

# International education policy: Its influence on the conception of VET and the VET system in Germany

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## Abstract

Inquiries into vocational education and training (VET) systems are normally characterised by looking at institutions and steering mechanisms. That aside, however, it is culture which underlies both the practice and the theory as well as the policy of VET in various countries. Specific problems arise when it comes to harmonising VET systems through the backdoor. One of the current supranational instruments in this context is the European qualifications framework (EQF) and other related instruments as well as OECD expectations referring to increasing the numbers of higher education graduates. The PISA studies certainly also play their part within these influential streams of international education policy, in so far as they put pressure on school systems to change, depending on the performance of students. The PISA findings are then generalised by rebuking whole education systems as well as pointing to best practice countries like Finland. In contrast to PISA, though, the EQF is not as well-known an instrument outside the world of education, although its long-term impact should not be underestimated as it could result in specific national reform steps beyond the issue of raising the quality of school education. In this respect, its implications may be compared to those deriving from OECD studies rebuking countries once they fail to increase progression to and participation in higher education, since this issue touches the basic architecture of the whole education system and its underlying cultural and pedagogical paradigms.

Since Germany is a typical example of an ‘apprenticeship country’, the paper picks up these immanent matching problems by referring to the German institutional framework of VET, including forms and practices of non-state intervention into the system and, in particular, to the responsibility of non-state institutions such as the social partners, who have specific views on preserving the culture behind the dual system in the context of internationalisation. The paper also touches on other specific issues associated with Europeanisation of VET, i.e. the function of hybrid qualifications, which are quite common in the UK or France, but also in Switzerland with its traditional apprenticeship system. They refer to the dimension of lifelong learning policy in so far as they touch the relationship between VET and higher education, but also the basic question of new progression routes within the education system.

## Keywords

VET, apprenticeships, EQF, German qualifications framework, Germany, dual system

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## Introduction

The label ‘apprenticeship country’ for Germany, together with the notion of a mass education system for what is known as the dual system (*Duales System*), illustrates the unique positioning of this country, together with Switzerland and, to a lesser extent, Austria, as a model of skill formation where initial vocational training forms the crucial foundation for a career in intermediate level working positions, such as banking, electrical engineering or various types of craftsmanship. It has for many decades been considered to be both the most important subsystem of VET and an essential component of a normal biography for a large share of the school-leaving population (Konietzka and Lempert, 1998). Here, the strong focus on educational principles and process regulation of VET, due to particular historical developments and specific cultural and pedagogical convictions that helped apprenticeships survive (Deissinger, 2004), imply that the dual system is still the strongest stream in post-compulsory secondary education in Germany. Its institutionalisation and didactical systematisation and standardisation are typical of the German learning culture in VET, although on the other hand, it is also responsible for quite a strong binary understanding of academic and vocational learning pathways (Harris and Deissinger, 2003). Although the latter is also typical of the English condition of VET (Davey and Fuller, 2013; see Parry in this issue) one outstanding pedagogical component in Germany comes in with compulsory school attendance in the part-time vocational school (*Berufsschule*), which underlines both the importance of theoretical vocational learning as well as additional general education during the apprenticeship. Ryan (2001) places this in contrast with the British approach to VET: ‘A striking difference from Germany is the absence of minimum training periods, such as a three-year programme for bakers. Similarly, apprentices need not take part-time technical education’ (Ryan, 2001: 136).

It is against this background that Germany’s VET system does not refer to qualification levels, but rather to occupations or occupational fields, while the EQF can be seen as a starting point from which the various VET systems in Europe are challenged to create their own national qualifications frameworks (NQFs), which are to emanate from a new understanding of competence (Bohlinger, 2008; European Commission, 2005; Klenk, 2013). Germany has also worked hard to try to comply with the so-called Lisbon-Copenhagen-Maastricht Process (Dunkel and Jones, 2006). Besides the levelling of qualifications and educational pathways, another underlying challenge has been to give birth to concepts such as the learning economy or lifelong learning (Hake, 1999)<sup>1</sup>. ‘Working hard’ in the German context means that resistance from stakeholders and conflicts within the education system had to be overcome or at least softened in order to comply with the new ideas underlying the EQF. Internationalisation in the German VET context, therefore, has to be seen as a function of both national and international factors leading to a typical national solution, notwithstanding the fact that the EQF’s strategic inventors mainly thought that a European system would emerge from this core element of the lifelong learning agenda of the EU (see also Clarke and Winch in this issue).

When we talk about stakeholders in the German context we mean mainly non-government or non-state institutions that manifestly shape the apprenticeship system and decide on the speed of innovation, but always in consideration of tradition and established best practice as well as institutional self-interest (for a broader use of the term see Kuhlee in this issue). In the case of the German qualifications framework (GQF), an alliance of trade union representatives and employers’ organisations managed to fend off much of the Anglo-Saxon understanding of designing and sorting of qualifications, which was not seen as compatible with the national understanding of a state-recognised occupational qualification (Deissinger, 1998, 2013). While competences in the English or Australian understanding have a functionalist meaning by referring to specific workplaces or workplace activities (Misko, 1999; Jessup, 1991), in Germany the notion of *Beruf* implies a holistic

competence portfolio, which is strictly bound to a specific model of training (i.e. in the dual apprenticeship system).

This paper looks at two of the major conflict zones between the German national understanding and institutionalisation of VET and the recent EU policy parameters determining international education policy. The first refers to modularisation as a counterpart to the vocational principle (*Berufsprinzip*), the second to the notion of progression from VET to higher education emerging via the concept of hybrid qualifications. It will be argued that, while modularisation is normally, though not exclusively, seen as more or less incompatible with the German vocational tradition, hybrid qualifications as rather underrepresented structural elements of the education system are closely associated with the structure of the vocational school system in general and the dominant position of the dual system.

## Europeanisation and internationalisation as triggers of VET reform?

One of the keystones behind the EU's lifelong learning agenda is the concept of competence-based training (CBT), meaning that learning can take various forms (formal, non-formal, informal) and: 'should be independent of the routes of acquisition' (Westerhuis, 2011: 68). This understanding also exists outside Europe, with many countries establishing NQFs more or less along the lines of learning outcomes in the sense of validated competences, which should be obtainable irrespective of the context in which they were gained (for Australia see e.g. Misko, 1999)<sup>2</sup>. Another facet is sorting existing qualifications along (competence) dimensions and levels, which are based on general descriptors. VET systems with a strong focus on initial training therefore obviously face the most serious challenges. The nation-specific strategy of Germany had to link two worlds: Keeping the well-functioning elements of the VET system (such as the dual system of apprenticeship training) stable, while at the same time trying to cope with the prominent European issues such as informal learning, modularisation and accreditation of prior learning. Besides, transition from VET to higher education is seen, in a European perspective, as an integral element of a more open educational architecture, while so far the subsystems in Germany (above all the school system and VET) have been working as traditionally clearly segregated entities with hardly any competence-relevant links between them.

It is the historical character of any VET system which determines its current structures and principles, including its links to the labour market, but also, in the case of Germany in particular, some of its structural problems emanating from the overall significance of the dual system of apprenticeship training (Deissinger et al., 2012; Greinert, 2015; Marsden and Ryan, 1991). This means that the general status and evaluation given to apprenticeships as one specific institutional and didactical solution to the problem of skill formation can differ between countries, mostly depending on the availability of alternative or socially preferred pathways and qualifications. Besides the apprenticeship system, school-based forms of vocational learning, such as vocational colleges (*Berufskollegs*) (e.g. in the federal state of Baden-Württemberg, cf. Deissinger et al., 2006) represent more or less traditional courses and qualifications, which are normally institution-based, shaped by state influence and provide underpinning knowledge for work-based training, although they function as more or less theoretical alternatives to workplace learning. Experiences with these school-based subsystems stretch from highly labour-market relevant courses (e.g. in Austria, cf. Aff, 2006) to more or less ambivalent functions of vocational schools, which include opening up progression to higher education (e.g. in France, cf. Ott, 2015; Ott and Deissinger, 2010).

An important overarching issue, besides institutionalisation, seems to be not only the social and economic understanding of various vocational pathways (Harris and Deissinger, 2003) but also the

evaluation given to VET in general, which obviously becomes manifest when we look at the implications of the EQF. Countries that differ in terms of their VET structures and underlying traditions, especially with respect to the relationship between school-based VET and company-based training, also show different strategies to cope with international policy challenges, above all when it comes to NQFs (Young, 2003).

NQFs ‘support the objectives of strong and accessible qualifications pathways, a transparent qualifications system, and one that facilitates lifelong learning’ (Keating, 2008: 1). In this context, the EU – with the implementation of the EQF – sees the boundaries between various sectors of the educational and/or training system, including higher and further education, as more and more permeable subsystems. This premise is based on a specific understanding of competence. It is quite obvious that the European notion of competence is specific as it distances itself from the notion of a full qualification, as ideally realised in a traditional apprenticeship system without the possibility of obtaining partial qualifications. The terminology used in the EQF clearly underlines that levels of qualifications should ideally be understood as levels of competence or competence accumulations. Therefore, what is generally understood by the European framework concept resembles the concept of national vocational qualifications (NVQs) in England in the 1980s (Deissinger, 2002; Jessup, 1991; see Clarke and Winch in this issue), which has had profound effects for the primary orientation of VET towards achieving ‘someone’s ability to perform, rather than demonstrating the possession of knowledge’ (Westerhuis, 2011: 77). On the level of course organisation and structuring of qualifications, modularisation is closely connected to this understanding of competence (Brockmann et al., 2010: 91). Against this background, work-based learning ‘should be confined to the immediate requirements of acquiring the skills associated with a particular job or task’ – with the implication that learning beyond this scope is not just ‘regarded as superfluous, but a positive hindrance to effective working’ (Brockmann et al., 2010: 92).

The EQF may be described as a “competence framework” which provides general descriptors for particular learning outcomes, themselves understood as independent of any pedagogical processes or curricular assumptions involved in their acquisition by any individual ... The descriptors are general because they apply to any sector or occupation that seeks to translate its qualifications in one national qualification system into equivalents in another. (Brockmann et al., 2009: 788)

We have pointed to the assumption that the competence approach evident in the EQF is likely to enter into a conflict with a non-functional (and non-modular) understanding of initial vocational training. It needs to be added that the reluctance or sluggishness of Germany to put non-formal and informal learning on the educational policy agenda seems to be representative of the ‘conservative’ commitment of the relevant stakeholders in Germany to EU policy challenges. In the German case, this conservatism seems particularly strong. It is interesting that, even in France, informal learning – via the VAE (*validation d’acquisition d’expériences*) system – is now being integrated into the VET system – in a country which, even more strongly than Germany, has always demonstrated a firm belief in the importance of formal, and mostly general, qualifications and their meritocratic relevance for positioning the individual in the economy (Lutz, 1986). Nowadays, all vocational qualifications can be obtained via different routes or pathways, including schools, apprenticeships and VAE as the French version of recognition of prior learning (RPL) (Ott, 2015).

The following section depicts the function of those stakeholders who represent the conservative character of the German dual system, which is trying to preserve its functionality both in socio-economic and pedagogical terms. We will focus on the trade unions and the craft sector in particular, and on their role in the design of the GQF. A second aspect will be discussed by focusing on the relevance of hybridity as one instrument to comply with the notion of progression routes as incorporated in the EQF philosophy.

## Specific challenges for the German dual system and the role of stakeholders

In Germany the consultations leading to the QF, which took place between 2006 and 2012, proved to be difficult and burdensome for two principle reasons:

- 1 The trade unions and, among the employer representatives, the craft association (*Zentralverband des Deutschen Handwerks*), insisted on a *German* understanding of competence as the major guideline for the consultations of the working group chaired by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (*Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung*) and the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Cultural Affairs of the *Länder* (*Kultusministerkonferenz*, KMK). The fear most frequently articulated was the argument that a fragmented understanding of competence, and especially the assumption that learning sites and learning durations could be degraded as non-essential input variables of VET, was the major motivational force in the debate.
- 2 There was no consensus between the representatives of the school system (education ministries of the federal states) and higher education (German Rectors' Conference, *Hochschulrektorenkonferenz*, HRK) on the one side, and the representatives of non-government stakeholders within the dual system (trade unions and employer organisations) on the other when it came to the allocation of the respective qualifications on specific levels of the QF. One major argument proved to be the issue of comparability between an *Abitur* (general university entrance qualification) and a training occupation (normally meaning three years in an apprenticeship) within the matrix of the perceived QF.

It is with these two points of discussion that the topics depicted in the following section are closely associated, as the first touches on the vocational principle (*Berufsprinzip*) and a specific understanding of vocational competence (*Berufliche Handlungskompetenz*), while the second refers to a new understanding of 'boundary crossing' between historically divided (binary) subsystems of the education system, i.e. higher education and vocational education.

The position of social partners and especially chambers (of commerce, e.g.), representing the various branches of the economy, is particularly strong in the German VET system (Busemeyer and Schlicht-Schmälzle, 2014; Kreft, 2006: 255 ff; Deissinger, 1996)<sup>3</sup> and has to be seen as one of the essential parameters for its success story, but also for its inherent conservatism. It is especially the unions which underline that vocational training should be a public issue and seen as education rather than employment. Their view of the state's role in protecting young people from being exploited (which used to be a political issue in the 1960s) stands behind most of their political beliefs and objectives with respect to the dual system. This also explains why they look at competence orientation as detached from the holistic notion of an occupation as an unpedagogical didactical concept. This also includes a critical stance towards European issues and modularisation (Drexel, 2005). It is interesting that the craft sector and its associations have a similar understanding when it comes to making training occupations more flexible. The fact that nearly all craft occupations (*Handwerksberufe*) in Germany are mono occupations underlines this trust in the vocational principle (Deissinger, 2001b; Stütz, 1969). All this gives the German system the quality of a VET model, where collective skill formation can be seen as the crucial logic of regulation in harmony with both political and economic interests (Busemeyer and Schlicht-Schmälzle, 2014: 61):

Non-market coordination allows firms to solve problems of market failure in the joint production of human capital ... which leads to a higher willingness of employers to provide training. Employment and social protection in turn enhance the willingness of workers to invest in vocational skills ... In countries where

high-quality vocational skills are widely available, firms develop a competitive advantage in “diversified quality production” ... of high-quality manufacturing goods. These economic benefits contribute to the long-term political sustainability of collective skill systems.

The role of non-state stakeholders within this kind of non-market coordination becomes visible when looking at the relevant stipulations of the German Vocational Training Act (1969, revised 2005; see BMBF, 2005; Deissinger, 1996; Greinert, 2015: 81 ff.), which gave the dual system a late legal foundation. Here, the principle of self-government (Zabeck, 1975) is one of the most important principles and means that the Act takes account of the traditional features of guild apprenticeship while at the same time submitting in-company training to general standards. The competent authorities (*zuständige Stellen*) are in charge of monitoring in-company training and of holding exams for journeymen, skilled industrial workers, commercial clerks and master craftsmen or master workers. As chambers they represent an essential element of what may be called the sphere of public or semi-private responsibility within the dual system (see also Kuhlee in this issue).

The Vocational Training Act therefore makes stipulations both for the private *and* the public sphere of initial vocational training. While in the private sphere apprenticeships are defined as specified modes of employment, the public sphere widens the scope of the Act to the formal organisation of vocational training (in companies), where the government plays a formal, but not a material role. Although some authors have pointed to the fact that the dual system deserves to be called ‘the most comprehensive and detailed regulatory system for apprenticeship training in the Western world’ (Raggatt, 1988: 175), non-government organisations play decisive roles. The chambers are in charge of registering training contracts, holding examinations and supervising in-company training, and the trade unions and employer organisations for the various trades or occupational fields are responsible and have the freedom to set up occupational standards and contents for training regulations. Since all their activities are not only confined to system-immanent functions securing a high degree of consistency and historical continuity with established practices, above all when it comes to modernisation or training courses, their political influence must not be underestimated. This political influence has so far successfully avoided any attempts by government to establish a levy system to secure a sufficient number of training places, but has also fended off suggestions to make the system more flexible through modularisation. Both issues are no longer relevant topics in the German debate on VET.

This is quite surprising as the VET system has given birth to various non-regular pathways besides the dual system. The emergence of the *Übergangssystem* or transition system (Schmidt, 2011), swallowing a remarkable amount of public money, has proved that the German apprenticeship system is only a success story for those who manage to find a training place (see Granato et al. in this issue).<sup>4</sup> The same may be said of the full-time school system: for constitutional and political reasons, full-time vocational schools and the dual system remain more or less unconnected subsystems, even if the local or regional vocational part-time school and the various types of full-time schools are in most cases physically located under one roof in vocational school centres (Deissinger et al., 2006).

From the perspective of the relevant stakeholders within the dual system, the architecture of the GQF now quite clearly mirrors the overall importance and valuation of VET, as apprenticeship qualifications are located on levels 3 and 4 (depending on training duration) and the master craftsman finds itself on the same level as the Bachelor (level 6). This positioning of traditional VET, however, implies that two other European issues are more or less excluded: (1) RPL and how to deal with competences outside strongly regulated training courses or educational pathways; and (2) the issue of progression from VET to higher education.

## Two examples for 'resistant behaviour'

### Modularisation

Modules can be differentiated according to the degree of dissolving a holistic entity, such as an occupational curriculum. While differentiation and supplementation within or in addition to an existing occupational profile are not seen as destructive concepts, an atomising or fragmenting approach (Deissinger, 2001a) appears, at least in the German debate, incompatible with the traditional notion of *Beruf* (occupation) (see also Clarke and Winch in this issue). The alliance of trade unions and the craft sector in the German context has embarked on a joint battle against the impact of the GQF being too closely associated with the Anglo-Saxon understanding of competences and modularisation. Their aim has been to protect the character, functionality and importance of the dual system of apprenticeship training as the heart of the German VET system. The contributions by Esser (2009) and Nehls (2008) are illuminating examples for this structurally conservative point of view. Although both tackle the specific topics of alignment and transparency, indicating progression as one of the central objectives underlying the EQF, their major concern is the vocational principle (*Berufsprinzip*) commonly described as the organisational principle within the German system of VET (Deissinger, 1998).

Nehls (2008: 50, translated) warns that an 'alignment towards competence and employability skills must not mean that socially standardised learning processes in the shape of training regulations might be replaced by a combination of arbitrary learning objectives'. In his statement, a substantial fear of modularisation of VET becomes obvious. The trade unionist concludes that the GQF should be aligned in a way to 'enable all young people and adults to acquire recognised and high-quality competences capable of long-term and marketable application on the labour market within the scope of lifelong learning' (Nehls, 2008: 50, translated). However, the motivation of relevant stakeholders functioning as social partners within the VET system appears to be anxiety for the apprenticeship system. Therefore, they are obviously only willing to accept the EU's terminology in areas where these traditional structures are not at risk. This means that full occupational qualifications should be preserved and put onto a comparatively high level within the framework in order to underline their equivalence to school and higher education qualifications.

Given these tensions between a competence-based modular approach and the vocational principle (*Berufsprinzip*), the issue of permeability assumes a major role. Esser (2009)<sup>5</sup> refers to the idea of 'removing pillars' (Esser, 2009: 47), although he applies this concept to the demarcation lines between VET and higher education – admittedly a highly relevant borderline within the German educational system – rather than to the demarcations within the VET system as such, which have been responsible for the emergence of the transition system (*Übergangssystem*) since the 1990s (Schmidt, 2011). This segment within Germany's VET architecture has grown significantly in the last few decades and has become the object of considerable debate in both academic research and educational policy. It is obvious that the problems associated with the transition system, with all their implications for the social and economic perspectives of young people, will remain a persistent structural challenge for Germany's educational policy in the years to come (Euler, 2011). The fact that VET policy in Germany is centred around these issues in the first place, underlines that its major topic is still the dual system, since all transition measures are supposed to lead directly or indirectly into an apprenticeship (see for more detail Granato et al. in this issue)<sup>6</sup>.

When it comes to the GQF and its levels, Esser (2009: 48) suggests a scenario, which in his view involves following a similar process to that adopted with the Bologna qualifications within higher education, i.e. localising all VET qualifications and all VET entry entitlements to a specific reference level of the framework, while at the same time allowing various requirement levels only

within a defined skills area (e.g. in the sense that a one-year vocational preparation course in the commercial sector would be unambiguously on a lower level than a fully-fledged vocational qualification deriving from a three-year course in the apprenticeship system). This position goes hand-in-hand with a rather lukewarm handling of the issue of informal and non-formal learning and the fact that comprehensive and reliable accreditation structures and mechanisms even within formalised VET, i.e. above all between full-time VET and apprenticeships, have not yet been implemented. One reason for this lies in the specific organisational architecture within the German education system according to which all issues associated with school education are the responsibility of the federal states (*Länder*), and training outside schools, e.g. the company-based part of the dual system, is regulated by federal law (in particular through the Vocational Training Act) (see Kuhlee in this issue).

Interestingly, the revised Vocational Training Act of 2005 came up with some modernisation issues, some of which could be understood as more or less in line with European expectations (BMBF, 2005), i.e. (1) the inclusion of vocational preparation schemes within the scope of regulation of this Act and with it the implementation of a system of qualification modules (*Qualifizierungsbausteine*); and (2) the recognition and crediting of vocational competences obtained in school-based VET via bye-laws of the federal states. The situation in most federal states concerning the latter is still rather unsatisfactory. In the state of Baden-Württemberg, for example, the fact that most graduates from vocational colleges find it hard to get RPL for their two-year course when embarking on an apprenticeship illustrates this problem quite well (Deissinger and Ruf, 2006). It is also connected to the role given to hybrid qualifications in the German education system (see next section).

When it comes to making the dual system more flexible by using a modular approach, some rather soft (unfragmented) concepts have been suggested, both with respect to the transition system and to more flexible training occupations. While the latter objective has been taken up by the social partners since the late 1980s and 1990s, leading to a number of new training occupations and occupational families with core and elective qualification modules as curricular components (Müller et al., 1997), more progressive approaches are still objected to and feared by the trade unions and also the craft sector (e.g. Drexel, 2005). Euler and Severing (2006) came up with a concept of training modules (*Ausbildungsbausteine*), which should structure both existing training occupations and alternative pathways and vocational preparation programmes. Their idea was directly linked to the problematic growth of the above-mentioned transition system. One of their models even pointed to the possibility of modularised examinations – still out of bounds against the background of the exclusive competence of the chambers in this field and their tradition-based system of holistic qualifications, such as skilled worker or master craftsman (Muth, 1985).

Recent evaluation research shows that the concept of training modules, as suggested by Euler and Severing, has now been implemented in some 40 projects. The study by Ekert et al. (2013) tentatively mentions a number of positive developments and impacts of these innovative instruments, used as competence-based modules in a national transition programme called *Jobstarter Connect*. However, more resistance and a lack of information seem to exist in the industrial section of this programme, although the modules are strictly in line with the training curriculum of a specific skilled occupation. Similar to the above-mentioned problems with RPL of school-based vocational courses, one problem seems to be that employers are unwilling to reduce the duration of an apprenticeship for young people being taken on as apprentices through the *Jobstarter* measure. One reason might be that companies do not trust or do not really appreciate the certificates issued at the end of the programme as they still prefer fully-fledged courses of VET based on a non-modularised notion of an occupation.<sup>7</sup>



## Hybrid qualifications

In particular, enhancing permeability and parity of esteem between general and vocational education may be seen as one of the essentials of Europeanisation. One instrument is the use of hybrid qualifications, i.e. entitlements for skilled work *and* higher education (Deissinger et al., 2013). These qualifications so far have been treated as a rather lower-ranking topic within the German education system and do not appear centrally on the German educational policy agenda. The reason for this is that the topic more or less failed during the great time of educational reform in Germany in the 1970s (Deissinger, 1998). Nowadays, it comes as a surprise when looking at other European countries, including Switzerland and Austria, which have both been successful in installing hybrid pathways – mainly with the overall objective of making VET (even) more attractive (Gonon, 2013). At the same time, school-based hybrid qualifications in Austria, for example, which have existed since the 1970s, were established as a kind of flagship of higher VET and are still given a dominant role in the VET system, even outshining the dual system in terms of social and economic reputation (Aff, 2006; Aff et al., 2013).

In contrast, progression to higher education in a formal manner in Germany is limited, because there is no direct pathway from apprenticeship to university or university of applied science (*Fachhochschule*) as a ‘normal’ progression route (see Wolter and Kerst in this issue). Instead, students need to take detours, either before or after an apprenticeship in the dual system, once they want to proceed to higher education. Basically, there are mainly two types of institution that provide access from the vocational school system to higher education (full-time not part-time): (1) the *Wirtschaftsgymnasium* and the *Technisches Gymnasium* (commercial or technical vocational high school); and (2) the *Berufskolleg* or *Höhere Berufsfachschule* (vocational college). In the first case, students obtain a general higher education qualification certificate (*Abitur*); in the second case they study for a lower-level polytechnic entrance qualification (*Fachhochschulreife*), sometimes together with a so-called assistant qualification (*Assistentenberuf*). Only the latter may be considered as a hybrid qualification since it is linked to an occupational qualification. However, there is quite a lot of empirical evidence that hybridity does not have substantial attractiveness for employers and therefore can only be seen as a preliminary step requiring a follow-up apprenticeship (Deissinger and Ruf, 2006).

It is quite obvious that the strong focus on traditional apprenticeships as the gold standard for employment makes these school-based pathways largely irrelevant as an *alternative* VET option, although, on the other hand, graduates seem well-disposed to a follow-up apprenticeship (Baumert et al., 2011: 133; Deissinger and Ruf, 2006: 122ff). Against this background, the German VET system has failed to comply with EU expectations for its dual system, which has become a kind of model for other countries, although any kind of transfer is more than questionable (Deissinger, 2015a; Euler, 2013). Complaining about the irrelevance of hybrid qualifications, therefore, virtually means complaining on a higher level.

In Germany, it is the formal dimension of the EQF, however, which collides with a consistent policy of ‘opening up barriers’ in order to enable individuals to proceed from one sector of the education system to another. Hybridity is just one relevant dimension within the scope of political objectives associated with it. The fact that, in Germany, master craftsmen can now apply for permission to begin university studies (as well as other people with working experience) implies a stronger political focus on ‘parity of esteem’ in the wake of the EU’s Lisbon-Bologna strategy (Frommberger, 2012: 184ff), even in a country where incorporating the notion of lifelong learning as a crucial overarching topic has a rather weak tradition. There is still a strong belief in German society, though, that vocational qualifications have a function other than the purely academic ones. Positively speaking, this means that VET is still predominantly seen as a specific subsystem with

its own self reference (Luhmann, 1984) and functionality, especially once one sees the master craftsman qualification as a logical upgrading of an apprenticeship.

Despite stronger academic aspirations in Germany's society (see Wolter and Kerst in this issue; Autorengruppe Bildungsberichterstattung, 2014: 40ff, 124ff; Deissinger, 2015b) and easier ways to proceed from primary education to the higher stratum of secondary education, research shows that, at least for the time being, higher education degrees have not yet developed into serious alternatives to traditional vocational qualifications in most branches of the economy (Hippach-Schneider and Weigel, 2013). It is also likely that, in the future, companies will look for different levels of qualifications, depending on various functions in the company organisation they have to serve (on the German labour market see Ebner in this issue). In some way, the so-called vocational academies (*Berufsakademien*) have satisfied these aspirations. Started in the 1980s in the federal state of Baden-Württemberg (Deissinger, 2000), the dual universities (*Duale Hochschulen*) as they are called today, are a kind of academic dual system.<sup>8</sup> In Germany it is likely that pathways that resemble the dual system will remain attractive to employers. New types of university courses and specifications of graduate courses now seem more relevant within the political discourse than, for example, the issue of hybrid qualifications, which are definitely not a pivotal topic of educational policy at the moment (Deissinger et al., 2013).

## Conclusion

We have seen that the dual system represents a rather conservative approach to EU policy objectives and projects, such as the EQF. The result has been a national solution, with a strong positioning of VET in the framework and with an exclusion of general education for reasons which can only be understood by looking at the basic architecture of the German system and its binary implications. Although the academic-vocational divide is sometimes much more powerful in countries where VET systems really struggle for their position within the education system (Davey and Fuller, 2013; Fuller and Unwin, 2011), in Germany it is the apprenticeship system and its overall social and economic acceptance, based on strong support from relevant stakeholders, such as trade unions, employer organisations and chambers, which also help explain this divide.

VET systems and pathways are more than constructions based on political motivations or economic interests, i.e. they have to be looked at as historical entities, and they even bear the potential – though this is contended by some authors – of revealing a national character, which corresponds with overarching or organising principles that are not necessarily shared by other countries (Allemann-Ghionda, 2004: 23, 51; Busemeyer and Schlicht-Schmälzle, 2014; Deissinger, 1998). An important overarching issue, besides institutionalisation, seems to be not only the social and economic understanding of various vocational pathways (Harris and Deissinger, 2003) but also the evaluation given to VET in general, which becomes clearly manifest when we look at the challenges imposed by the EQF. It is understood that countries which differ in terms of their VET systems and underlying traditions, especially with respect to the relationship between full-time VET and company-based training, also differ in terms of their capacity to adapt to the European VET policy agenda, above all when it comes to NQFs (Young, 2003).

Against this background, 'European construction sites' in the case of Germany remain, although they have to be solved primarily from a national point of view, i.e. considering the German condition, with a clear focus on the transition system and the specific problems of full-time VET. All of these have a European dimension:

- Links between different streams within the VET architecture still seem non-existent and they are normally highly dependent on federal state or regional regulations, especially when it comes to vocational preparation and integration measures.
- Differentiation within VET is weak in terms of skill levels and duration, which would be important with respect to supporting disadvantaged young people training in the dual system.
- Links between non-formal and informal learning and formal VET are virtually non-existent. It is interesting that, as mentioned above, even in the French education system, concepts have been implemented which correspond to the premises of the EQF.
- School-based VET remains detached from the dual system and may be seen as the clearly weaker subsystem when it comes to portable qualifications relevant for employment. However, here general qualifications can be obtained to proceed to higher education.

It has become obvious that the result, in Germany, of coping with the European dimension of education and training, has so far been rather an incomplete answer to Europeanisation, as it mirrors a kind of reconfirmation of the overall significance of apprenticeship training and also of continuing training in its wake (master craftsmen, technicians, etc.) to which the GQF now in operation has paid special tribute. Since the EQF/GQF have no substantial judicative function it may be assumed that they will remain a paper tiger in many respects. Real pressure for more far-reaching reforms of the German education system are likely to emerge from within. However, some of them, such as demographic change and tertiarisation (Deissinger, 2015b), are issues which we were not able to discuss in this contribution.

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## Notes

1. Earlier in the 1990s, in its White Paper on 'Growth, competitiveness and employment' (European Commission, 1993), the European Commission had already pointed out that lifelong learning ought to become a joint goal of all member states. Two years later, in a well-known White Paper on 'Teaching and training – Towards the learning society' (European Commission, 1995), the concept of lifelong learning even became associated with the idea of a 'personal skills card' for every European citizen, which would document the knowledge and competences acquired through formal and informal learning environments.
2. Other countries, besides the UK, that had already started with frameworks in the 1990s were New Zealand and South Africa (Klenk, 2013: 16). Australia introduced its NQF in 1995.
3. The chambers have the authority to hold examinations in the apprenticeship system, while the social partners normally define the contents of a training occupation before it becomes legally binding (Deissinger, 1996).
4. In 2012 some 266,000 young people undertook some kind of training or vocational preparation in the transition system. Among these, some 195,000 were in school-based measures and some 71,000 in company-based or company-related programmes (DIHK, 2013). In 2013 this number dropped slightly to 257,000, as against some 497,000 new apprenticeships in the dual system. It is alarming, though, that 40% of school leavers with a lower secondary school qualification had to take the route into the transition system (Autorengruppe Bildungsberichterstattung, 2014: 98f).
5. Friedrich Hubert Esser is a former VET expert of the central craft sector association (ZDH) in Germany and is now president of the German Federal Institute of Vocational Training (BiBB).

6. One example is the concept of entry qualifications (Einstiegsqualifizierung, or EQ), which has turned out to be a comparatively successful programme, as its success quota is quite high, i.e. more than two-thirds of young people who enter this programme, which is a kind of company-based internship, succeed in entering the dual system after completion (Ekert et al., 2013).
7. There is still a considerable degree of heterogeneity within the transition system, however, the number of school leavers who had to make use of it has fallen from 418,000 in 2005 to just 267,000 in 2012 (DIHK, 2013).
8. Dual higher education is still a heterogeneous field. The Baden-Württemberg example is a particularly sophisticated model as it offers Bachelor degrees based on a training contract with a company. For more details on dual universities, see Bundesinstitut für Berufsbildung (2015: 248ff) and Krone (2015).

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