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EDITORIAL

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Lifelong learning – wishful thinking and reality

Or, what kind of reality do we wish for?

Dear readers,

Concepts for continuous learning have been evolving on national and international levels since the end of the 1960s. Good ideas and best practices abound; some can be found in this issue. So why has the lifelong dimension of learning still not become a matter of course?

Effective lifelong learning depends on learning effectively over a lifetime

Trite as it may be, this circular reasoning points to root causes of the deficiencies in realising the “maxim of lifelong learning”. The foundations for the ability and willingness to engage in continuous learning are laid in early childhood and in primary school. German education policy tended to ignore this simple insight until well into the late 1990s. Despite the great efforts now being made, it will take a long time to catch up with international progress in this area.

While other countries fundamentally reformed their systems in the 1970s and 1980s, and all-day learning in integrated schools became the international standard, Germany had a febrile debate about school structures that tailed off in the 1980s in a climate of education-policy dormancy. Key factors in the success of other education systems, based on the PISA evidence, are overarching education strategies spanning the elementary to secondary school phases; educators who naturally take responsibility for teaching personal and social skills as well; active learning methods and individual support in small groups of learners; and more time for learning and better social inclusion by learning in class all day up to the end of obligatory schooling. PISA has revitalised the German debate on this issue and spurred on new advances. But as ever, the enthusiasm for transferring these findings into the reality of German schooling is underwhelming.

Only Germany’s dual system of vocational education and training and its parallel system of school-based vocational qualifications, both of which lead directly to employment, are still seen as models of best practice internationally: 85 per cent of young adults achieve a qualification recognised on the job market, an outstanding figure by international comparison.

In the 1990s, on somewhat tenuous regulatory-policy grounds and partly for financial reasons, an opportunity was missed – especially in western Germany – to compensate for the shortage of in-company apprenticeships by meeting the need in other ways, such as expanding the school-based vocational system and industry-based extra-company initial vocational programmes. Instead, the development of the “transition system” has escalated since the mid-1990s. Year after year since then, tens of thousands of applicants capable of undertaking apprenticeships have also ended up in this system.

Priority for education often asserted but too seldom realised

The fact remains that too many children and young people, particularly those from families with a background of “educational exclusion”, do not acquire the foundations for lifelong learning. Even

after embarking on employment, it is a truism that “the ‘haves’ always get more”. The better the qualification, the higher the income, the greater the likelihood of further learning. Opportunities missed in childhood and youth inhibit active, continuing learning in adulthood.

Yet there are also structural reasons for the modest take-up of continuing education. Although Germany has an internationally unique system of nationally recognised advanced training occupations, and has made clear progress on equivalence and permeability between the vocational and higher education pathways, there is still a sense that the university track is the “high road” and the vocational route the “low road”. Although the social partners and politicians vehemently demand equivalence, this is barely borne out in recruitment and pay policy in industry or in the public sector. Nor is sufficient funding available, from the public purse or from employers, for continuing vocational education and training. This puts it at a considerable disadvantage to the university sector. Consider the potential of a broad, structurally underpinned and properly funded campaign to increase the provision of advanced vocational training as well as qualification during employment. It would be an opportunity to fill the impending qualification gap more rapidly and more appropriately than by raising the quota of academics. That opportunity should be taken!

Translation: Deborah Shannon, Academic Text and Translation, Norwich