Vocational training and lifelong learning in Australia: Observations and conclusions from a German perspective

Jochen Reuling

Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training (BIBB) Bonn

The Australian vocational training policy of the last decade is marked by permanent and radical changes. The aim was and still is the development of structures which stimulate individuals to learn continuously over their whole working life. Lifelong learning is regarded as a prerequisite for individual employability and for a lasting increase of the formal qualifications level in Australia, in the hope of safeguarding the competitiveness of the Australian economy with that of its neighbouring countries.

In recent years, concepts of lifelong learning have received more attention in the Federal Republic of Germany as well (BMBF 2001). However, while vocational training policy reforms proceed rather cautiously and incrementally in Germany, vocational training policy in Australia has favoured extensive structural changes in the system of vocational training. The key elements of this policy are the reform of the professional qualification system, the support for training markets and the increased autonomy of the (public) training providers. From a German point of view, such approaches are extremely interesting because they contain concepts and elements which, though being discussed in Germany as well, are difficult to try out due to their system-changing nature. The Australian concepts and experiences serve as pilot projects for Germany in this respect. One can study the concepts, try to recognise the advantages and disadvantages, discuss their applicability under German conditions and try to adopt them if this appears desirable.

Reform of the qualification system: outcome-based vs. process-based approach

The guiding approach to reforming vocational education and training in Australia is the so-called outcome-based approach. Programs are conceived as learning outcomes based on competence and developed according to industry plans (employer-led). This means that qualifications are focussed on the requirements of work processes. The individual learner can acquire a full or partial completion of a program in very different ways, for example through...
formal face-to-face teaching programs, through non-formal or informal on-the-job, in-the-community or even on-line learning. The system allows a range of forms of access to the certification of his or her skills. Qualifications are distinguished by content and level of difficulty and related to each other and to the general educational certificates from the school and higher education system using a nationwide framework. This in principle opens up extensive progression routes to the individual learner which he or she can use depending on demand and situation.

The outcome-based approach views qualifications as “major driver, incentive and motivator of learning and the role of individuals is stressed rather than that of teachers, government or other stakeholders” (OECD 2001). This approach is in total contrast to the (learning) process-based approach as it is widely applied in Germany. Here, qualifications are tied to learning programmes and places of learning. The design follows defined procedures; all relevant stakeholders (in particular management and labour) participate in the development process. “Qualifications are treated as only one element of the qualifying process and the approach relies on trust that is deeply rooted in traditions of practice” (ibid.). The general and vocational pathways are relatively isolated from each other, which can restrict progression.

The outcome-based approach indeed allows very different forms of delivery and acquisition of professional qualifications. However, the question remains whether there are indeed clear and practicable criteria for evaluating professional competence, especially for medium and higher level jobs, which allow quite different types of learning to be registered and certified. If this is possible then it is indeed unnecessary for the state education policy to deal with the contexts in which qualifications are acquired. However, if this is not the case because competence can be defined and assessed in many different ways, then the question arises whether certificates have the same value and the same recognition on the labour market as within the educational system. In other words, these are questions regarding the coherence of an educational system. At least from the German point of view, further empirical research would be necessary to assess the suitability of this approach for promoting lifelong learning. Answers to this question are also of importance because qualifications are not only regarded as important incentives to lifelong learning but also as an essential instrument for the state control of resource allocation and the effective use of public spending on education.

**Extending education/training markets and user choice**

Another central element of the Australian vocational training policy for promoting lifelong learning is the extension of education and training markets and the introduction of new mechanisms for controlling these markets. The vocational training offered in Germany, leading to formal qualifications, is segmented with regard to different functions (vocational preparation, initial vocational training, formal and non-formal further training) and separated into training provided by public and private providers. In Australia, on the other hand, there has been a growth in the extent to which public and private providers of
vocational training compete for public and private funding in a common training market. A large proportion of the public funding for apprenticeship and traineeship provision and a small proportion of other public vocational training has been contested between public and private providers. For apprenticeship and traineeship the employer, and to a minor extent the apprentice or trainee, can choose an accredited public or private training provider and negotiate the details of training within the framework of the binding standards. Public funds at a specified rate are paid to the provider. In Victoria however, for example, the state government has moved to place limits on the amount of funds flowing to private providers.

This raises the question of whether the extension of training markets and of user choice has really increased the chances of individuals and businesses to receive training offers that are cost-effective and adapted to the individual situation. Or, to view this from the opposite perspective, does user choice increase competition between the training providers, and what are the consequences for the market? Perhaps intensified competition leads rather to quality-conscious training providers becoming no longer viable, to an oversupply of providers in lucrative areas of training, to established providers joining together and new providers having difficulties entering the market. Which measures of quality management and quality control are adopted, and how successful are they? The answers to these questions determine whether (and if so, how) the government or the individual states have to intervene in these markets to counter the possibility of ‘market failure’.

It would also be of interest to know more about to what extent individuals/businesses actually make use of the various possibilities of acquiring qualifications provided by outcome-based qualification systems and user choice. Are the users sufficiently prepared for the possibilities of flexible delivery of training, or would they prefer a clearly structured training programme where it is clear what is expected of them and where they are in a social context with other learners and a teacher or trainer? If the latter were the case, it would not necessarily be an argument against flexible delivery of training, but rather indicate that neither training providers nor recipients are sufficiently prepared for using these possibilities (Smith 2000). The questions raised here can be answered only empirically. The German side should pay attention to relevant research results, since there is a tendency towards more autonomy for state vocational schools in Germany as well.

Change in the universities and public training providers in the context of lifelong learning

How do the Australian universities in their role as providers of education and training deal with these structures, and do they attempt to promote lifelong learning? First of all it is surprising from a German viewpoint that the Australian universities are far more involved in post-secondary training than German universities or post-secondary technical colleges. Also of interest is the fact that courses of study are organised according to a dual system at some universities—a strategy that is currently being tested in pilot projects at some German post-
secondary technical colleges. A few Australian universities in Victoria and one in the Northern Territory allow the acquisition of the full range of professionally relevant certificates, ranging from the vocational certificates and diplomas, advanced diplomas, bachelor degrees and postgraduate degrees. In addition all Australian universities provide research degrees and undertake extensive research.

Due to restriction in government budgets, universities increasingly have to raise their own funds. Among other things this has led to more co-operation between providers of education and training. This development could have several advantages for promoting lifelong learning: Universities, like other providers of education and training, have to create extensive learning opportunities to draw students in. They will also strive for close co-operation with businesses to ensure a practically oriented education. Furthermore they have to seek strategic alliances with other providers and businesses to share knowledge with them, a necessary prerequisite for survival in the education markets of the knowledge society. And all this takes place not only on a local level but also nationally and (in the case of the most important providers) internationally as well. Finally they also have to co-operate closely to make cost-efficient use of the new technologies.

Clearly, great efforts have to be made by the universities and the other training providers to create a system of education and training that is truly seamless for the individual, that provides for the best possible use of state funding in training and that promotes business investment in education and training. A number of specific national mechanisms and peculiarities play a role in solving these problems, especially the distribution of competencies and resources between the Australian federal government and the individual states. This problem is also familiar in German education and vocational training policy. The primary goal remains, on the other hand, to make sure that public and private training providers find a true balance between competition and co-operation. A number of dangers which can appear in an unregulated market become clear, for example that due to cost pressure training providers might direct central resources into areas where the highest profits can be made, neglecting other areas.

As mentioned above, similar training markets exist so far in the Federal Republic of Germany only in a few segments, and there specifically in further training not regulated by the state (non-formal learning). However, state vocational schools are gradually acquiring more autonomy and playing a stronger and more active role in vocational training and further training in regional training markets. A further central strategy for promoting lifelong learning in Germany is support for networking among training providers who jointly carry out innovative long-term measures to create ‘learning regions’ in co-operation with the relevant regional protagonists. In the future the universities will be more and more involved in this development. The experience in Australia seems to indicate that segment-transcending networks and co-operation between training providers, though initially bound to be complicated, create a clear added value in the long term.
Financing lifelong learning

In view of the dynamics of economic change on the one hand and the shrinking of the age group cohorts on the other, a society can no longer rely on the annual influx of trained youth to meet the demand for qualified employees. Rather, additional funding, depending on the economic and political situation and priorities, is required to finance lifelong learning. These funds cannot be provided by the state alone, neither in Australia nor in Germany. On the contrary, it is more likely that public funding will be increasingly restricted in the future. For both countries the question arises how lifelong learning (in the sense of structured education and training offers) can be privately financed to a higher degree, and how the incentives for employers and individuals to commit themselves more strongly to this area can be improved.

Which forms of funding lead to provision of more education and training, more efficient and effective delivery of high-quality education and training and increased equity in the provision? With regard to individuals, grants, loans and tax deductions are the principal means. Several countries also favour forms of funding (like lump-sum grants, individual learning accounts etc.) that allow individuals to spread education quotas over a long-term period according to their own learning requirements (entitlements). Particular emphasis is also put on measures that enable the individual to better assess the advantages of investing in education and training. There are also a number of potential measures for increasing the willingness of businesses to invest in education and training. For businesses as well as for individuals it is important to understand lifelong learning as a worthwhile investment.

One apparent problem is the lack of empirical data to assess the positive or negative results of the various models and measures and therefore to determine whether they have led to more efficiency, benefits and profits of lifelong learning. In part this is because such measures have been introduced only for a restricted period of time in many countries. But an even more important reason may be that there are often no uniform and nationwide funding systems but rather an extremely diverse number of such systems, leading to a lack of transparency and concerted planning which restricts their overall efficiency. Australia and Germany are no exceptions in this regard. More co-operation between the involved government agencies, labour market authorities, management and labour and social initiatives across functional areas of existing education and training systems is required to ensure that financing mechanisms reinforce long-term effectiveness and efficiency (OECD 2000a).

Collection of empirical data on different forms of lifelong learning

Lifelong learning can take place in the framework of formal training arrangements, it can be offered in structured form by educational institutions, businesses or on-line without leading to recognised certificates (non-formal training) or, in what is probably the most frequent case in real life, informally within the context of the work process or in the social surroundings. In this connection it is interesting to know whether there are displacements between these three forms of learning. Depending on the size of the enterprise and the industrial sector to
which it belongs there are almost identical tendencies towards increased in-house further training and a move towards on-the-job training in Australia as well as in Germany and other countries in the European Union. However, what was mentioned with regard to the question of funding lifelong learning applies to this area as well, namely that the quality of the data has to be improved. In particular there is a great need for more individual data. Furthermore, greater attention must be given to the collection of data on informal learning. It remains to be seen how successful the European Union’s efforts in this field will be (EUROSTAT 2001).

**Individualised or institutionalised transition to working life?**

Apart from school and vocational training, the most important factors for lifelong learning are the transition of young people to working life and the first years on the job, because this is the period when the foundations for improving and purposefully developing knowledge, skills and competencies are laid. There are striking differences between Australia and Germany in the way young people make the transition from school to working life after completing secondary level education. From a German viewpoint it is noteworthy that the differentiation into different pathways does not start until age 17 or 18 in the Australian education system. A comparatively large number of Australian youths enter the higher education sector (and acquire a degree there) and that the post-school education and training sector in Australia is very diversified. Accordingly the pathways of Australian youths after completing secondary level education are more individualised, while the pathways of their German age group peers are far more institutionalised. The reason for this is that the education/training system and the labour market are ‘loosely coupled’ in Australia. In Germany they are ‘tightly connected’ by tradition.

These comparisons naturally give rise to the question of which system is more efficient for enabling youths to make the transition from school to working life (OECD 2000b). The results turn out to be to some extent sobering from the German viewpoint. Despite very different institutional arrangements for the transition from education to work of young adults between 20 and 24 (i.e. at the end of the transition period) in 1996 the proportion of non-students who were employed was identical in the two countries. Both countries lie clearly above the average of all OECD member states in this respect. In the case of Australia, high responsiveness of the tertiary sector and the flexible labour market are likely reasons.

Can the high institutional expenditure by Germany to regulate the transition of youths from school to working life be justified? At least it emerges that teenagers aged 16 to 20 are more frequently in education or work than their Australian age group peers. Youths in Germany can also compete with adults on the labour market much more easily than youths in Australia or other OECD countries. The predominant vocation-specific and enterprise-related forms of training surely also play a role here.

The central question in the long run, however, appears to be whether highly institutionalised systems of qualification are better suited to promoting lifelong learning than systems with a
comparatively low degree of institutionalisation. Qualified vocational training, a successful transition to employment and the first years on the job are certainly of high importance for lifelong learning. In the future, however, there will be a need for greater individual responsibility for education and employment. For Germany this means further development of the institutional basic conditions with the goal of more vertical and horizontal permeability, thus opening up more possibilities for the differentiation and individualisation of pathways and patterns for developing competencies. The Australian concepts and experiences, in particular those from the tertiary sector, will continue to be of great interest for German vocational training research and policy.

References

BMBF 2001, Lebensbegleitendes Lernen für alle, Bonn.
OECD 2000a, Where are the resources for lifelong learning? Paris.
—— 2001, The role of qualification systems in promoting lifelong learning, issues paper, Meeting of national representatives and experts to be held at the OECD, Paris, 5–6 March, paper.