



BIBB International – Strategy paper on the internationalisation of German vocational education and training



► **The process of internationalisation has gathered pace in recent years, spreading through one area of society after another and posing new challenges, not least for vocational education and training (VET). The growing globalisation of the economy and the rapid process of European integration towards a single market for education and employment have given rise to a radically new situation. National VET systems are caught in a cross-current between the imperative of international competition and the necessity for cross-border cooperation. At the same time, there are increasingly stringent requirements for the planning of VET to embrace a European and an international outlook. The paper explains the action to be taken by the Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training (BIBB) in response to these developments.**

As countries compete to be more attractive locations for international business, national VET systems become a key competitive factor and scrutiny is turned on their quality and innovative capacity. This prompts a need for action going beyond measures on the national level alone: it is vital to engage in transnational projects, partnerships and international networks as a source of innovative and creative impetus for our own work. “Learning from others”, “sharing experience with others” and “working together on solutions” have become essential maxims of VET policy and practice.

According to the Federal Vocational Training Act, BIBB is to take part in international cooperation in the field of vocational education and training in accordance with the guidelines of the competent Federal Minister. In view of the major political importance ascribed to international cooperation in VET, and the growing quantitative and qualitative challenges faced by international VET research and practice, a strategic orientation of BIBB’s international activities is required, which will entail the focused development of existing know-how and the safeguard of a high level of professionalism in the development of methods and tools for international VET consulting and marketing. The present paper makes a conceptual contribution towards this end. Based on an analysis of the current requirements applying to BIBB with regard to international cooperation in vocational education and training – reflecting the changed framework conditions – the objectives for BIBB’s medium-term activities in the international context are defined and specified in strategic and operative terms.

The position of BIBB in the international context

In recent years there has been a vast increase in demand for cooperation with BIBB and access to its international competence. More and more institutions and organisa-



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tions in Germany and abroad are contacting BIBB, wishing to benefit from its know-how in the field of international VET and to collaborate on research projects, development and advisory programmes. This demand works in Germany's interests – not only from the viewpoint of VET policy but also from economic and employment policy perspectives:

- EU member states are important partners in the construction of a European system of VET.
- With the advancing development of the single European Education Area, cooperation with the European Commission is intensifying. The National Agency "Education for Europe" at BIBB performs an important function under the action programme for lifelong learning within the framework of European VET policy, with responsibility for the Leonardo da Vinci (VET) and Grundtvig (general adult education) sectoral programmes, and for certain special measures such as the EUROPASS.
- European and non-European industrialised countries, which are in transition towards "knowledge societies" and are classified as global competitors, are important and innovative partner countries for VET in Germany.
- By providing advisory services in newly-developed and developing countries which seek cooperation with Germany for the purpose of establishing or modernising their VET systems, BIBB opens up important fields of action and international relationships for the future.

In addition, BIBB is receiving growing numbers of visiting groups, experts and graduates from abroad who are interested in learning more about German VET and the structure, organisation and range of work done by the Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training.

The upward trend in demand in the international sector reflects the fact that BIBB's remit and role in adapting VET to economic, technical and social developments are a matter of considerable interest to foreign vocational education experts. At the same time, BIBB has continually strengthened its own competence profile in the field of international VET. This has been accomplished particularly through:

- BIBB's longstanding function (since 1989) as a national coordination centre for European Union VET programmes and community initiatives, and the transfer of this portfolio in the year 2000 to a National Agency "Education for Europe" at BIBB;
- the increased participation of various departments of BIBB in European programmes and projects (including those jointly financed by the European Commission via the EU vocational education programme LEONARDO);
- cooperation with partner institutes within and outside Europe;

- advisory work with selected countries on the modernisation of their VET systems;
- international comparative research projects and major studies in collaboration with the OECD, CEDEFOP and the ETF, and
- a series of bilateral VET policy workshops, numerous lecturing activities abroad, academic exchanges and the secondment of short-term experts to developing and newly-developed countries.

Changes to framework conditions affecting future work

The pressure for modernisation which goes hand in hand with globalisation calls for the rapid deployment of solutions which have already proven successful in practice for the continuous development of the VET system. In recognition of economic relationships based on interaction and cooperation and the new opportunities provided by mobile communications, it is imperative to look beyond our own borders.

Supranational cooperation ventures force the individual member states to address the mutual recognition, or at least the transparency, of vocational qualifications. In the international arena the German dual system must compete with other approaches, and to support this it is necessary to prove the high performance of the German model.

It is an increasing hindrance to the public image and the effectiveness of German activities abroad when partner countries have to deal with a confusing array of German actors, each with different responsibilities. BIBB has therefore set up a marketing task force, the "Aktionsgemeinschaft Profilbildung" in conjunction with GTZ (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit – German Technical Cooperation) and InWent (Internationale Weiterbildung und Entwicklung – Capacity Building International, Germany). It serves as a discussion forum for key actors from the field of politics, economics and research. Its goal is to define a common identity so as to improve the positioning of Germany's international promotion of VET.

Because of the environment described above in which internationally-oriented VET work is taking place, BIBB's own activities have to be defined in terms of the desired results, and priorities have to be set from which specific objectives can be derived. Such objectives have a number of benefits: they help to prevent duplication of effort and support the networking of activities (synergy effects); they enable us to check the effectiveness of our own work (achievement of objectives); and their normative character ensures planning security.

In the present strategic concept, BIBB has defined the following fields of action for its medium-term activities in the international context:

- BIBB intends to make use of international comparisons, monitoring and benchmarking to identify the most pressing reform requirements, and to come up with appropriate solutions to the problems. At the same time, BIBB will contribute to making the German system internationally compatible by integrating international standards and skills.
- BIBB will support policy-makers in putting forward strategic concepts which reflect German interests at European level, and raising awareness of the impact of Community measures on German VET. In this regard, EU vocational education and training programmes have a substantial role to play.
- The dual approach is acknowledged worldwide as an efficient basic model for vocational education and training. BIBB aims to be proactive in promoting the advantages of the German dual system, without necessarily advocating its crude “export” elsewhere. To this end, BIBB has developed advisory modules which can be used by experts on short-term assignments in relevant partner countries.
- BIBB is involved in a network of relationships with other countries and foreign partner institutions. BIBB intends to intensify this cooperation even further and establish international networks.

International comparisons, monitoring and benchmarking

Our knowledge about the strengths and weaknesses of our own VET system as well as the strategies and reform approaches adopted by relevant industrialised countries and global competitors forms an important basis for the development of future-oriented reform concepts. By means of benchmarking on the basis of binational or multinational comparisons, the most pressing reform requirements are to be identified, followed by appropriate solutions to the problems.

Thematic priorities of particular importance for the future are:

- Ensuring high-quality company-based initial vocational training for young people in the light of the expansion of education and training and corporate assessment of training programmes. Other countries using a dual/alternating model of initial vocational training have integrated this more thoroughly into their education and training system, made VET more attractive and maintained the commitment of companies to in-

itial vocational training. Their experiences may highlight potential alternative routes leading to the acquisition of an initial vocational qualification.

- Greater flexibility of vocational training pathways and reinforcement of links between qualifications through qualifications frameworks. Other countries are favouring concepts which allow greater flexibility and personalisation of initial vocational training within a stabilising framework, in response to new qualification requirements and individualised demand on the part of learners. A question of special interest is the extent to which national qualifications frameworks are able to ensure the cohesion of the education and training system and the transparency of vocational qualifications in the labour market.
- Output-oriented concepts for quality assurance in vocational education and training. In contrast to the strong emphasis on input orientation in Germany, other countries are following an evidence-based approach. Such concepts are backed with quality management systems in order to supply providers with the necessary data to improve the efficiency of their training provision. Comparative studies should give an indication of how far these concepts are transferable to Germany.
- Creating the framework conditions for lifelong learning. Numerous approaches can be found in neighbouring EU countries, from which we could draw inspiration for optimising lifelong learning in Germany. These include financial arrangements, teaching of certain basic skills, learner-centred methods, methods for competency-based recognition/certification of professional experience, and systems of credit transfer for formal and informal learning (accreditation of prior learning, portfolio and bilan des compétences initiatives).
- The need for skilled workers, and recruitment patterns. Action is made all the more urgent by the major shortage of skilled workers which is anticipated for demographic reasons in the coming years, both in Germany and in other countries. Taking account of the need for skilled workers, on the one hand, and the declining numbers of school-leavers on the other, modified recruitment strategies and routes in selected countries are to be analysed (academic drift).



European vocational education and training policy

The EU has become an important framework for German vocational education and training. The role of the Community is to support and supplement the policies of its member states. Germany's VET policy in relation to the EU faces a double challenge: firstly, to take an active influence in the formulation of Community measures with a view to upholding German interests, and secondly, to assess the impacts of Community measures on German VET. Care must be taken that Community measures do not interfere with key functional principles of German vocational education and training (such as the principle of the recognised occupation – the *Berufsprinzip* – or the dual form of initial vocational training) or usurp the responsibility of the social partners. Ultimately, an active lead must be taken in the Europeanisation and internationalisation of German VET.

Internationalisation will be driven forward by transnational cooperation projects, on a European level in particular. Successful developments and products from Europe will be adapted to national needs, exemplary practices shared, and didactic and methodological innovations (e. g. relating to the use of modern information and communications technologies) will be tested and implemented. European material will be introduced to the curriculum for a wide variety of recognised training occupations, and a number of pan-European occupational profiles will be developed.

MEASURES

A central task is the scientific monitoring and structuring of the Europeanisation and internationalisation process within vocational education and training. In detail this means:

- Observation and analysis of European VET policy and its effect on VET policy and practice in Germany.
- Expert advisory work and support for national decision-makers (the German federal government, the social partners) on European VET policy.
- Participation in European surveys (e.g. the European Continuing Vocational Training Survey).
- Systematic evaluation in order to record innovative approaches developed in the context of European programmes and to make them usable for German vocational training practice.
- Development of common occupational profiles and/or common training modules which support the aim of delivering cross-border initial vocational training in training alliances with mutual recognition of the outcomes.

- Development of a concept of international vocational competence (foreign language skills, specialist knowledge with an international dimension, intercultural skills and intercultural attitudes).
- Development of framework conditions in the vocational education and training system. In part, this consists of implementing the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and developing a national qualifications framework which is compatible with the European system so as to increase the “decipherability” of German qualifications in an international context. It also involves implementing the European Credit Transfer System in Vocational Education and Training (ECVET) which supports (cross-border) credit transfer for prior learning. The EQF and the ECVET will help to improve transitions between qualifications and qualifications systems, and hence improve the framework conditions for mobility and exchange.

Services for the international VET market

In many countries, the organisation of vocational education and training remains firmly school-based and provides rather inadequate preparation for the demands of working life. Business and industry complain that VET is detached from workplace practice and call for the training objectives and curriculum content to be geared more closely towards the needs of the labour market and of companies.

Hence it is necessary to continuously develop and modernise vocational education and training, i.e.

- to create an attractive range of high-quality initial and continuing vocational education and training provision, in order to improve the employability and occupational mobility of those completing courses successfully,
- to make vocational education and training more relevant to practice and oriented to the demands of the employment system, and
- to prepare learners for qualifications which fulfil defined minimum standards and open up employment prospects which meet the needs of the future.

Many countries have recognised this necessity and are seeking experience and support for the modernisation of their VET systems. Here Germany is in international demand as a partner for cooperation and advisory work on vocational education. The vocational education cooperation projects involving BIBB attest to considerable interest from other countries in the German model of dual-cooperative initial vocational training. This applies particularly to the following elements of the German model:

- The low financial burden on the state;
- The high correlation between labour market requirements and training profiles;
- The close association of theoretical, school-based and practical, company-based training;
- The existence of uniform national quality standards (training regulations and examinations) in vocational education and training;
- The high level of work productivity, product quality and efficiency in German industry, which can be traced back, at least in part, to the German dual system;
- The relatively low rate of youth unemployment by international comparison.

MEASURES

- BIBB is advising political decision-makers at system level and works primarily towards the integration of all relevant players in society. There is an emphasis on strategic cooperation on VET with selected countries, particularly in South-East Asia.
- BIBB is advising selected partner institutions from the new EU member states on the planning, implementation and coordination of structures and processes in vocational research and development, and on the detailed formulation of normative frameworks for the regulation of tasks and responsibilities in vocational education.
- In the framework of the “Aktionsgemeinschaft Profilbildung” (marketing task force), BIBB is working with GTZ and InWent to help to develop a corporate identity for the German actors, as a means of strengthening the German position in the international VET discourse and in international markets, with a view to accomplishing German developmental, economic and education policy objectives.

International cooperation

Cooperation on a partnership basis and international networks are providing a crucial impetus promoting quality, flexibility, mutual and interdisciplinary learning. The central aspect is that of cooperation with selected countries which have significant relationships with Germany for overarching (education) policy reasons.

BIBB accords great importance to maintaining and developing relationships with its partner institutions. Tight-knit research cooperation programmes with the French partner institute Céreq underscore that Franco-German cooperation is as important in the field of vocational education and training as in any other. Following EU enlargement, BIBB also continues to broaden its programme of scientific exchange and cooperation with national

vocational training institutions and other agencies responsible for VET in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe.

MEASURES

- BIBB is consolidating its bilateral cooperation with EU institutions (CEDEFOP and ETF).
- The Federal Institute is the national coordinator for the European network of reference and expertise REFER and for the European trainers’ network TTnet.
- BIBB and UNESCO cooperate in the global context by exchanging information and materials. Cooperation ventures have been agreed on specific topics, principally in the area of environmental vocational education, the development of standards, and cooperation between the public sector and industry to promote VET.
- In accord with the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research, BIBB participates in OECD activities on themes such as the promotion of lifelong learning, the recognition of informal learning or the transition from initial vocational training into employment.
- By hosting the first “Partners’ Meeting” for VET institutions from different European countries, BIBB has initiated a forum and paved the way for regular exchanges which will strengthen international contacts and cooperation opportunities.

The strategy described above for the internationalisation of vocational education and training is a highly significant strand of policy. It has therefore been reflected in BIBB’s mission statement, which reads:

We cooperate with international partners and offer services worldwide.

We advise international partners and institutions on the development and modernisation of vocational education and training. We initiate and maintain international networks and contribute to the structuring of the European education area. With our international competence we promote the effectiveness and competitiveness of the German vocational education and training system.