

INITIATIVES AND STRATEGIES TO SECURE TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES IN THE GERMAN VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING SYSTEM

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ABSTRACT

In Germany, the vocational education and training system has traditionally been regarded as stable and efficient and also well esteemed because it produces highly valued and nationally recognised vocational qualifications. The so-called Dual System still attracts the majority of school-leavers with non-academic aspirations or talents. However, in the past few years the Dual System has faced severe problems, and critics argue that it is in a structural crisis owing to failing operating mechanisms. Furthermore, economic factors have contributed to a critical situation in the training market, with a serious lack of training opportunities. On the other hand, the vocational full-time schools as the second major sub-system of vocational education and training in Germany, though clearly in the shadow of the Dual System, provide a mix of opportunities to achieve general or vocational qualifications.

Against this background, vocational training policy and research alike have identified the need for reforms and a more or less substantial change of the system. Currently, four strategies are under discussion and have already been partly undertaken to provide a more reliable supply of training opportunities and to enhance the quality of vocational courses and programmes. Although one focus lies on bridging the gap between the two subs-systems, the nature of the reform debate at least partly shows parallels to reforms in anglophone countries, which seems remarkable as the system in Germany has always been reluctant to reform and less flexible and open compared to other countries.

Keywords: Dual apprenticeship, Dual System, German VET system, learning places, practice firms, skilled occupation, state-subsidised training, training levy, training market, vocational college, vocational full-time schools, vocational Principle, Vocational Training Act

Introduction

In Germany, dual apprenticeship training is the major non-academic option for school-leavers to start their working lives. Referring to the Dual System as the ‘centre-piece of vocational education and training in the Federal Republic’ (Raggatt, 1988, p 166) is certainly apposite, as its quantitative importance has traditionally dwarfed the school-based vocational education and training (VET) schemes of the federal states (Zabeck, 1985). In 2003, out of 2.7 million students attending non-academic vocational courses, only some 700,000 subscribed to a vocational full-time school, including vocational preparation schemes (Federal Statistical Office, 2004a). An apprenticeship in the Dual System gives young people the opportunity to undertake formal qualifications leading into various forms of employment within an occupationally structured labour market (Beck *et al*, 1980; Deissinger, 1998). The system – with its strong focus on tradition and quality control – has an almost universal character and traditionally recruits the majority of 16- to 19-year-olds, thereby contributing to a comparatively low number of unskilled employees in international terms (Büchtemann *et al*, 1993, pp. 510f.; Greinert, 1994b, p 116). In 2003, 39 per cent of graduates from lower secondary schools (*Hauptschulen*), 49 per cent of intermediate secondary school (*Realschule*) leavers and 12 per cent of those holding the school-leaving qualification (*Abiturienten*) from grammar schools (Gymnasien) planned to enter a formal apprenticeship course in one of the 350 occupations in the Dual System (Federal Ministry of Education and Research, 2004b, p 502).

There is no doubt that the problem behind these figures is the fact that this focus on the apprenticeship model implies a huge dependence of the VET system on economic parameters and the general labour market situation. As vocational full-time schools mostly offer formal school qualifications (including the *Abitur*), schools are in fact not prepared to develop a strong ‘qualification function’ which could assist the Dual System in solving the problem of integrating all school-leavers at ‘threshold one’ (between school and VET) into the formal VET system. In a paper published eight years ago, one of the authors of this article wrote (Deissinger, 1996, p 323):

Recently, the ‘Dual System’ has become the object of criticism and scepticism as to the question if, as a tradition-based training system, it will be able to master the challenges of the late twentieth century in the way it did in the past. Although the number of ‘open’ training places still amounts to 44,200 (September 1995) there are structural and regional frictions on the training market as well as developments which put the ‘Dual System’ under pressure from outside. Yet, in 1995, around 617,000 training places were offered which caused a tender rise in the number of new apprenticeships by 0.8 per cent against 1994. In the east of Germany, the upswing took new contracts up 4.1 per cent to 122,646 (...). The fact that in the new federal states the number of in-company training opportunities has risen seems quite remarkable considering the structural problems of the economy there (...). On the other hand, unemployment as Germany’s major social and economic problem in these days certainly puts strain on the training system. At ‘threshold one’ – between school and vocational training (...) – the ‘Dual System’ still seems to perform satisfactorily as to its ‘absorbing function’, although all social groups – first of all employers – will have to strengthen their efforts in favour of training opportunities for school-leavers as the demand for training places is expected to rise by 1 to 2 per cent p.a.

within the next ten to 15 years (...). More strikingly, the problems at 'threshold two' – from training into employment – have sharpened in recent years.

This quotation reflected an optimistic analysis of the situation, and it certainly has had to be revised recently because of what may be termed a 'double crisis' of the apprenticeship system: while the problems at 'threshold two' have continued owing to an unemployment rate of more than 12 per cent in the first quarter of 2004 (Federal Statistical Office, 2004b), the unsatisfactory situation on the apprenticeship market represents a new dimension of the problem. Hence, it is not surprising that widespread criticism refers to the Dual System as being in a structural crisis, and three traditional core mechanisms of the German VET system seem to be failing with regard to new economic and social requirements (Greinert, 2004, p 112). First, the 'recruiting mechanism', which should provide the training and labour market with qualified apprentices, seems to be failing, according to Greinert this is because companies prefer to recruit employees from outside the Dual System. In consequence, opportunities for skilled workers (*Facharbeiter*) to climb to the position of a technical assistant (*Technischer Angestellter*) are gradually disappearing, and qualified school-leavers now tend to prefer other paths than the Dual System. Second, the 'funding mechanism' seems to be failing because the stabilisation of the Dual System is cost intensive, especially with regard to the new federal states in the east of Germany, which have not yet been successful in implementing an appropriate funding scheme. Third, problems have not been solved in one of the most important mechanisms for the Dual System, namely the 'mechanism of learning places' (*Lernortmechanismus*), which includes periods of theoretical learning in a compulsory vocational part-time school and periods of practical learning in the workplace. Critics argue that the cooperation between vocational schools and companies has never been truly successful and will not be in the future. In their view, the vocational schools especially seem to be unable to direct training objectives towards knowledge-based qualifications rather than skills based on experience. This mechanism is also endangered by the increasing social demand for, and aspirations towards, general education at the expense of vocational education.² Moreover, employers are critical about not being able to recruit qualified apprentices via the training market and they associate apprenticeships with an additional financial burden rather than with a useful future investment (Pätzold and Wahle, 2003, p 473). This is a particularly serious problem in a situation where the supply of training places regularly fails to meet demand, and employers seem to have lost interest in the apprenticeship system (Deissinger, 2004).

Beyond the training market issue, the scene has been set in Germany for an ongoing reform of the Dual System (Federal Ministry of Education and Research 2003a, p 2):

By providing an appropriate general framework the Federal Government's future vocational education and training policy will focus, among other things, on supporting industry in its efforts to supply a number of training places that matches demand. This framework will include both a reform of vocational education and training law and an economic policy furthering small and medium-sized enterprises. In addition to economic recovery such a policy can play a major role in this situation. At the same time, reforms started during the past legislative period will be vigorously pursued; these reforms were designed to

modernise the initial and continuing vocational education and training system, make it more flexible and open it up at the international level.

All the issues reflected in this quotation raise the question as to whether it is necessary and possible to develop both supporting measures and alternative mechanisms to secure the supply of training opportunities in the German VET System. In this regard, reform initiatives have been undertaken in various areas on both the federal and federal state level.

Four strategies within the German VET system to secure the supply of training opportunities

On a national level, the federal government has tried to tackle the training market situation by using three strategies:

- State-subsidised training within and outside companies in order to stabilise the particularly critical situation in the training market in the new federal states.
- Implementation of a training levy for non-training enterprises to support companies that train.
- New stipulations in the revised Vocational Training Act (*Berufsbildungsgesetz*) to bridge the two subsystems (apprenticeships and full-time VET) as well as to integrate vocational preparation programmes into the formal VET system more reliably.

Also, against the background of a declining training market and considering the low acceptance of school-based VET qualifications, the German federal states have sought to strengthen the work-related features of vocational education in order to open up pathways and opportunities for young people outside the Dual System. This is especially true for the federal state of Baden-Württemberg, which prefers and promotes the implementation of ‘practice firms’ in the so-called ‘vocational colleges’ (*Berufskollegs*).

Establishing alternatives in the training market through state interference

In the past decade, the German Dual System has increasingly been criticised for its obsolescence in the face of a rapidly changing economic and social environment. Moreover, both in the political and scientific community, the serious situation in the training market, above all in the east of Germany, has emerged as a permanent issue of public concern. In 2003, the task of providing all applicants with a training place was once again associated with major challenges. At 557,612, the number of new training contracts was down 14,711 on the previous year and, decreasing by 2.6 per cent, reached an unexpectedly low level (Federal Ministry of Education and Research, 2004b, p 66). By early October 2003 some 35,000 young people had been left seeking an apprenticeship place.³

The reasons for the serious situation in the training market may be seen in the following factors (Pätzold and Wahle, 2003, pp 472–3):

- the weak economy;

- insecurities about the future demand for skilled employees;
- lack of training maturity among school-leavers; and
- regional and occupational imbalances on the training market.

The Federal Ministry of Education and Research indicates in its 'Report on Vocational Education and Training for the Year 2004' (*Berufsbildungsbericht*) that the serious decline of new training contracts has other structural reasons than the cyclical downturn (Federal Ministry of Education and Research, 2004b, pp. 15–16):

- New industrial sectors cannot compensate for the loss of work and training places in traditional industries quickly enough to provide a supply of training places sufficient to meet the requirements of both industry and young individuals.
- The alarming results of the PISA study (OECD, 2000) illustrate that standards of general education are in need of improvement, and the majority of German school-leavers (especially those graduating from a lower secondary school) are not well equipped with skills required for undertaking an apprenticeship. Companies often bring forward this argument to rationalise their decision to reduce training places instead of, or in addition, to arguments about cost.
- Although high in international terms, the demand for apprenticeships by young people has gradually decreased in recent years, while the number of university students has undoubtedly increased. This leads to the question whether the Dual System is losing its attractiveness, especially among those school-leavers who can make use of alternative pathways (Greinert, 1994a; Greinert, 2004).⁴
- With new technologies and new forms of work organization, qualification requirements in the labour market have risen, leading to a demand for higher standards of occupational aptitude for skilled work. Young people with educational deficits are unable to fulfil these new requirements.

All these tendencies have put strain on the apprenticeship system. The federal government has made it clear that it considers the Dual System as being in a critical state and has announced a number of compensating measures to address the unstable situation in the training market. These measures will encompass, for instance, an awareness-raising campaign and marketing initiative regarding VET, addressed to non-training companies in particular. Another major focus is the revision and modernisation of a number of existing training and economic programmes to develop customised in-company training courses and training schemes organised by external providers in close cooperation with local enterprises in problem regions. These political activities are meant to contribute to the creation of training opportunities and pathways into the labour market which in consequence will make the German VET system much more 'pluralistic'. This implies that the Dual System with its traditional features is likely to lose its 'exclusive' function as a system of skill formation for the vast majority of German school-leavers.

Despite its enthusiasm for privately funded apprenticeships, the federal government has been forced by the fragile economic framework in eastern Germany, to subsidise training schemes created for the purpose of establishing alternative ways of vocational preparation and integration. As early as 1998, against the background of rising youth unemployment, the JUMP programme (*Jugend mit Perspektive* (Youth with Perspectives)) was implemented to bring young people into training beyond the regular training market. In 2002, special training place programmes for eastern

Germany resulted in the creation of 14,000 additional training opportunities, mostly provided by external providers (*Bildungsträger*) in cooperation with local employers. Some 138,000 young people joined the 'Immediate Action Programme for Young People' which is supposed to lead to regular training places. The 2003 Vocational Training Report puts the number of schemes launched in 2002 at 196 and the number of newly created apprenticeships at some 10,000. Since 1999 a total of 60,259 training places have been created under the various schemes using public money (Federal Ministry of Education and Research, 2003a).

According to the 2003 Vocational Training Report, current initiatives to tackle the critical situation in the German training market are as follows (Federal Ministry of Education and Research, 2003a):

- A 'vocational training campaign' including governments, trade unions, employers, and various other institutions and social groups involved in VET, with a clear and strong focus on the creation of a sufficient number of training places.
- Implementation of special human resources measures in regions with a considerable shortage of training places, with the intention of attracting and introducing non-training companies to VET within the Dual System.
- Stronger support of sectoral, regional and in-company training place initiatives, and collaborative vocational training ventures as well as training schemes organised by external providers in close cooperation with local enterprises with a view to developing sustainable VET structures, also in problem regions in the western part of the country.
- Stronger focus on the company-oriented design of training place programmes for eastern Germany launched by the Federal and *Länder* governments, and of the supplementary schemes of the new *Länder*.
- Establishing instruments to connect all training-place programmes with regional innovation promotion measures and with structural and economic development schemes.
- A continuation of the JUMP programme with more flexible implementation rules, thus targeting a greater number of young people.

To address the training-market problem more clearly, the federal government has recently introduced the concept of training-place developers (*Ausbildungsplatzentwickler*) in order to secure the long-term provision of training places and detach it from the contingencies of the labour market. This includes support for companies to cope with administrative work linked to an apprenticeship, cooperation with vocational schools and with the setting up of company-specific training plans. Regional joint training provision is to be promoted in association with another programme called 'STARegio', and companies will pool resources in order to enable young people to achieve all the competencies within a given occupational training scheme (*Ausbildungsverbände*) (Federal Ministry of Education and Research, 2003b).

Introduction of a training levy system

The training-market crisis makes the introduction of a training levy more and more likely. This could mean that companies not engaged in training would have to pay 1 per cent of their wage bill into a fund to subsidise additional training places. The 'Act to Secure Provision of Training Places' (*Berufsausbildungssicherungsgesetz*) would

become effective once the training supply fails to exceed the demand by 15 per cent at the beginning of a training year. In this case all companies with more than 10 employees and with a training quota of less than 7 per cent ('training quota' is simply the proportion of employees who are apprentices) would have to pay a levy, which would then be redistributed to companies engaged in training or used for the encouragement of non-training companies to become training companies. The Act includes additional criteria that should be considered before the implementation of the training levy, for example, the relationship between the benefit of such a training levy and the administrative effort as well as the implications for the future development of the training in that company (Federal Institute of Vocational Training, 2004a, p 2).

The political move behind the Act (supported by the Social Democrats and the Green Party) has to be viewed in relation to the fact that at the end of September 2003 only 6,500 school-leavers out of 35,000 still searching could be provided with a training opportunity. German employers, however, have always refused a training levy (and continue to do so) fearing that this could eventually lead to even fewer training places. As early as in 1976, training levy legislation (*Ausbildungsplatzförderungsgesetz*) failed because the Federal Constitutional Court considered it to contravene the constitution. The present government has been the first since then to try to steer training supply in the Dual System in this problematic direction.

Currently, different issues are being discussed in favour of and against the 'Act to Secure Provision of Training Places' and the implementation of a training levy. The Act intends to strengthen the responsibility of companies for the provision of sufficient training places with an internal funding system and without additional state subsidies (Federal Institute of Vocational Training, 2004b, pp. 1–2). If the Act becomes effective, companies that exceed the required training quota of 7 per cent would be entitled to receive funding for additionally provided training places, and thus the incentives for companies to train above the required quota would be increased. Private companies and the public service are treated equally by the law and therefore are subject to the training levy in the same way. The current debate has caused severe criticism of a training levy system, especially with respect to the criteria defining the circumstances under which the levy has to be imposed. The government-set margin of 15 per cent by which the training supply should exceed the demand cannot be regarded as a reliable indicator for the training situation, because it is purely quantitative and therefore neglects qualitative and regional factors (ibid, p 3). The mechanisms deriving from it could lead to a situation where companies who actually provide training places in occupational areas which are less attractive for young people, and hence find it difficult to recruit qualified apprentices, would have to pay the training levy. Another anticipated effect is a shift from training in large companies to small companies. Apprenticeships in large companies are significantly more expensive, and it is harder for large companies in comparison to small companies to achieve a quota of 7 per cent of apprentices (Deissinger, 2001). Consequently, small companies will still provide the required number of training places and might even offer more in order to receive additional funding, whereas for large companies it might be cheaper to reduce the number of apprentices and pay the training levy. Against this background it may be assumed that not only the quantity of training would diminish, but also quality would suffer, since apprenticeships in large companies are regarded to be superior because of better income and career opportunities and a generally broader scale for personal development. The qualitative decline of

VET leads to less skilled workers, higher unemployment rates and enforced occupational changes.

Despite severe criticism the government put the law through Federal Parliament in May 2004. At the same time, the government offered a pact (*Ausbildungspakt*) with industry and trade unions as an alternative to the levy, which included financial, organisational and human resource measures that should have guaranteed training places for all young people. This alternative seemed to have convinced the last opponents of the training levy system within the present government to finally agree upon the law. On July 9th 2004, however, the Federal States Council (*Bundesrat*) rejected the law. Preceding this decision of the Land chamber, dominated by the conservative federal states, the federal government had agreed to accept a 'Training Pact' with industry which promised to offer 30,000 additional apprenticeships per annum within the next three years. This new development seems to have stopped the enforcement of the law for the time being. Meanwhile the government has announced that it has 'parked' the law until autumn 2005.⁵

Reform of the Vocational Training Act

Since the passing in 1969 of the Vocational Training Act, which overcame the divergent developments in the craft and the industrial sector, national uniform training standards have determined the didactical pattern of the qualification process. As the existence of a 'skilled occupation' (*Ausbildungsberuf*) is dependent on a training ordinance, its formal recognition requires governmental approval. The Vocational Training Act has laid the formal responsibility for training ordinances in the hands of the Federal Ministry of Education and Research. The procedure which leads to training ordinances claims to be reality-based and tries to take account of newly developing job requirements based on organisational and technological changes. The general tendency with training ordinances is against too much specialisation. Between 1970 and 1990 the number of skilled occupations decreased from around 600 to 378, and now stands at 350. It is assumed that a broad basis of elementary vocational qualifications supports a maximum of flexibility and mobility between different workplaces and firms. Moreover, the so-called *Ausschliesslichkeitsgrundsatz* (principle of exclusiveness)⁶ ensures that training ordinances represent the only way which leads young people into skilled employment (Deissinger, 1996).

The idea behind this strict principle is based on the conviction that a systematised training course pins companies down to the complete skill range of a given occupation, marketable beyond the training company (Beck *et al.*, 1980). Still, the central objectives of the federal government are nationwide transparency, uniform quality standards and reliable recognition of vocational training, but this is now being extended to the issue of vocational preparation, pursuant to section 29 of the Vocational Training Act. The purpose of qualification modules geared to vocational training is to improve substantially the opportunities for transition from vocational preparation and school-based VET to vocational training courses. At the same time, the intention is to create an easier and more adequate basis for entry into employment for those young people who cannot make it to vocational training at first attempt, or at all, in spite of support systems and alternative training schemes made available for them. According to the 2003 Vocational Training Report (Federal Ministry of Education and Research, 2003a), a system of uniform certification of qualification modules throughout Germany is to be established. However, the government wants to ensure that – irrespective of the necessary flexible

gearing of qualification modules to the regional demand for qualifications by employers and local players – the issues of transparency, quality and marketability of qualifications remain the cornerstones of vocational training policy.

In its 2003 Vocational Training Report, the federal government has underlined its intention to make transition routes from vocational preparation to vocational (initial) training and from initial training to continuing or upgrading training more flexible. The ‘Second Modern Services on the Labour Market Act’ (*Zweites Gesetz für Moderne Dienstleistungen am Arbeitsmarkt*) has already led to the integration of vocational preparation of socially disadvantaged adolescents and young adults and those with learning impairments into the Vocational Training Act as an independent part of vocational education. This is in addition to vocational training, continuing vocational training and retraining. The federal government thus made it clear that this subsystem should become an integral part of the VET system and that it should be more closely linked with the Dual System and hence employer-based training.

In consequence, the federal government plans to amend the Vocational Training Act (Euler and Pätzold, 2004). The reform, due to become effective in 2005, will include the following components:

- the inclusion of vocational preparation schemes within the scope of regulation of the law and with it the implementation of an appropriate system of qualification modules;
- the transferability of credits obtained in school-based VET via agreements between the federal states and the federal government;
- a more intense internationalisation of VET by providing opportunities for apprentices to undergo part of their vocational training abroad; and
- an ongoing modernisation of examinations by including the ‘extended’ final examination in the list of recognised types of final examinations.⁷

According to the criteria for the reform of the Vocational Training Act, the introduction of national competency standards, as they have recently been implemented in general education, seems to be inevitable (Federal Ministry of Education and Research, 2004a, p 4). A change from a strongly ‘input-oriented’ system to a more ‘output-oriented’ approach appears to be self-evident. As indicated in the criteria, the tendency towards output orientation in the sense of competency standards, modularisation and work-based learning is striking, especially if one considers that these are features of competence-based/outcome-based education and training common in the UK and Australia (Jessup, 1995; Mansfield, 1990; Misko, 1999; Wolf, 1995).

The interesting question which arises in this respect is whether the German Dual System is gradually adopting elements of the ‘anglophone’ training concept often regarded to be a complete opposite of the German VET system, especially if one considers the ‘vocational principle’ (*Berufsprinzip*) as its ‘defining element’ (Miller Idriss, 2002, p 473), or the ‘organisational principle’ (Deissinger, 1998). Others claim that there is a converging of European VET systems as a result of increasing economic convergence and despite the subsidiarity principle of the Maastricht Treaty (Ertl, 2000, p 36). This convergence hypothesis is supported by the increasing demand for internationalisation of VET programmes and the necessity to open national VET systems via transferable and internationally comparable vocational qualifications. Consequently, discrepancies between different VET systems would diminish and it would be more likely that similar elements would be found in presumably different systems.

For the time being, modernisation of the Dual System at the curricular level has led to the creation or revision of training schemes within the system of ‘skilled occupations’ that have at least adopted features of modular curricula. Implanting modules within training schemes as didactical units does not necessarily mean giving up occupational skill formation (Euler, 1998, pp 96ff.). Vocational profiles with elective modules (such as the IT occupations created in 1997) offer more flexibility in terms of training content but remain portable in a conventional way since they still stand for holistic sets of competencies. The advantageous effects of such a ‘mild’ strategy of modularisation may be seen in adapting the existing training system to technological developments more easily and more quickly without changing its basic ‘philosophy’ or working principles (Deissinger, 2002).

New perspectives for VET in full-time vocational schools

There certainly is a growing degree of state interference within the German VET system, which is underlined by the increasing number of participants in school-based vocational preparation courses as well as full-time students in VET. This is especially true for the vocational college or BK (*Berufskolleg*) in the federal state of Baden-Württemberg. This is a good example, illustrating the ambivalence of full-time vocational education in Germany. Being one of the major subtypes of a commercial vocational full-time school with some 14,300 students currently enrolled, it can be attended by students with an intermediate school-leaving qualification. These students come from either the two-year vocational full-time school or *Berufsfachschule* (which takes graduates from the lower secondary schools normally aged 15 or 16) or – more likely – from pre-vocational education (*Gymnasium* or *Realschule*).

Many subtypes of vocational full-time schools such as the BK feature a ‘double function’ which means that young people can study for a ‘professional’ or ‘occupational’ qualification (economic assistant) and also for a higher school qualification (in this case a polytechnic entrance qualification). Preliminary research carried out at the University of Konstanz (Deissinger, 2003; Deissinger and Ruf, 2003; Franz 2001) preceding a research project on practice firms (which will be completed in early 2005) reveals that, from a student perspective:

- The occupational (assistant) qualification (*Wirtschaftsassistent* in the case of the commercial BK) is generally not valued as being useful or attractive – a result which is supported by empirical evidence as most students report their intention to take up an apprenticeship after finishing the BK course.
- The ‘parking function’ (deferring function) of the BK before entering the Dual System seems to remain restricted to the first year (BK I) while students in their second year have a clear understanding of their goals and motivations including taking up an apprenticeship after the BK II.
- Because of the different value students give to various qualifications in full-time and part-time VET courses, the BK rather assumes the role of a ‘bridge’ between school education and the Dual System and therefore cannot be regarded as a substitute or alternative in relation to the apprenticeship system.

One of the didactical tools supposed to ‘make schools practical’ and, in the case of the vocational colleges, to increase the labour market and training market value of the assistant qualification is the ongoing implementation of ‘practice firms’ (Reetz,

1986). In Baden-Württemberg, practice firms (*Übungsfirmen*)⁸ are seen as learning arrangements to give full-time VET a new face and increase its attractiveness to both students and employers (Niephaus, 1999). All in all, some 90 practice firms are currently in operation in commercial school centres. Most of them are implanted within BK I and BK II courses and have been introduced in the commercial sector on a larger scale since 1997/98. Currently, the third phase of what is named 'Future Offensive III' is being implemented with 43 vocational colleges involved and some 70 practice firms in operation.

As already mentioned, there is a long-standing dissatisfaction with the conspicuously low market-value of the assistant qualification in relation to apprenticeship qualifications (Euler, 2000; Feller, 2002). Traditionally, there has always been a clear preference from companies for the Dual System and its graduates. For instance, in 2002 only half of all full-time VET students in Germany attended courses leading to 'occupational' qualifications considered to be portable on the labour market. However, with the slackening training market, the ongoing discussion on alternative pathways, and the accreditation of school-based learning leading to occupational qualifications, vocational full-time schools could become more occupation-orientated. This would require, however, improvement in their relevance both for skilled employment and for a subsequent apprenticeship course. From an educational perspective the crucial question is the extent to which practice firms are able to promote the employability of young people by developing skills in a more-or-less realistic learning environment that merely simulates problems and work activities typical of workplaces in companies. Against this background the above-mentioned research project picks up a topic which has regained major attention in the pedagogical debate since the 1990s and which is also underlined by the political intentions framing the new Vocational Training Act.⁹

Conclusion

Examining the various reforms and strategies that have been implemented in 'anglophone' countries, such as Australia and the UK (Harris, 2001; Raggatt and Williams, 2000; Raffe, 2001), it seems that reforming VET has become a burning issue within the last few years. While the reasons for reforms can generally be found in the social, political and economic context of VET, the respective goals can clearly be identified as directed towards enhancing quantity and quality of VET programmes, providing coherent qualification standards as well as increasing acceptance and transparency of vocational qualifications. However, attempts to achieve these goals are being realised in different ways, although the respective problems and structural changes appear to be similar. Consequently, the pressure to modernise VET seems to be prevalent in all countries due to globalisation and technological changes that affect the international and national context of VET policy. It is interesting and promising that even Germany, with its long-standing tradition of dual apprenticeships and the reputation of maintaining its practices rather than changing them, has joined the reform agenda. From a comparative perspective, the German reform approach – being clearly affected by the economic situation – tends to happen 'within the system' and still appears to remain a long distance behind the 'radical' or 'revolutionary' ways which 'anglophone' countries have pursued in the last decades. One of the most interesting issues in the national German context is the future shaping of the 'borders' between initial training and further training (or lifelong learning respectively), but also the relation-

ship between full-time and part-time (dual) VET. With its institutional demarcations and more 'structured' system (Ryan, 2001; Raggatt, 1988; Harris and Deissinger, 2003), Germany seems to find it more difficult than other countries to become more flexible and open up pathways and, even more clearly, to change established patterns of responsibility within its VET system. The latter, however, seems inevitable in the face of a partial failure of the traditional mechanisms operating within the existing apprenticeship system.

Notes

- 1 Germany's apprenticeship system has its roots in the corporatist framework established by legal sanction in the late nineteenth century (Deissinger, 1994), which not only remained virtually unchanged in its crucial features up to the establishment of the Vocational Training Act (*Berufsbildungsgesetz*) in 1969 (Deissinger, 1996), but was incorporated in the main into the modern training system. Much earlier in the development, compulsory attendance at part-time vocational school emerged as a second pillar underlying formalised vocational training. Although the dualism of learning sites and legal responsibilities is held to be the striking feature of the 'German system' of vocational training (Greinert, 1994b), it is characterised by working principles which reflect the organisation of the training process as a whole, and thus reach far beyond the dual training arrangement.
- 2 In 1993 the quota of first-year students was 25.5 per cent and increased by 14.1 per cent to 39.6 per cent in 2003. Furthermore the quota of 'A-Level Holders' increased by 6 per cent in the last ten years (Federal Statistical Office, 2003).
- 3 This is against the background where the number of apprentices in the craft sector alone decreased by 100,000 within the last six years (Federal Ministry of Education and Research, 2004b, p 527).
- 4 On the other hand it still seems remarkable that grammar school-leavers undertake apprenticeships as an alternative to university courses. In 2002, their proportion stood at 14.8 per cent of all apprentices (Federal Institute of Vocational Training, 2004b).
- 5 See www.netzzeitung.de/arbeitundberuf/295022.html
- 6 Training for a recognised trainee occupation shall be given only in accordance with the relevant training regulations. (...) Initial training in occupations other than recognised trainee occupations shall not be provided for young persons under 18 years of age unless it is intended to prepare them for a subsequent course of instruction' (Section 28 of the VTA).
- 7 The theoretical achievements in the vocational school during an apprenticeship are not recognised in the final examination. The integration of these achievements is demanded by teachers' unions, such as the Business Teachers Association (*Verband der Lehrer an Wirtschaftsschulen*).
- 8 The basic features of a practice firm may be characterised as follows: (i) it is a fictitious company within a vocational school that works like a normal company; (ii) all commercial departments are represented within a practice firm; (iii) there is no real exchange of goods and money; (iv) it cooperates with other practice firms within a national and international network; (v) a real company normally provides support funding and the product names for the practice firm; (vi) the number of lessons per week spent in the practice firm is typically between five and seven (in the BK in Baden-Württemberg).
- 9 Didactical expectations attached to the practice firm concept refer to the presumed benefits of this clearly non-conventional learning arrangement which puts both the teacher and the student into different roles by requiring a new understanding of the relationship between teaching and learning, as opposed to normal classroom settings of lessons in business administration or economics. It is assumed that practice firms help learners to develop a more substantial understand-

ing of business processes and to experience realistic workplace conditions although the practice firm remains first and foremost a pedagogical institution. Practice firms are seen as learning arrangements which have to be measured against the criteria typical for 'activity orientation' (*Handlungsorientierung*), now seen as the dominant and most innovative didactical concept within the current VET debate (Czycholl, 2001).

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