

Policy brief

# Conditions for flexible transitions between vocational and academic education

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## Summary

The lack of permeability between the vocational and the higher education systems has become a central concern of education policy in recent years. To meet the demands of a modern work environment as well as the needs of individual workers, the transition between the different education sectors must be facilitated. This policy brief identifies conditions necessary to successfully establish permeable structures between the vocational and the higher education systems in Germany and derives specific policy recommendations from this.

## Problem description

In Germany, there is a strong traditional institutional separation between the vocational training system and the higher education system – a separation that has been fundamentally called into question in the last ten to fifteen years. This is linked to a growing discussion about the equivalence of vocational and higher education. The root cause for these debates are societal and socio-economic developments that challenge the established relationship between vocational and higher education systems. These include a dynamic change in the economy towards more knowledge-based activities, the digitalisation of the workplace, increased educational aspirations of young people, a general trend towards academic degrees, demographic change, and a feared shortage of skilled workers. To be able to cope with such dramatically changing work and societal conditions, there is an increasing desire for equal educational opportunities. An example of this is lifelong learning, which requires an institutionally permeable education system (Wolter, Banscheraus and Kamm 2016). However, the question remains, how can institutional permeability between vocational and higher education be promoted in Germany?

By institutional permeability, we mean structures that promote educational mobility within individual educational career paths. This suggests that the chosen educational path does not necessarily have to be continued, but that there are opportunities to smoothly transfer to alternative routes without having to re-start from square one in another educational trajectory. Permeability is not simply about the easy

transition between different educational organisations or sectors; rather, it is also about the conditions within the latter. In this context, we consider four different dimensions of institutional permeability: (1) access to educational programs, (2) credit recognition of what has been learned, (3) the organisational connection of different educational areas and (4) the handling of heterogeneous learning needs (Bernhard 2017). In the following, we first present three practical examples of permeability between vocational and higher education systems. Building on this, we develop and discuss specific political options for action.<sup>1</sup>

## Key figures

2009

KMK resolution on higher education access for vocationally qualified applicants without a school-based higher education entrance qualification.

2013

For the first time, the number of first-year students (including foreign students) exceeded the number of first-year students in dual vocational training (BIBB 2020b, S. 85).

2,2%

Students in higher education without higher education entry qualifications ("Studierende ohne Abitur") (2019) (CHE 2021).

14%

Increase in the number of students in dual study programmes (initial training) between 2014 and 2019 (AusbildungPlus-Datenbank, BIBB 2020a, S. 11).

## Practical examples of permeability between vocational and higher education systems

The practical examples presented demonstrate innovative approaches as *good practice* cases that have supra-regional appeal and the potential for institutional consolidation and diffusion. We explore one educational model from the secondary level, namely the vocational training with Abitur (baccalaureate). The other two examples are located at the tertiary level. They concern the Open University Initiative Lower Saxony and the Baden-Württemberg Cooperative State University.

### Dual vocational training with Abitur in Saxony

So far, there are only few educational programmes in Germany in which dual vocational training is systematically linked with the general higher education entrance qualification in the form of a double qualification. However, the number of such educational offers is increasing in the form of new model projects.<sup>2</sup> One of the first of these projects, Dual Vocational Training with Abitur in Saxony ("Duale Berufsausbildung mit Abitur in Sachsen", DuBAS), was launched in Saxony in 2011. In this project, it is possible to obtain a vocational qualification *and* a general higher education entrance qualification within four years. The dual qualification course can be undertaken in ten different training occupations. It combines dual vocational training in a company and a vocational school with the general higher education entrance qualification obtained at a vocational Gymnasium in Saxony, thus allowing for later access to university degrees. DuBAS training lasts six months to one year longer than the traditional dual vocational

<sup>1</sup> This policy brief builds on a larger study (see Banscherus, Bernhard and Graf 2016 in the list of further readings), which explains the arguments in detail and provides further examples and background information for interested readers.

<sup>2</sup> Within the framework of the "Higher Vocational Education" initiative of the German Confederation of Skilled Crafts (ZDH), the ZDH and the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Länder in the Federal Republic of Germany (KMK) have developed a concept for the vocational Abitur in the skilled crafts, which has been tested in nine states since the 2017/2018 school year.

training and one year longer than the vocational Gymnasium. However, it is two years shorter than the consecutive completion of both courses of education.

The DuBAS programme highlights the important role that onsite support structures as well as a safety net created by institutionalised transition opportunities play for students. Both within the company and at school, the students' heavy double workload must be considered, which requires, among other things, a special didactic approach. This is made possible through close cooperation between the different partners involved in this educational pathway, which also allows existing problems of the companies or schools to be dealt with in a collaborative manner. From a systemic perspective, the challenge is that these new types of training courses should not be established in direct competition to the existing education system and its institutions, such as the vocational Gymnasium, as this may jeopardize their acceptance and support. At the federal level, it is advisable to give even more recognition to dual-qualification education programmes such as the Abitur with dual vocational training. This is especially important since these programmes can make dual vocational training more attractive for academically oriented youth.

### **The Open University Initiative Lower Saxony ("Offene Hochschule Niedersachsen")**

In 1971, Lower Saxony was the first German state to provide access to higher education for prospective students without a higher education entrance qualification. Since then, a robust network of higher education institutions, adult and continuing education institutions, labour organisations and political actors has emerged that is committed to the idea of an "open university". This is reflected, among other things, in the large participation of Lower Saxony's educational institutions in nationwide funding programmes such as the "ANKOM - Transitions from Vocational to Higher Education" (2005 to 2011 and 2011 to 2015) initiative and the joint Federal Government-Länder Competition "Advancement through Education: Open Universities" (2011 to 2020) or the state-specific funding lines "Open University Lower Saxony" (2009 to 2013) and "Opening the Universities" (2016 to 2022). Not only did these projects develop numerous part-time study programmes, but they also allowed for an in-depth experience concerning different educational credit transfer systems and a variety of target group information, counselling and support activities.

One attempt to institutionalise such activities was the creation of the Service Centre Open University ("Servicestelle Offene Hochschule Niedersachsen") in 2012. At the end of 2018, the Lower Saxony state government decided to refocus the Open University Initiative ("Offene Hochschule") by shifting its attention more strongly towards the individual target groups via a decentralised, regional set-up. Because of this, the service centre was integrated into the Coordination Office for Student Information and Counselling in Lower Saxony.

The example of Lower Saxony indicates many of the prerequisites that are necessary for an increased permeability between vocational and academic education. In addition to suitable formats, accompanying offers and the necessary resources, this also includes long-term cooperation between different education and higher education policy actors as well as a common strategic objective.

### **The Baden-Württemberg Cooperative State University (DHBW)**

The central example of the organisational link in the tertiary sector is the dual study programme. Dual study programmes operate at the intersection of vocational and higher education and, as hybrid organisational forms, combine organisational and institutional elements of traditional vocational and traditional higher education (Graf, 2013). The DHBW, founded in 2009, is considered the cradle of dual study in Germany. Its origins dating back to the 1970s. The DHBW is the primary provider of dual study programmes in Baden-Württemberg. With more than 34,000 students, it is by far the largest provider of

dual study programmes in Germany and the largest higher education institution in the state. Almost 10 percent of all students in Baden-Württemberg study at the DHBW (Statistisches Landesamt Baden-Württemberg, 2020). With a total of nine locations, DHBW currently offers 50 dual bachelor's and master's degree programmes in a variety of fields, such as business, technology, social services and health (DHBW, 2021).

Dual study programmes combine the respective institutional logic of the classical vocational training system and the higher education system and thus represent a hybrid form that bridges the fields of vocational training and higher education. With their hybrid structure, dual study programmes show that the organisational differences between the two fields can be overcome. In addition, they promote mutual familiarity between the actors in vocational training and higher education – which can be considered an important prerequisite for the creation of further permeability initiatives. However, apart from the given subject specificity, the expansion of dual studies is limited by the fact that for each available study place a paid trainee employment offer must be provided at a partnering company.

## Political options

### 1. Understand permeability as a multidimensional task

To promote permeability, future structures should address the various dimensions of permeability (access to educational pathways, educational crediting, linking of education sectors, dealing with heterogeneous learning needs). Policymakers' attention should not exclusively be focused on granting access, but also on enabling the successful completion of educational pathways through a fair recognition of previous learning achievements. In addition to access and credit transfer, target group-specific support services as well as an organisational linking of vocational and higher education must be realised.

### 2. Close cooperation between stakeholders involved in higher general education at secondary and tertiary levels as well as in vocational education and training

Permeable education structures can only be institutionalised in the long term if a fair and trusting cooperation between the various actors of the vocational and higher education system is promoted and ensured. Increased cooperation at all levels, both in the conceptualisation and steering of initiatives as well as their implementation within the organisations, increases mutual understanding between the different educational sectors and their individual institutional logics.

### 3. Establishment of supra-regional standards

Supra-regional or national standards can help introduce regulations and practices that promote permeability and institutionalise *good practice* cases nationwide. This is particularly the case if the standards are designed in such an open manner that they can accommodate specific individual cases to the greatest extent possible.

### 4. Establishment of target group-specific advisory and support structures

The importance of information provision, counselling and support services for individual educational success is increasingly recognised by educational policy and educational organisations. The establishment of state-wide counselling and support structures even at an early stage in an individual's educational pathways can contribute, among other things, to greater transparency about educational opportunities, access options and credit transfer procedures, but also to the development of custom-fit study programmes.

## 5. Promote different forms of collaboration and credit transfer between vocational education and training and higher education

This can happen in the tertiary sector, for example, via dual studies, or in the secondary school sector through the acquisition of a higher education entrance qualification in combination with vocational training. The advantage for the educational participants of all these institutionally permeable educational formats lies with the corresponding socialisation and thus the acquired understanding of vocational and higher general education. Furthermore, it provides participants with increased flexibility (especially in terms of double qualifications) regarding future educational paths and career opportunities. Simultaneously, the various organisational collaborations promote a better understanding between the different educational actors. Equally relevant is the development and institutionalisation of instruments for the transfer of credits obtained in the respective other education sector (i.e., vocational training or higher education).

## 6. Further training and raising staff awareness in educational organisations

Promoting permeable structures requires more than simply introducing regulations and standards. Such new regulations and standards must also be implemented in the organisations themselves. In this respect, organisational staff – whether at the administrative level or teaching staff – must be prepared for the new tasks at hand related to the new structures that promote permeability and new target groups.

## Recommendations and outlook

In Germany, several promising projects are currently carried out at the intersection of vocational education and training and higher education. Given that the past few years can be described as a phase of innovation and initiation, it is now necessary to actively promote a new phase of consolidation and further institutionalisation of successful initiatives. A central goal here must be to overcome the local level and to create regulations that are as transparent and compatible as possible at both the state and the federal level. This is of extraordinary importance, as the current "jungle" of options at the intersection between vocational training and higher education is still too hard to navigate when it comes to offering sufficient orientation and planning reliability. It will therefore not only be important to further expand and improve the existing guidance infrastructure, but rather to make the existing institutional structures more transparent and to steer them into nationally recognised paths.

### 1. Expansion and consolidation



Expand and consolidate successful initiatives.

### 2. Standardisation



Create compatible standards at state and federal level.

### 3. Transparency



Make flexible education pathways more visible and transparent.

### 4. Guidance structures



Further expand and improve guidance infrastructure.

## Further reading



Banscherus, U., Bernhard, N. & Graf, L. (2016). *Durchlässigkeit als mehrdimensionale Aufgabe. Bedingungen für flexible Bildungsübergänge*. Berlin, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.

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