



## Permeability: Much remains to be done

If regular learning is to become an integral element of the whole lifespan, it must be possible for people in every phase of life to take the next step from their existing qualifications and competences, and pursue the educational pathways they have embarked upon in one direction or another. There must be no dead ends. This is why, for many years, the demand for greater permeability has been a matter of fundamental consensus in education policy. It is a relevant issue for all sectors of education. The most vital aspect for vocational education, and its perceived status, is the extent of integration not only with the general educational sector but also with institutions of higher education.

Although some progress has been achieved, a whole series of barriers remain to be overcome in the endeavour for greater permeability. Traditionally, training courses in Germany have been kept fairly discrete from one another, because access is often made dependent upon particular formal qualifications. Yet the organisational principle of making competence acquisition contingent upon curriculum content to be mastered, courses to be completed or certificates to be obtained, cannot claim universal validity. Nor can this monopolisation of access routes and entrance entitlements be legitimised indefinitely on the grounds of quality assurance.

(1) To begin with, permeability *within vocational education* must be ensured. This applies equally to the relationship between initial and continuing vocational education and training, and between different occupations requiring formal training. In the long run, two-year training occupations can only become established if credit transfer and transition into three-year initial training programmes are viable possibilities. Thought must be given to this aspect from the outset whenever training regulations are updated.

(2) *Additional qualifications* can make an important contribution to better permeability. If their regulation and certification is brought within the scope of the regulation revision procedure, they not only enhance the flexibility of initial vocational training but also open up individualised development options at the same time.

For example, they make it possible to prepare for recognised advanced vocational qualifications whilst still undergoing initial vocational training, or to gain a general educational certificate in addition to a recognised vocational qualification.

(3) Attendance of *full-time vocational schools* should be viewed much more positively as an opportunity to train for an occupation.

Through recognition and transfer of the skills acquired in this context, unnecessary repetition can be avoided, learning periods streamlined, and resources ultimately deployed more efficiently. The amended Vocational Training Act (Berufsbildungsgesetz, BBiG) has therefore rightly created the possibility for successful completers of full-time vocational school or extra-company training courses to be admitted to chamber examinations. If these opportunities are to be utilised, all parties must be willing to take up the new legal options constructively and in the interests of young people. For instance, the chambers should put aside their reservations about full-time school-based initial vocational training. By the same token, the vocational schools must make overtures to industry, and organise their teaching so that both the content and the level of cooperation with enterprises support access to chamber examinations.

(4) The framework of *dual courses of study* provides for credit transfer and the integration of initial and continuing vocational education and training with tertiary-level studies. This is reflected by the growing number of dual study courses at colleges of advanced vocational studies (Berufsakademien) and (private) universities of applied sciences (Fachhochschulen). Throughout Germany, there are now almost 550 degree courses of this kind, with some 42,500 students.

The introduction of bachelor's degree courses has brought new opportunities to combine vocational courses with subsequent programmes of study. Yet the considerable levels of curricular and organisational integration that can be achieved within cooperation initiatives have so far proved impossible to reproduce on a broad scale. What is missing is a system of equivalence by which competences from vocational education and on-the-job experience could be translated into credit towards study programmes.

(5) The *development of a credit transfer system* is therefore a central challenge facing the continuing development of vocational education. Preliminary experience is currently being gathered in the context of pilot projects. Criteria, in-

struments and processes are being developed and tested, with which competences from vocational education or occupational practice could be converted into credit towards study. The experience gained is likely to point up how occupational competences need to be defined and verifiably documented in order to be compatible with higher education.

Comparative analyses of training, advanced training and degree course regulations suggest that this approach could yield a range of savings, from exemptions for individual certificates of academic achievement to reductions in course length amounting to several semesters in some circumstances.

(6) Great expectations attach to the *development of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and a corresponding national qualifications framework (NQF)*.

These are intended to make it possible to match competences – regardless of where and how they are acquired and certified – to particular qualification levels. The Board of the Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training (BiBB) welcomed the development of a European Qualifications Framework in principle. There should be no bias against vocational training processes in initial vocational training, continuing vocational training and occupational practice or in favour of school-based or academic courses. Instead, the goal of vocational education policy must be for every level of qualification to be equally attainable via vocational pathways, and for attainment at every level to be equally demonstrable by practical means. Initial vocational training based on the principle of the recognised occupation (the *Berufsprinzip*) lays an appropriate foundation for this.

(7) For vocational education, the *outcome-orientation* of the EQF is, in essence, nothing new. The emphasis on occupational competences (Handlungskompetenzen, “doing” skills) is almost a trademark of vocational education. Training regulations and curricula do not merely specify lists of topics but also, importantly, the knowledge, skills and competences to be achieved. These are increasingly assessed in project-based final examinations which test proficiency in fulfilling the demands of real situations. With regard to a national qualifications framework, these examinations should be made even more competence-focused and linked to a description of the competences acquired and the level of competence achieved, framed in terms of learning outcomes. It would lay a good foundation for this if training regulations were geared expressly towards learning outcomes. The logical consequence might be to render detailed specification of curriculum requirements superfluous, thus delegating more responsibility to those accountable “on the ground” for the exact form of initial vocational training and the allocation of tasks to learning venues. Regulations would therefore need to be supplemented with illustrative implementation guidelines for enterprises and schools.

(8) A proven means for the recognition of informally acquired competences are *external examinations*. In the year 2004, some 29,000 employees made use of this possibility. They accounted for 5.1 percent of all examination candidates.

The reform of the BBiG has eased the conditions for admission to the examination for mature employees wishing to qualify in a recognised occupation (the *Externenprüfung*). They now only need to have been employed for one-and-a-half times the standard length of initial vocational training. What is still missing, however, is a simple, standardised and transparent procedure for demonstrating evidence of competences acquired in practice.

(9) There can no longer be any real doubt that *competences acquired in working life* can equip someone perfectly well to *commence a programme of tertiary-level studies*. So far, the regulation of access for non-standard entrants varies greatly in the different German Länder. Some have very liberal regulations whereas others are more restrictive. In their coalition agreement, the CDU/CSU and SPD parties decided to open up access to higher education for all who successfully complete initial vocational training. This would necessitate a standard national framework regulation to define the criteria and procedures for access to higher education. Different forms of access will have to be distinguished, depending on the certification or competence level attained. In addition to unrestricted access, equivalent to the universal entrance qualification for higher education (allgemeine Hochschulreife), there should also be a qualification entitling the holder to study a more restricted range of subjects at universities or universities of applied sciences. It is the role of higher education institutions to work with experts from vocational practice to develop suitable mechanisms and methods.

(10) Permeability does not result solely from more flexible organisation and management of transitions, or from the recognition of qualifications for access to education courses. The deciding factor is ultimately the *recognition and valency of qualifications in the labour market*. Over and above a national qualifications framework, it is therefore vital for admission requirements to be dealt with more flexibly and openly in collective agreements, employment law and recruitment practice. A situation must not arise where the education policy sector develops instruments for the recognition of informally acquired competences but employers remain hidebound by formal criteria for staff recruitment and human resources development purposes. ■



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