

# The cultural foundations of VET and the



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## 1. Introduction

In a ‘system’ perspective, VET can take different shapes. Besides the apprenticeship system, school-based forms of vocational learning, such as ‘vocational grammar schools’ in France, ‘vocational colleges’ in Germany or further education colleges in Britain, represent more or less traditional courses and qualifications which are normally institution-based, shaped by state influence and more or less clearly didactically steered pedagogical arrangements. There are, however, differences when it comes to formally linking up these traditional structures with general or higher education. It also seems that countries differ in terms of their VET systems and traditions, especially with respect to the relationship between full-time VET and company-based training, but also, when it comes to Europe, in terms of their adaptability to the overarching European VET policy ideas. One of these ideas is the conceptualisation of National Qualifications Frameworks, linked with notions of “Lifelong Learning”. In its White Paper on *Growth, Competitiveness and*

*Employment* (European Commission 1993), the European Commission pointed out that Lifelong Learning should become “the overall objective to which the national educational communities can make their own contributions”. Two years later, in the White Paper on *Teaching and Training — Towards the Learning Society* (European Commission 1995), the concept of Lifelong Learning became associated with the idea of a ‘personal skills card’ for every European citizen which would document the acquisition of new knowledge both in formal and informal learning environments.

These new concepts imply that the borders between different sectors within the educational and/or training system, including higher and further education, should become permeable and the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), emerging from the so-called “Lisbon-Brugge-Copenhagen Process”, repeats the underlying principles of a policy which challenges each of the member countries in a specific way.

## 2. Different pre-conditions in Germany and Britain in the face of current European VET policy

2.1. *The case of Germany: challenging the tradi-*

*tional features of an “apprenticeship country”.* In Germany, the apprenticeship system (dual system) is the strongest stream in post-compulsory secondary education. Formal training takes place both in the company and in the part-time vocational school. In this system, with its 350 recognised training occupations, the commitment and interest from chambers, trade unions and companies is linked with a specific pedagogical component comprising both theoretical vocational learning as well as general education during the apprenticeship period. The basis for all this is the *Vocational Training Act*, which places vocational training in the hands of firms and chambers, with the latter functioning as monitoring agencies for in-company training and examination bodies. For constitutional reasons the Act only covers company-based training, but nevertheless contains stipulations which refer to the existence of the second “learning venue”, the part-time vocational school. Against this background, vocational training is founded both upon the school law and the law of labour.

Apart from a move towards a clearer “internal modernisation” process, the revision of the VTA in 2005 has come up with some more or less innovative stipulations meant to

# European Qualifications Framework:

## a comparison of Germany and Britain

re-define the relationship between apprenticeship training in a recognised occupation and full-time VET courses leading to vocational qualifications and has therefore picked up the 'European' topic of permeability in a specific way. The German federal states now have the right to determine which courses in full-time vocational schools or in comparable institutions are eligible for partial accreditation in a subsequent apprenticeship course. Applications for accreditation have to be submitted individually to the chambers. According to another new stipulation, graduates from a full-time course leading to a vocational qualification shall get permission to undergo a final examination in a recognised occupation before the chamber if the courses are rated as equivalent in terms of purpose and contents. This new regulation also includes the so-called "school occupations" outside the scope of the VTA or the Craft Regulation Act. These regulations, when put into practice, could lead to a re-positioning of different pathways into skilled work and could help to cure the notorious acceptance problem haunting full-time VET. It is too early to assess the consequences of these new stipulations as they depend on the value companies and chambers will place on full-time VET in the future.

The general structural feature of non-existing links between educational sectors may be listed as just one of the open issues still to be solved when designing the German Qualifications Framework (DQR) alongside the above-mentioned EQF:

- Missing links between VET and HE in terms of progression, inclusion and permeability of the education system.
- Missing links between different streams within VET, especially when it comes to valuation and accreditation of non-dual VET or vocational preparation and integration measures.
- Lack of differentiation within VET in terms of skill levels and duration, also

with as view to special groups and/or disadvantaged young people.

- Virtually no interaction between non-formal or informal learning and formal VET.

### 2.2 *The case of Britain: inventing the blueprint for the European Qualifications Framework*

In contrast with Germany, Britain's (and in particular England's) VET system has often been described as a decentralised, heterogeneous system, characterised by the particular importance of individual firms in the field of skill formation. In general the system has so far successfully avoided external regulation, especially from the state. Although having become a major focus of VET policy in recent years, the apprenticeship system in Britain as one sector of this VET reality "continues to differ fundamentally from its counterparts elsewhere in Europe", as the British understanding of VET particularly here "favours deregulation". It is obvious, especially from a German perspective, that the lack of process regulation corresponds with the 'competence-based' approach to skill certification in the context of the system of National Vocational Qualifications introduced in the 1980s. Some critical observers talk of "behaviourist reduction", the still existing problem of diverging "roads" between "high skills" and "low skills", and some even deplore the "decline of vocational learning".

Nevertheless, apprenticeships in Anglo-Saxon countries — this also includes Australia — feature as part of a national qualification system which offers different options and pathways for school leavers and adults alike. Also, at least intention-wise, apprenticeships are considered to provide training which is seen as equivalent with pathways in general and higher education. This is especially true for Britain and also for Australia where apprenticeships have been revitalised or reframed in recent years due to dissatisfaction with school-based skill formation as well as with traditional on-the-job training. Britain as a 'framework country', as it

might be labelled from a continental European perspective, certainly has the more 'modern' concept, measured alongside the rhetoric used by the European Commission and other agencies committed to the EQF strategy.

This poses the question whether countries with a weaker apprenticeship culture or a weaker initial skill formation system might be more prepared for the 'Lisbon-Brugge-Copenhagen Process'. In fact, it cannot be denied that the EQF appears to be a copy of the NQF in England and Wales, with its focus on equivalence patterns between general, vocational and higher education pathways and therefore a clear commitment to the issue of permeability (similar to the Australian QF). The rhetoric and terminology which the EU uses in this context sounds and reads familiar for those who look to the descriptors for the different levels of competence achievement in the English NQF. One of the clear messages both from the NVQ system and the EQF policy context is that "direct assessment of someone's competence — not their book knowledge, and not their time on the job" is seen as the defining requirement for any qualification or competence profile within any national framework. This certainly puts strain on existing course patterns and institution-based VET in general.

### 3. Conclusions from a German perspective

In Germany, it is still initial training which is seen as the core component of the VET system and all major stakeholders make it clear that it should be shielded off against potential erosion due to European policy. On the other hand, it seems inevitable that employers become more open for flexible and regional solutions when it comes to the formation or accreditation of vocational qualifications. In the current debate accompanying the impending construction and implementation of the DQR, one of the basic problems could be the questioning of the

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“vocational principle” with its holistic notion of “full” or “fundamental” qualifications from which any career or employment perspective should emerge. While British VET policy appears to be much more pragmatic, the German debate may be characterised as ‘protective’ and ‘conservative’, with the trade unions and the craft sector as the major defenders of a specific cultural understanding and corresponding institutional arrangements within the VET system.

Sticking to the overall importance of initial training certainly makes sense considering the functionality and merits of the dual system (with the training market offering more training opportunities now as it did in the last 15 years). On the other hand, VET policy should avoid narrowing its view to issues related to the dual system, such as modernisation of training schemes or the training market. Taking the European framework issue seriously implies that the existing ‘irregular VET system’ and more ‘individualised’ approaches enter the political and pedagogical agenda more visibly and strongly. According to the benchmarks for the reform of the VTA in 2005, the introduction of national competency standards as they have recently been implemented in general education seem to become inevitable. However, for the time being, modernisation of the dual system only happens on the curricular level. It has materialised in the creation or revision of training schemes within the system of ‘skilled training occupations’ which now even allow for modest features of modularisation. Implanting modules within training schemes as didactical units with a mandatory but optional character (like in the IT occupations created in 1997) no

longer seems incompatible with a holistic notion of competence. However, there are other suggestions using modules in a more open manner, and there is a general conviction in the research community that the system has to become more flexible. On the other hand, interest groups, such as trade unions and chambers, are eager to underline their belief in the efficiency of the dual system as the ‘king’s way’ into skilled employment. It becomes evident from this that the debate on the introduction of a ‘German National Qualifications Framework’ (DQR) is likely to continue posing crucial challenges for the German education system in general and especially for the apprenticeship culture within the dual system.

Moreover, full-time VET, vocational preparation and integration programs now make up the reality of the VET system, as regional training markets determine the need and viability of apprenticeships on a large scale. One of the steps ‘into Europe’ for the German VET system needs to be re-assessing and re-developing its system of links and accreditation mechanisms. Such a move would not necessarily require to simply copy the British or Australian system but would reflect the acknowledgement of one of the crucial premises underlying the EQF, i.e. the appeal to ‘build bridges’ between sub-systems, pathways, forms of learning and institutions in the VET system. However, such a move certainly requires more flexibility and openness towards

the European VET strategy without ignoring the experiences of the Anglo-Saxon VET systems with ‘outcomes’ and ‘competences’.

When looking to Australia, developments such as school-based new apprenticeships, besides opportunities to learn in different institutions when doing a degree or qualification, seem to proceed in this direction. As part of these programs, school students have the option of undertaking an apprenticeship which involves being in a part-time apprenticeship or traineeship employment contract and studying at a TAFE or a private RTO, which can be the secondary school itself. On the other hand, the acceptance and value given to (initial) VET as such is an asset which the German-speaking countries should preserve. One could argue that in Australia vocational pathways are still much more likely to be poorly understood. It even seems that the introduction of traineeships and New Apprenticeships from 1998 in the interests of flexibility has tended to make the understanding of apprenticeship even less clear. Therefore, VET policy always should look to possible implications of reforms in one area, such as building bridges between systems or promoting Lifelong Learning, for others, such as initial training — which undoubtedly is a solid basis for all learning following suit. ♦

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## ATSIEC News

# Arthur Hamilton Award

The Australian Education Union is pleased to announce that the winner of the 2008 Arthur Hamilton Award for Outstanding Contribution to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education is the Aboriginal Training Programs Team of TAFE Tasmania.

We congratulate the dedicated staff of the Aboriginal Training Programs whose educational practices and programs are underpinned by principles of inclusive education.

This marks the first time that a TAFE Institute has won the Award and could be the first time an application has been received from a TAFE Institute.



Gill Brazendale of the Aboriginal Training Programs of the former TAFE Tasmania receives the Award on behalf of the team from AEU President Angelo Gavrielatos.

All positions within the small but dynamic state wide Aboriginal Programs Team are staffed by Aboriginal people in identified positions. They pride themselves on providing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with quality vocational education and training and are committed to ensuring quality content and delivery of Aboriginal specific programs through strong

involvement in programs not run by them.

More general training can range from basic reading, writing and maths skills to specific employment related training. They also assist with access to training at all TAFE Tasmania campuses. Aboriginal VET Officers’ time is also spent in consultation with the Aboriginal community identifying future local training needs. Finally they provide Cross Cultural Awareness training and advice to both teaching and non-teaching staff and management on Aboriginal issues.

Established in 1999, this Award is in recognition of AEU members who are committed to ensuring that all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students have the right to high quality education throughout their lives.

The field was very highly competitive this year demonstrated by the fact that three Special Commendation certificates were awarded. The recipients are Gina Archer (QTU), Stephanie Ingster (ACT Branch), and Donna Bridge (SSTUWA).

The AEU congratulates the Aboriginal Programs Team, the staff and community of TAFE Tasmania on their success in winning this Award. ♦

*Wayne Costelloe, Federal Aboriginal Education Officer*