“Learn & Earn“ Concepts and Approaches in German Vocational Education and Training (VET)

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Abstract: In German initial VET, the Dual System prevails. Apprenticeships are subdivided into theoretical and practical tracks, the one being carried out at vocational schools, the other being done in firms. Apprentices enter contracts with employers and are being paid. This is a “learn & earn“ approach par excellence. Problems arise in other than initial training sectors with groups that either became unemployed (1) after many years of employment or (2) immediately after their chamber exam or (3) when they will not be able to otherwise meet the requirements to become a qualified member of the workforce. In the first case, i.e. in the Dual System, introducing modules is rather a political issue, since it implies giving up the Dual System. With the latter three examples modularized and flexible VET proves to be important in order to (1) individualize VET, (2) help industry develop its impact on the market, (3) enforce regional restructuring and (4) recruit workplaces beyond those being available for mainstream occupations. Concepts and projects for such target groups will be presented based on an educational philosophy that supports individualized VET and is targeted at locating niches in the labor market.

Introduction

With certain target groups it becomes more and more important to replace mass VET by individualized VET. For the presentation here this statement is limited to Germany. Usually, the people concerned obtained formal qualifications. They are skilled workers or technicians, graduated from colleges or universities or have, at a minimum, attended such institutions for some time. All of them have in common that they became unemployed, either soon after they took their chamber exams or after many years of employment. Others realized that they will not complete their studies.

In a sense, we are not simply talking about qualified personnel, but about experts in their field. Efforts in such cases go beyond those being necessary for target groups which got a successful go at their first chance. Specifically, I will present three projects that we developed to re-integrate or integrate these target groups into the labor market.

Project 1: Product Development on Demand in SMEs
Due to mismanagement, workers and employees at one of the largest German shipbuilders were laid off in the mid 90’s. They were specialized to a degree that as far away as Southern Italy they would have been able to find adequate employment again.

Our first idea was to make them see that they had to get back to broad, basic qualifications and that holding on to their high-level expertise would not get them anywhere in the German labor market. However, they objected to that solution, since it implicitly meant less income.

Another problem was their not being used to formalized classroom instruction after decades of work in that company. They needed another approach to learning. Thus, plans were changed and finally the concept adopted was the following:

We looked for firms that were in need of qualified personnel to develop new products either to stay or to expand in the market. Product-development teams were set up in the training center. The skills and knowledge missing to carry out the expected job were delivered by us or our partners. The participants could choose from a number of different products. A group of eighteen decided to develop their own product - a medical device for elderly people to train their leg muscles. They manufactured a prototype, cooperated with an art college for a good product design and exhibited their work at fairs.

Individual projects taken up by engineers, technicians and skilled workers were, for instance, design of jigs and fixtures for machining of special milling tools, commissioning machine tools, PLC applications (e.g. testing security controls for presses, developing a PLC for radio-controlled locomotives), standardizing projects on technical devices, project management for a de-dusting device, designing a system for document administration, writing a CAD handbook, introducing team work and supervising teams.

Modules the participants could choose from in order to acquire the necessary knowledge were actually quite varied: management skills, social and methodological topics, foreign language acquisition. The project covered a period of twelve months, including in-company work as needed. This flexibility turned out to be vitally important for the successful completion of the products and for employment prospects.
Companies benefitted from the people’s input directly by having a new product available, having introduced new knowledge and skills and by saving labor costs, since the State Employment Office and the State Government, who had asked us to develop the project, paid the participants. When the news spread, more companies wanted to join the project.

**Project 2: Practical VET for Unemployed Young Adults**

Youth unemployment is a severe problem in Germany and elsewhere in Europe, even with young adults who passed their chamber exams as skilled workers. We call it the “second-threshold“ problem.

In April 1996 we initiated a practical VET project for young adults under or equal to the age of 25, in cooperation with the local employment office, the chamber of industry and commerce and the chamber of handicrafts. The basic structure provided the participants with three months of VET at the training center, individually to be taken as needed, timewise and as to the contents, and nine months of training in a firm.

At that time the rate of unemployment in the city of Essen was 13.5 p.c. This was 32 p.c. above the national average which was at 10.2 p.c. Every fifth young person in the Old Bundeslaender could not secure a job after having completed their apprenticeship. 21 skilled workers in the electrotechnology or metal sectors joined the project that year. 14 of them had been apprentices in industry, 6 in crafts firms, 1 in a special institution. 3 young men dropped out early to do their military or civil service. After or during the project, 14 of the 18 left were employed and 1 person resumed university studies.

Again, the project trained participants individually according to their needs and the firms’ requirements. We organized a job fair where firms and participants could present themselves and first matches were arranged. During the project, only 2 men left the firm they originally opted for and chose a new one. We were in close contact with the firms and the participants all the time, almost on a day-to-day basis. The project showed that close contact and personal as well as considerable personnel input were crucial to positive results.
Project 3: Career Alternatives for College / University Students

Out of the 82 million Germans, 1.2 million are enrolled at a university or college. The number of students who do not finish their studies is increasing. According to research done by the University of Cologne in 1993, the rate of overt and covert drop-outs was 25 p.c. By now it is approx. 30 p.c.

The North Rhine-Westphalian government and the State Employment Service were alarmed by these figures. They asked us to develop and run a project to tackle the problem. One of the major concerns was the devastating effects on the individual students’ lives. The reasons for low retention rates at universities and colleges are manifold. Among them are the degree to which the studies are structured, lacking self-organizing abilities, the high level of theoretical work, financial problems and insecure job prospects. So we designed a project that focused on stabilizing the personalities and that offered them prospects for their lives by giving a general overview of (1) professional alternatives and (2) qualifying processes. The target group were students that were still enrolled, had at least studied for six semesters and had not yet graduated.

North Rhine-Westphalia has a population of about 17 million. Every year, 60,000 students drop out of universities and colleges or are classified as potential drop-outs. With our approach, we intend to de-stigmatize that target group and emphasize positive characteristics students typically exhibit. Characteristics such as flexibility, motivation, expert knowledge and work experience as “free lancers” are their advantages in comparison to other target groups.

The project is divided into two major phases. The first phase covers a period of four to six weeks and deals with contents like developing self-initiative, analyzing one’s abilities, working in groups and doing projects, improving one’s decision-making processes, getting to know a variety of occupations, preparing for (1) entering the next project phase, (2) returning to university or college and (3) taking up a retraining program. Phase 2 runs for 10.5 months and allows for participation in any VET program at the center, accompanied by gathering work experience in a company.
Again, the VET modules students do are to support their practical work. Most of them opt for multi-media techniques, environmental topics or IT technology. Once they decide to follow a vocational career path, the European Commission also offers help. They receive a monthly allowance of DM 1,200.

Being carried out at three different locations in North Rhine-Westphalia in the 1997/98 period, the project attracted 186 students for phase 1. 122 of them decided to continue with phase 2. Another 21 entered a retraining program, 8 returned to university or college and 3 signed work contracts. After having completed phase 2, 27 were employed by companies, 6 founded their own businesses and 25 went on to take their chamber exams. The labor administration was pleased with the results and decided to establish the project as a regular program.

**Conclusions**

In the three projects presented here, the fact that, on the one hand, unemployed people were individually supported to achieve what is formally necessary to become a fully fledged member of the labor market and, on the other, companies’ needs were met to stabilize or improve their position in the market contributed to problem solutions that became effective on different operational levels: the personal and individual level, the company and labor market levels, the level of regional restructuring. The latter is especially important in an area that used to be based on coal and steel mining and is struggling to get away from the fossil technologies to enter new markets.

Basically, success was due to individual matchings of persons and companies and it can rightfully be doubted whether just “more of the same“ regular mass VET programs would have come up with similar outcomes. Beyond “learning & earning“ of the multi-level type, there were offers of financial acknowledgement to the participants by the companies involved in the projects.