



Systemic interlinking of school, transition system and training

An interview with Peter Thiele on the BMBF initiative “Chains of educational progression through to initial vocational qualification”

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► **The vocational education and training system has undergone considerable change during the past 20 years. Large numbers of vocational preparation schemes or programmes leading to partial vocational qualification have grown up alongside the dual system of vocational education and training, but these only provide some of the young people concerned with successful transitions into vocational training leading to a recognised qualification. Over the course of recent years, numerous programmes and initiatives have been introduced at an individual, regional and structural level in an attempt to increase the efficiency of the transition system. September 2010 brought the launch of the BMBF Initiative “Chains of educational progression through to initial vocational qualification.”**

BWP_ Mr. Thiele, what is the aim of the BMBF Educational Chains Initiative?

Thiele_ The “Chains of educational progression through to initial vocational qualification” initiative is not merely a support programme. Its aim is to bring about a systemic optimisation of the transitions between school, the transition system and dual-system initial vocational education and training. Although an initial budget of € 362 million has been planned for the “programme part” of the initiative until the year 2014, our orientation is towards a longer-term approach. Our goal is to reach young people in a targeted way, focusing on those at lower secondary schools and special schools, who require particular support and who have especial difficulty in making the transition into training later on. The objective of the initiative is to develop a system of collective responsibility between the stakeholders in the three areas mentioned above and to establish this at an early stage during the time young people spend at school. The focus is on avoiding school dropouts, preventing waiting loops and achieving efficient transitions into dual training and successful vocational qualification. This includes strengthening company responsibility for training preparation. Last but not least, a further aim is to counter the impending shortage of skilled workers occasioned by demographic change.

I admit that this is a challenging project which requires us to look beyond our own individual areas of responsibility. Nevertheless, I am optimistic that we can make discernible progress in this area.

BWP_ The Educational Chains Initiative brings together both new and old support instruments. Which tried-and-tested programmes does the initiative link up with, and how will the interlinking of the three instruments of potential analysis, vocational orientation and career-entry support actually work?

Thiele_ We have worked in conjunction with the federal states and used a standardised catalogue of criteria to select over 1,000 lower secondary schools and special schools as intervention establishments. Depending on the type of school, an analysis of potential will be conducted with all pupils from Year 7 onwards. The aim will be to identify

areas of strengths and to reveal support requirements. A school-based and out-of-school support plan will be agreed for young people ascertained to need support. This will happen in consultation with everyone involved, including pupils and their parents. We expect to fund around 60,000 such analyses of potential at the schools each year.

These young people will receive extra-school support from full-time, experienced educational guides on an individual and continuous basis. This provision will extend until the completion of initial vocational qualification in problem cases. We have planned to fund 1,000 such educational guides. The first guides, numbering just under 500, have already been in post since November 2010. Their tasks are to take on a mentoring role to support and monitor the young people personally and develop individual solutions for problems arising in the educational development whilst cooperating closely with regional educational and support institutions.

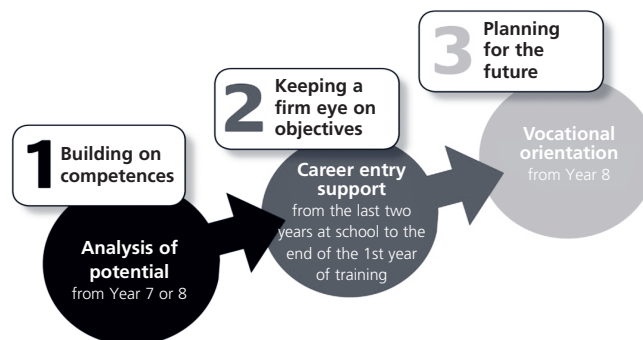
The plan is to deploy the third instrument of the initiative from Year 8 onwards. This involves practice-based vocational orientation in inter-company institutions and similar establishments with close links to trade and industry where the aim is that young people – and not just those identified as requiring support, by the way – will test out their inclinations and gather specific experiences in three occupational fields whilst – quite literally – grasping along the way that the subjects they have learned at school, such as mathematics, are of considerable practical use. Results will be recorded in a “career choice passport” or similar document. The funding available to the BMBF vocational orientation programme, which has already financed over 150,000 practical placements of this nature, has been specifically increased for this purpose.

Not all the individual instruments I have outlined are new. They have already been used and continue to be used on an individual basis in some federal states. What is new, however, is the strategic interlinking of such instruments within a systemic support philosophy geared up for broad-based, coherent, nationwide implementation. Another new aspect is that these measures are backed up with individual support agreements, the aim of which is to strengthen the coordination and collective responsibility of a range of stakeholders within sub-sectors of the educational system.

BWP_ Can you use the example of the educational guides to explain this?

Thiele_ The educational guides are the backbone of the Educational Chains Initiative. They will use the individual support plans as a basis for ensuring that young people in need of support receive continuous personal mentoring over several years, whilst also teaming up with the stakeholders in other areas of the educational system to realise the gradual transition of the young people into training. During the early design stage of the Educational Chains Initiative, we cooperated closely with the Federal Ministry

Figure Educational Chains from school to career entry



Source: JOBSTARTER Programme Office, Bonn

of Labour and Social Affairs (BMAS) and the Federal Employment Agency (BA). We have also incorporated the findings gleaned from the first generation of career-entry support staff and commissioned the BA to implement the deployment of “BMBF” educational guides in order to achieve the greatest possible degree of coherence. There are, however, specific characteristics which we believe are important for the BMBF educational guides, such as a commitment to carry out analyses of potential as the basis for selecting the young people and drawing up their individual support agreements; and that the BMBF mentors continue in their roles in the longer term. We continue to collaborate closely on the basis of an administrative agreement reached with the BA which also encompasses qualitative aspects of implementation, and to coordinate the tendering and selection procedures which have taken place as well as the implementation of career-entry support within the scope of the Educational Chains Initiative.

The full-time specialist educational staff are joined by around 1,000 volunteer educational guides from the Senior Expert Service. These unpaid Senior Experts, most of whom have many years of experience in the workplace and in initial vocational training, work in close conjunction with the locally based full-time post holders with a particular focus on supporting and stabilising young people during the vocational training process. The experiences we had with the Senior Experts during our JOBSTARTER VerA Initiative aimed at preventing training dropouts was very positive, and we are now extending our cooperation nationwide. Together with around 1,200 existing career-entry support staff from the BA, this means that a total of more than 3,000 mentors will soon be in post and pursuing the Educational Chains approach. Our aim is to use the “new” generation of educational guides to provide many years of support for up to 30,000 additional young people and assist them along their educational pathway.

We have also established a service agency at the JOBSTARTER programme office at BIBB, partly to assist us with the regular exchanges that take place with schools and mentors involved in the Educational Chains Initiative.

BWP_ You have already mentioned that one aim of the Educational Chains Initiative is to bring about further structural development of the transition system. This is in line with the idea of inclusion: i. e. setting up the entire VET system to be accessible to all young people and their heterogeneous requirements, rather than instigating special programmes for specific target groups. What impulses can we expect from the initiative in this regard?

Thiele_ The “programme part” of the BMBF Educational Chains Initiative is already pursuing precisely this objective. We put our faith in successful instruments which we interlink within an educational chain, and where additional provision is necessary, we take it from our existing toolbox instead of adding to the many layers of support already in place by instigating new instruments. The one key idea is that these instruments should keep forming connective links in the chain until it results in a qualification. One example is the combination of in-training support and introductory qualifications that reinforce company-based training preparation for lower ability trainees and deliver a retention effect into training. The transition system as a whole, however, also needs to be subjected to scrutiny. BMBF studies revealed that the transition system included in excess of 190 Federal Government and federal state support programmes as long ago as 2008. Our aims are to monitor the efficiency of these programmes, accord priority to the most effective instruments and achieve optimisation. Such an objective will not be achievable within twelve months. We have, however, already made a start and have set up an inter-ministerial group under the lead management of the BMAS to deal precisely with this topic and to present proposals before the end of 2011.

BWP_ One major plus of the Educational Chains Initiative – the broadly based and cross-departmental involvement and participation of stakeholders at the various levels – is possibly also a major challenge to your success. How will it be possible to reconcile these varying interests and concentrate the large number of ideas towards the objective?

Thiele_ We have established a considerable consensus in favour of the Educational Chains Initiative from all stakeholders. The degree of commitment shown by the federal states in particular is also pleasingly high. The bilateral discussions we held with every single federal state focused on the matching and coherence of Federal Government and federal state funding, the identification of transferable “good practice” and the ongoing future harmonisation of our support measures. The degree of consensus amongst the social partners is also high. The trade unions are seeking to become involved via such vehicles as supplementary voluntary projects of their own, and the Educational Chains are a central pillar within the new National Training Pact. This focuses on a rapid transition into training; for example, by extending school-industry cooperation and company-based training preparation.

BWP_ What else can be done over the coming years in order to ensure that the instruments being put in place become standard provision across the board for all pupils at lower secondary schools and special schools, and do not depend solely on Federal Government funding for their existence?

Thiele_ Sustainability and system optimisation are, of course, objectives of the initiative already. Whether we will succeed in achieving them in overall and permanent terms without funding seems to me to be questionable, however. The fact is that we have problems in the educational system, and solving them will cost money – money well invested for sustainable returns, I might add! Every time such funding prevents a dropout from giving up on school or training, subsequent societal costs are saved many times over. And I only need to look at the budget for the transition system, which amounts to around € 4 billion a year, to see that enough money is there. The focus therefore needs to be on improving the efficiency and connectivity of the instruments rather than on additional funding. For this reason, we at the BMBF see the support provided for Educational Chains as an initial injection of finance for a process that will be funded from various sources.

And we have, of course, already entered into discussions with the federal states on how we can establish the Educational Chains approach in each state’s system on a permanent basis. During the bilateral negotiations conducted with the federal states, we were pleasantly surprised by the degree of commitment shown and by the measures already instigated to pursue a diverse range of activities in support of the Educational Chains. We are now backing up these measures with our own funding. We also met with considerable openness with regard to cooperation projects extending beyond actual support for the Educational Chains Initiative. We have already succeeded in reaching additional BMBF-federal state agreements with some states covering such areas as the nationwide introduction of potential-analyses at lower secondary schools and special schools via self-sustaining teacher training systems, in order to enable such analyses to be carried out all over the country on a permanent basis. We have also set up a Federal Government-federal state support group at the BMBF with the aim of providing a platform for the transfer of good practice and achieving better coordination of future Federal Government and federal state measures.

Finally, we will also use our Educational Chains service agency at BIBB to pursue dissemination of the approach outside Federal Government and federal state funding schemes by instigating an Educational Chains campaign to link the diverse range of voluntary projects going on in this sector into our network, and actively promote additional initiatives of this nature. ■

(Interview: Christiane Jäger)