Statement of the Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training on the Consultation “Towards a European Area of Skills and Qualifications”

Introduction

The Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training (BiBB) is a national and international centre of excellence for research on initial and continuing vocational education and training (VET) and the progressive development of VET. Its present statutory basis is the Vocational Training Act (Berufsbildungsgesetz, BBiG) of 23 March 2005 which outlines the Institute's duties among which the drafting of initial training regulations and other ordinances to be issued under the Vocational Training Act (2005) or under Part Two of the Crafts and Trade Code (http://www.bibb.de/en/1417.htm).

Caveat 1: The present questionnaire considers the whole education and training system at national and European levels. On the basis of the scope of the BiBB legal remit, we focus in our answers on questions related to vocational education and training as defined in the Vocational Training Act. Consequently we focus on sections 4 (coherence of tools and policies; learning outcomes approach), 5 (recognition of skills and qualifications) and 6 (quality assurance).

Caveat 2: Our answers to the closed questions are formulated on the basis of past and current developments within the German dual VET system. The arguments we develop in the following statement ensure a sound understanding of our reasoning and position.

On Section 4: European tools and learning outcomes approach

The full title of section 4 reads “Ensuring overall coherence of tools and policies and further implementing the learning outcomes approach”.

Coherence of the tools

The consultation includes a wide range of tools and policies, linking the vocational education and training system (VET) with the higher education system (HE). The number of tools is impressive and confusing to many VET experts. Each tool is understandable in its scope and objectives; yet their coherence and interactions are not easy to grasp and to put into practice. In Germany, the German Qualification Framework includes VET qualifications and HE degrees. The Framework puts in the forefront the concept of Gleichwertigkeit and a competence approach. It is not planned to link the Framework with any credit systems (ECTS, ECVET). Current activities indicate that the German
Qualification Framework will be developing to relate to the validation of non-formal and informal learning and to include further vocational education qualifications.

This example (and more precisely the referencing report) indicates that the tools are operating at different levels: Frameworks, quality assurance, guidance, learning outcomes approach are major reference tools (meta-tools) which support the development of specific tools which operate with a narrower objective (for instance: Europass as a documentation support). They also have more or less direct links to either the labour market, or the education system at large or specific education sectors.

The European Commission in agreement with the representatives of the Member States should further develop on the coherence of the tools. It is less a matter of introducing new tools that of explaining the objectives and operational basis of those tools. The effort should be put into the development of adequate coordinated guidance for dissemination and use of the tools.

**The learning outcomes approach**

The learning outcomes approach is understood in Germany and more specifically in the context of the German dual VET system as competence-based approach. As such it exists since the outset of the dual VET system. The concept developed in 2009 by the BiBB to design competence-based training regulations also builds on the requirements of the Vocational Training Act (BMF/KMK 2013: 102). It is oriented by the principle of the recognised occupation (*Berufsprinzip*) and comprehensive professional action (*vollständige berufliche Handlung*).

The integration of professional, methodical, social and personal dimensions highlights the understanding of “competence” in Germany. Those dimensions build the structure of the German Qualification Framework for Lifelong Learning (two major descriptors: professional competence (knowledge and skills) and personal competence (social competence and autonomy). This concept differs from the European understanding of learning outcomes.

The understanding of competence as described above systematise and operationalize the concept of qualification and form a framework for the development of standards (BMF/KMK 2013). The examination procedures and practices (not ‘assessment’) in the dual VET system focus on typical professional tasks and action oriented processes (*Arbeits- und Geschäftsprozessorientierung*); this does not allow assessing single learning outcomes but follows a holistic approach.

**Units and credits**

Vocational education and training is geared towards securing the educational process aimed at the achievement of all-round “occupational proficiency” (*berufliche Handlungsfähigkeit*) and taking

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trainees/learners through to final certification in a recognised training occupation. It is this objective, i.e. obtaining a recognised occupation and being awarded the status of a skilled worker or employee, to which German VET is dedicated. Under the terms of the Vocational Training Act, the concept of “vocational education and training” comprises the areas of vocational preparation, initial vocational training, advanced vocational training and vocational retraining. With the exception of the threshold to higher education, procedures for credit transfer and recognition exist at the interfaces of the system in Germany, which are regulated on the basis of the Vocational Training Act (BBiG) and the Crafts and Trades Regulation Code (HwO).

There are major differences on different levels in concept between ‘unit of learning outcomes’ and ‘credit’ in Germany: On the legal level, ECVET’s intended aims of accumulation, recognition and transfer of credit are found to be clearly at odds with the basic legislative provisions in Germany, i.e. the Vocational Training Act (BBiG) and the Crafts and Trades Regulation Code (HwO). The “national practices” referred to in the Recommendation on the establishment of a Credit System in Vocational Education and Training (ECVET) are based upon the fundamental principles of dual system VET (concept of the recognised occupation and acquisition of occupational competence). As regards the applied procedures, they rely upon assessments (upper secondary school-leaving and higher education entrance qualification, intermediate secondary school-leaving certificate), documents (employers’ references, school reports) and/or completed periods of time (work experience, previous periods of initial vocational training). Essential differences can be discerned here from the ECVET-inspired concepts of outcome-driven, individually assessed and certified units of learning outcomes, irrespective of where learning took place. Not only are the legal and methodological/procedural foundations at variance, but the conceptual ideas of how credit and recognition are defined and what purposes they are supposed to serve differ accordingly from each other. On the level of political and administrative steering – with the exception of the higher education sector – ECVET is not (yet) ascribed any foreseeable positive impacts with regard to improving credit transfer at the interfaces (Eberhardt/Annen 2013²). Crediting of learning outcomes between VET and HE qualifications can be based on the equivalence of learning outcomes without introducing credits in VET; this has been demonstrated in the frame of federal initiatives such as ANKOM or DECVET. Credits are in place in HE following the introduction of Bachelor and Master Degrees; not such a thing is intended for VET in Germany.

Furthermore the crediting of learning outcomes within a validation and recognition procedure depends upon the organisation which is ‘taking in’ the applicants (for instance by mobility between VET and HE) whereas units of learning outcomes are a regulatory decision upon the structure of qualifications.

² Eberhardt, Christiane/Annen, Silvia: Credit transfer in Germany: ECVET meets BBiG, in: Eberhardt, Christiane (Eds): Implementing ECVET: crediting, recognition and transfer of learning outcomes between European target stipulations and national system conditions, S. 56-75, Bonn 2013,
URL: http://www.bibb.de/veroeffentlichungen/de/publication/show/id/7156
On Section 5: Recognition of skills and qualifications

The full title of section 5 reads “Ensuring clarity of rules and procedures for the recognition of skills and qualifications for further learning”. The “recognition of learning outcomes” instigated by the European initiatives poses problems for Germany since the concept of “recognition” relates solely to the occupations in initial and further training as such (Section 4 BBiG), but not to individual learning outcomes. Furthermore, “recognition” describes a legal act, as a consequence of which a title/a vocational certificate is awarded (synonyms for this would be correspondence, equal treatment, award of a title). Below this level, recognition can only take place in the sense of an “appreciative attitude” – for example in the recognising of MOOCs courses. The impact of such kind of recognition is poor due to the limited relevance that MOOCs do have for the learning in companies.

Recognition refers mostly to certificates, not to individual learning processes – as described in the German “Recognition Act” introduced as from 2012: If a person has gained professional or vocational qualifications abroad and would like to work in Germany, he or she has the option of having the foreign qualification recognized. In the recognition procedure, the relevant competent authority will check whether the foreign professional or vocational qualification is equivalent to a German qualification. The equivalence check takes place on the basis of stipulated formal criteria such as content and duration of training. Any relevant occupational experience the applicant may have is also taken into account and the applicant must be able to show that he/she completed a professional or vocational qualification which was not obtained in Germany. The example shows that the German understanding of “recognition” is distinct from the European one as regards the underlying concept: The Vocational Training Act does not make provision for the acquisition of certified (acceptable for labour-market entry) modular qualifications or the accumulation of learning credits which lead quasi–automatically to a vocational certificate in a recognised occupation without a final examination, an approach strongly advocated at European level. This means as a consequence that – even if the European commission proposes common criteria and procedures for the recognition for learning that is achieved in initial and further training – the probability for national implementation in Germany is limited due to the strong linkages among the concept of recognition and the labour market.

Central to the procedures and to the Vocational Training Act in Germany is the acquisition of a recognised training occupation. This understanding coincides with the European definition of “qualification” as a “formal outcome of an assessment and validation process which is obtained when a competent institution determines that an individual has achieved learning outcomes to given standards” (EUROPEAN COMMISSION 2009, C 155/14). In Germany the “given standard” is met when the final examination in a recognised training occupation has been completed successfully. Recognition implies that the learning outcomes acquired in learning or working experience are assessed against a given standard which has legal validity in a given vocational and education training system and opens rights on the labour market. The development of common criteria and procedures for recognition might thus imply the development of common European training or core professions.

The difficulties by the development of ESCO indicate that a new approach has to be developed.

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On Section 6: Quality assurance

The full title of section 6 reads “Increasing the focus on quality assurance”. The main principles for quality assurance are already defined in the Recommendations for Quality Assurance Reference Framework for VET (EU 2009). Common and fulfilled quality principles are the precondition for mutual trust with regard to transparency and recognition of learning outcomes. The implementation process with EQAVET network should be maintained on European level. Regarding the strengthening of quality improvement in VET it is important to bring forward the idea of a culture of Quality and to foster the implementation of quality frameworks (rather than tools or labels for quality assurance) at system level by:

- Linking quality principles strongly to the European Initiatives such as EQF, ECVET and Europass in order to develop a European area of skills and qualifications;

- Including the compulsory involvement of stakeholders in the framework;

- Connecting VET to the education system and at the same time to the labour market by using evidence based forecasts. Learners’ needs should be respected to enable them to occupational proficiency. They should be able to show willingness and the competence for reflected behaviour in occupational, societal and private situations and they have the aptitude to act in an individually and socially responsible way;

- Developing indicators that measure the performance of VET as educational result.