

translated by Heiner Benking

Review on

Bertelsmann Stiftung (eds.)

International Comparative Study (Comparison) of Vocational Training and Education on behalf of the Bertelsmann Foundation.

Author: Felix Rauner

Assisted by Wolfgang Wittig, Antje Barabasch, Ludger Deitmer

Gütersloh: Bertelsmann 2009

506 pages, paperback

The German system of vocational training is increasingly subject to very serious quality questions. Could this go back to a critical lack of appropriate steering and coordination?

In the international arena, the German vocational system is still highly regarded, but only 43.5% (2006) of new students end up in the 'dual system', the traditional core of technical and practical education.

Forty percent, however, are 'parked' in a so-called transitional system, waiting for better times. As a consequence, the current generation only enters proper vocational education at the very late average age of 20.

Only 17% enter the renowned school-based vocational training as part of the dual system (Apprenticeship & Professional School Vocational Training School).

Weaker students face increasing difficulty starting any form of apprenticeship at all. The dual system's traditional strength of integrating children from marginalized strata of society can no longer be considered true to significant degree.

More and more companies refrain from playing a role in training duties. Instead, we see an increasing number of new training networks operating outside the practical business and schooling sector. The need for state support is growing; in Berlin alone about 25% of all training programs are subsidized by public funds. As a result, we are facing a multi-track, dissociated training system crumbling all at once at its edges, at the first and also at the second threshold.

The need to conform esponding to the international eight-level European Qualifications Framework adds additional pressure.

On behalf of the Bertelsmann Foundation, an international study led by Professor Rauner (Bremen) has investigated the causes of this fatal situation. The comparison with other, more successful vocational education systems has led to the conclusion that the crisis is essentially rooted in "bad governance": fragmented, inconsistent competence and responsibility between the Federal Republic and the States (Regional States), the relevant ministries, social partners and chambers.

An article in the leading weekly newspaper DIE ZEIT quotes Rauner comparing the situation to "many cooks spoiling the meal", adding that in German vocational

training these chefs are even operating in different kitchens preparing different meals **unaware of each other**. Consequently, Germany comes out much worse than countries like Switzerland, Austria and Denmark.

The study bases its recommendations foremost on the model of Switzerland and calls for greater new augmented central leadership and policy-making.

As a matter of fact, this would require a new federal law and administration for vocational training that would unite the responsibilities of the participating learning environments of enterprises and schools, to overcome the duality of legislative responsibility.

The competences and responsibilities of all stakeholders should be brought together in a "Federal Office for Professional Education" and trickled down to the administrations on nationstate level.

Such a model was originally proposed in the mid-70s – and turned down.

Rauner speaks euphemistically of a steering and moderating function maintained by a national vocational training dialogue. The required fundamental change on legislative level, however, is difficult to imagine, in face of the federalism reform four years ago. It remains even more doubtful and vague whether they can be addressed by administrative policy, given the latent opposing positions of the associations in charge of the sectors of youth and education, and in view of the looming shortage of skilled workers, changes and conditions in workplaces.

Vocational training requires innovation, since it is constantly confronted with new challenges. The study criticizes the abolition of Article 91 b of the German Constitution (Grundgesetz), the dissolution of the Federal-Regional (Laender)-Chamber (BLK), the abolition of school pilot programs and the so-called economic pilot programs -- up until now proven instruments of innovation -- in the interplay of vocational training policy, planning, practice, and applied research.

The authors also recommend improving vocational training research by bundling the highly fragmented system consisting of the Institute for Labour Market and Employment Research (Institut fuer Arbeitsmarkt und Berufsforschung, IAB), the German Institute for International Pedagogic Research, the German Youth Institute (Deutsche Jugendinstitut) and the Federal Institute for Vocational Training (Bundesinstitut für Berufsbildung BIBB) in one or more Max Planck Institutes for vocational training. The authors see independent research and the revitalization of model project initiatives as the key factors in the establishment of a successful innovation strategy for vocational training.

'Independent' also implies independence from the social partners, part of the dialog (also recommended by Rauner) leading to the development and implementation of model projects.

Moreover, university-based vocational training research should be expanded to establish professional disciplines in accordance with the status quo of professional expertise, as well as to maintain established vocational education courses providing opportunities for young scientists. Whereas in Germany, where even unions have requested "pay-as-you-go-" funding for training (Umlagenfinanzierung), Swiss training enterprises obviously turn a profit. The study concludes that enterprise-based training can be profitable and still go hand-in-hand with high quality education. This means that those delivering good training can also make profits doing so. Many small businesses, however, face a very different reality.

This result, however, contradicts the survey of the Federal Institute for Vocational Training (BIBB), which found that the average business faces annual net costs of EUR 8700 € per trainee (2000).

The vocational schools should be based on federal qualification standards and uniformly government-funded, manage this budget themselves, and supplement it by income generated from education courses and offerings.

Their position should be strengthened, e.g. through the introduction of vocational audits providing vocational certificates.

If not, the function and organization of both part-time, and full-time vocational schools, which train according to BBiG or HwO standards, is underexposed.

A plausible strategy would be the consequent and logically integrated connection of theory and practice, and new cooperation between schools and enterprises, in which schools train core professions ('Kernberufe', as proposed by Rauner based on successful models from Switzerland) over a period of two years. During these two years, theory and practice are merged in workshops, laboratories, and student-run companies. This is then followed by one or two year long guaranteed continuation and specialized training which takes place in companies. Not regarded as a merely tolerated practical phase but rather is seen as a period of growing into the professional workforce and occupational competence. Such a model has been wholeheartedly discussed in the mid-'90s under the title "Two-plus-One ". But it has since disappeared , and does not even in Rauner's study. This would have been different if the study had extended its scope to Norway.

With respect to training instructions, the study recommends open-ended professional rules and regulations, or possibly national standards, which can be specified and adapted to regional needs.

This would replace the principle of specialization of training regulations in favor of broad-spectrum core profession curricula.

This is justified by the need to adapt to rapid technological and economic development and the establishment of a European labor market. In Rauner's view, this will lead to the "emergence of a European Training Architecture". Mutually accepted core-professions based on the European Qualifications Framework (EQR) are required Europe-wide. This requires the harmonization of training schemas with reciprocal structures for the recognition of diplomas.

In this context, the new Bachelor degrees create a situation of competition but also new opportunities for vertical permeability.

Conclusion

Learning from other countries means learning how to train and educate. The study sheds light on many long-held traditional positions, including a variety of responsibilities of the federal government, nation states, ministries, as well as the experts cited by associations and research institutions, which have all too often evolved from pressures the need for universal consensus.

Rauner wants to maintain the dualism between vocational training establishments and companies. He does not favor a central governing authority, but rather one that acts in a coordinating role.

The proposed "Federal Office for Professional Education" with regional offices in the nation states (Laender) is in any case an interesting thought, and – it deserves to be repeated for the sake of emphasis – Germany should not be considered incapable of accomplishing what its federally organized neighbour Switzerland has successfully achieved.