best Practices, Deficiencies and Changes against the Background of the Education Policy of the European Union

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Abstract

An increasing proportion of the school leaving population in Germany has difficulties in the transition from school to vocational education and training due to the lack of training places in companies and the rising demands facing trainees in vocational education and training, such as, e.g. key competences or social skills. The Federal Government uses a number of different strategies to address these challenges. The different strategies are also influenced by the education policy of the European Union (EU). In 2007, a high-ranking committee, convoked by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF), published concrete suggestions to modernize the vocational education and training (VET) system. One important result is the development of a new concept of training modules, which offers disadvantaged young people in the transition system more and reliable opportunities.

1 Introduction

In Germany, the transition from school to work, has emerged as a growing problem for young people (Beicht/Friedrich/Ulrich 2007; Friedrich 2006; Walden 2006; Deissinger/Hellwig 2004). The reasons behind this can be seen, on the one hand, in changing requirements of workplaces in terms of economic and technical parameters and their impact on training and qualifications. On the other hand, the supply of

training places in the economy has suffered a continuing decline during the last ten years.

The German Federal Employment Agency (Bundesagentur für Arbeit) reports that there were 625,606 applicants for apprenticeship training places for the year 2005/2006, while only 591,540 training places were offered. This means that 6.5 % of all applicants or 49,453 applicants failed in the training market (BMBF 2007a, pp. 10, 14). The number of applicants without a training place is even higher once we include those who have had to accept alternatives or have chosen to do so without giving up their inclination for training in the dual apprenticeship system. For the year 2006, the Federal Institute for Vocational Training (BiBB) and the Institute of Labour Market and Occupational Research (IAB) reported 160,000 young people without a training place (BMBF 2007a, p. 22).

It is against this background that a new support system – as a kind of irregular school to work transition system – has emerged. It is absorbing a growing number of participants and may be considered as the third major sub-system of VET, besides the regular apprenticeship system (dual system) and the system of full-time vocational schools (Deissinger 2007).

On the national level, Germany's Federal Minister of Education and Research (BMBF) in 2006 set up a working committee as an advisory board. Known as the "Innovationskreis berufliche Bildung" (IKBB), it consists of stakeholders representing employers associations, trade unions, VET research, as well as schools and companies. In July 2007, the working committee published concrete reform appeals

with respect to the German VET system (BMBF 2007b), some of which also explicitly refer to the reform of the VET support system mentioned above. What these suggestions from the working committee mean for the current VET support system is the subject of the following sections. Against the background of the traditional features of the German VET support system new developments, critical statements as well as examples of good practice will be pointed out. In a second step the results will be reflected against the reform proposals of the working committee dealing with the modernisation of the German VET system in general. The paper closes with some implications for a comparative perspective directed towards the Australian VET system.

2. Traditional features of the German VET system

Young people in Germany can achieve VET qualifications in various ways. These ways can be categorized as (1) part time at a vocational school while working in a training-contract-based employment (apprenticeship or dual system) and (2) full time vocational schools with no training-contract-related employment. The apprenticeship model is called dual system because training is conducted in two places of learning: companies and vocational part-time schools. The aim of training in the dual system is to provide, in a structured training programme, broad-based basic vocational training and the qualifications and competences required to practise an occupation as a skilled worker or clerk in one of 350 recognized training occupations (Hippach-Scheider/Woll 2007, p. 19). The dual system as an apprenticeship system is determined by the notion of “vocationalism or the vocational principle” (Deissinger/Smith/Pickersgill 2006, p. 36) which means that “priority has always been given to broad-based knowledge and the acquisition of basic techniques instead of

over-specialization or company-specific on the job training” (ibid.). In Germany the dual apprenticeship system is the major transition system, covering nearly 60 % of the school-leaving population.

The apprenticeship system in Germany depends on the labour market situation. In the face of changing external conditions and because of the decline in the supply of training places in the past decades the dual system has been criticised as obsolescent (ibid, p. 31). One indicator for the serious situation for young people regarding the dual system is the rise of young people entering special training programmes or opting for vocational courses in full-time vocational schools considered as an ancillary system to the dual system.

At the same time, however, the Federal Government has undertaken further considerable efforts supposed to solve the problem of shortages of in-company training places. With the National Pact for Career Training and Skilled Manpower Development (Nationaler Pakt für Ausbildung und Fachkräftenachwuchs), for the time span 2007 to 2010, the Federal Government, the private sector and the Federal Employment Agency have committed themselves to submit an offer for an apprenticeship to every young person willing and able to be trained (Nationaler Pakt für Ausbildung 2007, p. 3; BMBF 2007a, p. 74). This programme continues a policy in the area of VET by which the state shows its commitment beyond the traditional distribution of competences typical for the dual system, including subsidising companies once they hire apprentices.

3 Supporting vocational training for disadvantaged youths in Germany: problems and new developments

Basically, the Federal Employment Agency is the crucial responsible and competent authority in the field of supporting vocational training for disadvantaged youths. This governmental body offers different training opportunities for young people in the age group 16 to 25 and authorizes providers to carry out most of the programmes for disadvantaged. The general aims of the support system are to improve the transition from school to vocational training or employment, to enhance vocational competences of young people and to avoid unemployment by coping with the lack of training opportunities (BMBF 2005).

The VET transition or support system in Germany is highly complex as there are various competences and institutional affiliations involved which partly overlap. It mainly comprises the following areas: (1) Vocational training preparation schemes (Berufsausbildungsvorbereitung BvB), (2) vocational training in non-company establishments (ausserbetriebliche Ausbildung BaE) which means training in a training occupation recognized under the Vocational Education and Training Act (BBiG), and (3) training assistance (ausbildungsbegleitende Hilfen abH) as a form of remedial tuition and socio-pedagogical support within the framework of an in-company training relationship (ibid.; Hippach-Schneider/Woll 2007, p. 20).

The support for disadvantaged young persons has been in existence for some 25 years. Since then, this sector has continually grown and become more differentiated with respect to its target groups as well as to its courses and programmes. Because of its different courses or “measures” (Massnahmen) the VET support system is also called

“measure system” or “opportunity improvement system” (Krewerth/Ulrich 2006; Ness 2007).

The target group of the VET support system is very heterogeneous. It comprises “normal” school leavers, i.e. young persons with educational maturity who did not get a training place, young persons with individual disadvantages like those with obvious learning disabilities and/or with problems in social behaviour as well as young women, young immigrants and young persons with special needs (Enggruber 2005; BMBF 2005, pp. 12-19). In the VET support system there is a high proportion of young people without a school leaving qualification or with minor grades in their school qualifications as well as those who obviously lack apprenticeship entry maturity.

The German VET support system faces and also deserves criticism. Critics claim - especially with respect to the vocational preparation schemes - that the various measures fail to belong to a harmonised system of opportunities and that they stand for too much heterogeneity and little transparency, a reproach which has led to the label “measure jungle”. This often implies that measures are more or less arbitrarily linked to each other and that this “measure chain” produces long and duplicated training times let alone the cost aspect of multiple training.

New developments in vocational training preparation

Central changes have occurred in the vocational preparation schemes of the Federal Employment Agency. In late 2004, the “new concept” for vocational training

preparation was established and replaced the previous vocational preparation schemes (Zielke 2007). The character of the former vocational preparation schemes implied shifting disadvantaged young persons to different support programmes. This proceeding has led to mismatches between individual needs of young persons and the aims of the measures. With respect to individual promotion and skill formation pathways the new concept is based on a person-centred philosophy, rather than a general concept orientation. The new concept emphasises individualisation, differentiation, flexibility and permeability. Young persons start with an obligatory aptitude analysis. After that subsequent adequate courses follow.

The new concept has led to significant improvements in the support system. More young persons enter company-based (dual) vocational training, school-based or extra-plant training after participation in these measures. In 2005, out of 105,702 young people who were trained in preparatory training schemes (most among them within the new concept), 44.4 % were in employment and 37.7 % took up a conventional vocational training course in the dual system (BMBF 2007a, pp. 196 ff.). At the same time the retention periods could be shortened and the “measure jungle” has been successfully removed (BMBF 2005, p. 44). In this context, competence diagnosis as one of the elements of the new concept can be judged as a modern and useful concept. However, critical comments especially from the scientific VET community have been expressed about the stronger emphasis on “placement in work“ (employability) against “placement in vocational education “ (trainability) as well as the limited duration of the programme. As a whole, the new concept based measures have a maximum duration of 10 months (and between 11-16 months for disabled young

persons) and it is not possible to repeat the courses. Thus youngsters with lower learning abilities tend to be denied the benefits of the system (Dressel/Plicht 2006).

Introductory qualification programme (Einstiegsqualifizierung EQJ)

Another successful programme is the introductory qualification scheme (Einstiegsqualifizierung EQJ) (BMBF 2007a, p. 74 f.). This programme was established as part of the National Pact for Career Training and Skilled Manpower Development and was transferred to the responsibility of the Federal Employment Agency in October 2007. This special programme – which exists parallel to the vocational preparation schemes – is a practical course for young persons who have failed to enter a regular training place. Young persons get the chance to become familiar with the everyday working life in a company in a special occupational field for the duration of 6 to 12 months. After successful completion of the introductory qualification course the young person gets a certificate. As a result of the reform of the Vocational Training Act in 2005, it is now possible to grant accreditation of a successful practical training with respect to a subsequent apprenticeship (Vocational Training Act 2005). The programme started in October 2004. In 2006, out of 37,500 participants of the EQJ programme 65.5 % took up an apprenticeship in the EQJ company after completion of the course (Bildungsspiegel 2007; BMWi 2008). The success of the programme has led to its extension in 2008.

All these programmes are good examples for the engagement of the Federal Employment Agency in the process of coping with deficits in the VET system and its will to modernize the vocational preparation schemes and to integrate successful

programmes like the EQJ into its responsibility. On the other hand, more special and individualized offers are necessary in the field of vocational preparation as well as in vocational training (for example for young women and immigrants).

4 New practice in the context of wider European Union policy

The support system for disadvantaged young people as well as the underlying VET policy as a whole has for some time been influenced by the education policy of the European Union (BMBF 2007a, pp. 263 ff.). With its decisions in March 2000 in Lisbon (European Council 2000; BMBF 2005, p. 222) the Union has set itself a new strategic goal “to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion” (European Council 2000) by 2010. The subsequent Copenhagen Declaration in November 2002 provided a general framework for European VET development (European Commission 2002). The following main priorities were set out in the Copenhagen Declaration: 1. Strengthening the European dimension in VET with the aim of improving closer cooperation in order to facilitate and promote mobility. 2. Increasing transparency in VET through the implementation and rationalization of information tools and networks. 3. Investigating how transparency, comparability, transferability and recognition of competences and/or qualifications, between different countries and at different levels, could be promoted. 4. Promoting cooperation in quality assurance in VET. With these goals in mind, new developments in operational areas of European VET policy have received a momentum, which has resulted, among other things, in the conceptualisation of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and the European Credit and Transfer

System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET) (Deissinger 2006; Winterton 2005).

Examples of best practice in different research programmes

Important tools to promote and spread the aims of the education policy of the European Union are labour-market programmes financed through the European Social Fund (BMBF 2005, p. 222). Here improvements regarding the transition process from school to work have emerged as results of accompanying research activities and “model programmes”. The programme initiated by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) with the label “Promoting Competences – Vocational Training for Target Groups with Special Promotion Needs” (BQF), is also included in this category. From 2001 to 2006 it has produced a number of valuable insights into “good practice” e.g. in the field of supporting young immigrants or young women (ebd., pp. 232 ff.). In the following section one project will be discussed in more detail.

Vocational education of young mothers

A special group of disadvantaged young persons are young mothers. For this group the transition from school into employment produces several problems. Connected with early motherhood are constraints in vocational choice, unstable circumstances and risks of poverty. This also becomes clear in the school performance records of young mothers. 50 % only have a secondary general school leaving certificate or no school leaving certificate. The BQF project MOSAIK, running from 2003 to 2006, represents a holistic approach of vocational support for this target group (Friese

2008). In consideration of adolescence as a biographical status passage the strengthening of the (vocational) identity of the young women and of their competence as parents are central issues. It is essential for the project work to develop a transparent information and support network (support chain). In this network different providers and governmental bodies work together closely. In practice the support concept requires the provision of qualified counselling and social pedagogical support including profiling. The programme also aims at adequate support services for children, focuses on school examinations, vocational orientation and preparation as well on regular training. The latter is organised on the basis of the amendment of the Vocational Education Act as part-time vocational training. In the federal state of Bremen the support chain has been converted into a permanent offer supported by providers and governmental bodies. A transfer of the results of the project in other regions of Germany is carried out in the MOSAIK Transfer project (<http://www.mosaikonline.info>).

Further important research activities are assigned to the European Union like the action programme LEONARDO DA VINCI. This programme focuses on the teaching and training needs of those involved in VET. One main objective is to increase the quality and attractiveness of VET all over Europe. The programme provides funds for a wide range of actions, notably trans-national mobility schemes and European projects focusing on the development or the transfer of innovation and networks. In the following one example of such a project will be discussed.

European competences in vocational training

In 2001 the project “European catering – European competence in vocational education in catering” started with vocational training in the hotel and restaurant industry for disadvantaged youth (Mohorik/Karth 2006). The project is funded through the LEONARDO DA VINCI action programme. The basic approach of the project is to support mobility, linguistic competences (English for the hotel and restaurant industry) and intercultural competences (Schröder 2007). The educational institution developed supplementary qualifications, based on competences which are desired in the catering industry but which are not yet part of the conventional initial vocational training course. With this intention the project follows the development of parts of the vocational training undertaken abroad fitting to the aim of training. This has also been made possible through the amendment of the new Vocational Training Act. The trainees complete two to three eight week work placements abroad in the United Kingdom, France, Italy and Belgium. Most of them acquired an English certificate, intercultural experiences and other special competences. In 2005, the first 21 trainees finished their training with a final examination at the chamber of commerce. A higher percentage of the graduates – compared to graduates of standard training from the same target group – were able to start their career in Germany, Europe and even overseas. The project was assigned with the European quality seal (<http://www.kiezkuechen.de>).

These projects show that the support system in the field of vocational training for disadvantaged young people can be improved especially with respect to special target groups. The basis for these new developments has been laid with the reform of the Vocational Training Act in 2005 which allows stretching periods of part-time vocational training as well as undertaking parts of vocational training courses abroad.

The discussed projects are “island solutions”, which means that they are not a regular offer in the programme for the disadvantaged. Their conversion into a permanent system is still a major challenge.

5 Modernization of VET in Germany: implications for the VET support system

However, these efforts can also be seen against the background of a modernisation debate on the German VET system. In 2007, the working committee of the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) presented ten guidelines with recommendations for modernization and improved structuring of the German VET system. This was done in the thematic fields of modernization, permeability, transition management and European opening. A first analytic view to the guidelines shows that the VET support system here seems to be an important issue. More than half of the guidelines refer, though partly indirectly, to this topic.

In the thematic field of modernization the working committee points out that VET still should remain organized as a dual system based on the “vocational principle” and final standardised examinations. This premise, however, stepped back from the ideas of some stakeholders within the working committee who argued for a more modularised and flexible VET system (Euler/Severing 2007).

In guideline 4 structural improvements of the VET system are recommended. In order to reach higher flexibility and permeability of the VET system “structured horizontal and vertical transition at the cutting points of the dual system” (BMBF 2007b, S. 18) are suggested for substantial improvement. Also, training regulations are considered

to be in need of competence descriptions and the commission also recommends that the system of apprenticeship occupations, where possible, should be structured alongside occupational groups with common core qualifications and special qualifications for each particular occupation.

Another important point is the strengthening of the dual system by widening the number of companies who are willing to train apprentices (see guideline 5). One example in this direction is the programme JOBSTARTER of the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF). In this programme new strategies are provided such as the analysis of regional training potentials and the creation of training networks and coaching systems to motivate companies to offer apprenticeship places.

More directly linked to the VET support system, guidelines 1 to 3 and 6 refer to concepts which aim to improve transition from school to vocational education and into an occupation by special target groups. Here, the most interesting suggestion is the use of the new concept of training modules (Ausbildungsbausteine), which is described in the context of transition of unplaced applicants from previous years (guideline 3). These applicants comprise more than half of all aspirants who are registered with the Employment Agency and there is a general political will to reduce their number (Ulrich/Krekel 2007). Currently, a system of training modules in 10 to 12 important dual apprenticeship training occupations is being developed. Training modules could help the unplaced applicants from previous years to move into a regular dual training. In this case, already acquired qualifications will be recognized for the admission to an external chamber examination, which underlies the regular certification of an occupational qualification (Deissinger 1996). After successful trial

in 25 pilot regions in Germany the training modules are supposed to be adopted in most of the programmes supporting vocational training for disadvantaged young persons (BMBF 2007a, p. 6) as well as for career changers and aspirants from full-time vocational schools who want to undergo a formal chamber examination.

6 Consequences for the German VET support system

The guidelines of the working committee are connected with perspectives for an improvement of the VET support system in Germany. The use of training modules has the potential to offer a “second chance” qualification for unplaced applicants from previous years. Similarly the use of this concept in all parts of the programme for disadvantaged young persons is crucial. Thus permeability and transparency in the field of transition from school to dual training and into a skilled occupation have been initiated. However, it is not intended to change the German VET system into a complete module system in the future.

With the concept of training modules the influence of the European education policy in German VET policy becomes more visible. Other concepts like the recognition of prior learning, which can assist the disadvantaged, are still not integrated in the German VET system. By 2010, a German Qualification Framework (Deutscher Qualifikationsrahmen DQR) is to be developed under the leadership of the German Federal Government and important stakeholders (Hanf/Rein 2006; BMBF 2007b). The DQR will be oriented towards learning outcomes and as an instrument aims at improving permeability, transparency and mobility in the sense of lifelong learning. It is open however, whether crucial changes, such as the recognition of prior learning

and the differentiation of training occupations along different levels, will definitely emerge from this process.

The working committee plays an important role when it comes to widening and intensifying the research basis with respect to the VET support system. The research and action programmes financed by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) and the European Union (see section 4) are good starting points to inspire further research. The new EU educational action programme for lifelong learning of the European Commission running from 2007 to 2013 (budget € 7 billion) ties up with these programmes. Both European and international comparative research studies are important in taking a look at the structural differences of VET support systems. Research here can give important hints to frame conditions to be kept in mind when implementing concepts of best practice on the basis of mutual learning (see for example the European study of Pohl/Walther 2007).

7 Conclusions

It is still too early to assess the (envisaged) changes in the VET support system for disadvantaged young persons in Germany such as the enhancement of permeability and transparency of the VET support system through the implementation of training modules. The reform process of the German VET system is still running and it is likely that it will be more clearly influenced by the education policy of the European Union in the future. Apart from that, it is certainly associated with remarkable challenges.

The experience of Europe could be interesting for Australian VET researchers because of the cooperation between Australia and the European Commission in the area of general and vocational education with the aim to find a better adjustment of the education systems of both continents (see <http://www.delous.ec.europa.eu>).

With respect to VET support systems, Australia also has to struggle with the problem of early school leavers and their difficulties to master the transition into work and/or apprenticeship (Woods 2007; Australian Industry Group 2007). Nevertheless, to the German observer, the Australian VET system seems to be much more flexible and permeable in terms of structuring educational and vocational pathways. This is certainly due to the Training Reform Agenda, but also has historical and cultural reasons. In the area of vocational support for disadvantaged young people VET-in-school programmes and also school-based-apprenticeships could be helpful instruments shaping the transition to post-school activities (ibid.; Deissinger/Smith/Pickersgill 2006). These programmes are also addressed to indigenous students (Hill/Helme 2006), although this ethnic group also can use special programmes (McRae et al 2005). The VET-in-school programmes do not have a correlate in the German VET system, as here vocational education in schools follows after general school education (Deissinger 2007). In my eyes, they represent examples of good practice and could therefore stimulate further developments of support measure of young people in Germany as well as they cross borders between sub-systems and open up unconventional pathways.

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