

*Original Research Article*

# German Vocational Education in the New Century

Weihua Du\*, Lu Liu

Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Guangzhou 510420, China

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**Abstract:** After the merger of two Germany States, the German economy has suffered from a lack of growth and social contradictions have appeared day by day. The Dual System of vocational education with German characteristics has also faced many difficulties and challenges. Many scholars even believe that the Dual System in Germany will soon disintegrate, but as a social system, the Dual System of vocational education also has the basic mechanism to change itself to meet the requirements of social development.

**Keywords:** Germany; Dual System; Vocational Education; New Century

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The German “Dual System” vocational education model, which was formed in the middle and late 19th century, provided the German Reich with a large number of secondary technicians. The trainees of the Dual System met the needs of the industrialized mass production at the time and filled a good deal of positions that did not require a lot of skills, thus greatly contributing to the industrial revolution and economic development of Germany at the moment. The “Dual System” was seriously challenged with a severe shortage of training positions and up to 10% of peers failing to qualify for apprenticeships. The German government has not allowed this situation to continue, all parties and all levels of government have actively explored the possibility of reform; and many vocational schools are engaged in a meaningful search for ways and means out of their current predicament.

## 1. Current problems vocational education in Germany is facing

According to the vocational education expert Foster, vocational and technical education must be based on the needs of the labor market, trainees’ employment opportunities in the labor market and their prospects after employment are the most critical factors in the development of vocational education. Moreover, students’ career aspirations are determined more by their personal perceptions of employment opportunities in the exchange sector of the economy, and the school curriculum itself has little to do with this selection process. Unemployment is therefore unlikely to be solved by changing the curriculum. The answer to the unemployment problem can only be found in the perspective of linking the development of vocational education to the actual needs of the local labor market. “Our view of educational development should be based on demand and not on supply.”

Secondly, the number of training positions depends on the economic situation of the enterprise and the costs incurred by the various training occupations; since vocational schools that are not profit-oriented are not concerned with production objectives, they may not be able to keep up with the requirements of the modernization of production processes.

The reasons for this are: a certain boom-dependence of the training jobs offered by the Dual System; an oversupply of training jobs in sunset industries and an undersupply in promising sectors of the economy; rapid technological and social changes that are not predictable over the long term, the slow reaction of training systems because academic and training regulations do not change quickly enough; a demographic wave to which enterprises and policies are often too late in responding; the rising cost of training, especially in high technical fields; the fact that trainees choose fashionable careers, with the consequence that companies in a given industry are no longer able to allocate training positions to the desired degree; the fact that many companies do not guarantee the acceptance of trainees at the end of their training; and the increasing tendency of the Dual System to favor academic studies.

The German social welfare market model revived the German economy from the ashes of the Second World War, and “the economic impetus of the market did release the necessary energy to promote economic development”, but the “essence of this social welfare market economic system was primarily that it sought to achieve both economic efficiency and social Fairness.

Thirdly, the wide flexibility and mobility of the workforce, the reduction of the traditional labor structures, the increase of temporary, contractual works, and the enormous and rapid development and change of communication and technology have increased the dependence on and demand for knowledge and information.

There is a surplus of traditional talents and the positions needed by companies are not applied for. In the era of information

society and knowledge economy, international competition is increasingly expressed by and depends on the quantity and quality of talents. In particular, IT skills and IT talents are becoming increasingly important in today's and tomorrow's economic development and international competition. In 2000, the Schröder government implemented a "green card" policy for the introduction of foreign IT talents in order to ease the talent demand for IT and other industries. In 2001, Chairman of the German Christian Democratic Union (CDU) Merkel gave a speech entitled "Ausbildung statt Einwanderung" ("Cultivate not import"), emphasizing the need to train professionals on their own rather than importing talents. In fact, in addition to the IT industry, other industries in Germany also suffer from a shortage of specialists to varying degrees.

## **2. German efforts and measures to promote vocational education**

### **2.1 Broadening the content of vocational training**

Society's requirements for the quality of employees are becoming higher and higher, and graduates of the "Dual System" vocational training must have higher qualities. On the one hand, some traditional industrial occupations are being replaced by machines as technology develops, but works in emerging fields, such as installation, programming, control and maintenance of complete equipment, are developing and providing new positions for graduates of vocational schools. And the number of jobs done using modern information technology is increasing, i.e., service and consulting jobs are increasing, that provides also new possibilities for the scope of training in vocational schools.

### **2.2 Change from the previous narrow specialization to a more comprehensive curriculum**

The requirements for vocational training vary considerably from one enterprise to another; the attitudes of young people today have changed, with very few of them considering their schooling as a lifelong career; and the job itself is becoming more and more complex, changing at a significantly faster and more frequent pace than before. The new syllabus must therefore take these three aspects into account and be more comprehensive.

In recent years, the German vocational education community has developed the concept of "Learning Field (Lernfeld)" to replace the traditional departmental courses. The "Learning Fields" have been developed on the basis of the typical tasks of training occupations. The purpose of the "Learning Fields" is to combine the knowledge and skills of the departmental subject courses and to impart them to the students in such a way that they develop comprehensive vocational competence through comprehensive learning. Although there are different views of the German vocational education community on the concept of "Learning Fields" and it is still in the exploratory stage, however, the introduction of this concept and the corresponding typical experiments mark a more comprehensive development of the reform of the content of vocational education.

### **2.3 Improving the quality of training to expand the level of graduates**

In order to attract competent young people to vocational training, companies and vocational schools together offer them the so-called "training of talents", including foreign language training for vocational school students, professional and technical training outside the curriculum, and international internships.

A relatively new type of training is emerging in North Rhine-Westphalia: on the one hand, students can study at a general higher education institution, on the other hand, they can apply for vocational training in a particular field, such as education, foreign languages, physical technology, environmental protection, and so on. This combination of higher education and vocational training is designed to attract competent students.

### **2.4 Early warning systems on training needs, changing needs in line with occupational changes**

The rapid development of life in society has led to the emergence of new things in all areas and to the creation of a large number of new professions. The German Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training (VET) has set up and implemented a training early warning system, which analyses occupational changes and training needs by analyzing job advertisements and company questionnaires.

## **3. Conclusions and revelations**

The German economy is sick, not only because of education, but also more because of the German social welfare market system and the system of labor agreements and the irrational structure of the German economy. The German government has not abandoned this instrument, but is constantly reforming it in order to adapt it to the changes in society and the economy. In its 2001 report on vocational education, the German government stated that "in the context of the information and knowledge society and the globalization of the economy, continuing vocational education is the key to the society and economy of the future". In August 2003, it proposed strengthening the legislation on continuing vocational education in order to strengthen the status and positive functions of vocational education. In view of this effort by the German government and the improvement of vocational education itself, it is unlikely that vocational education in Germany is headed for disintegration.

The importance that the German government and the German vocational education community attach to vocational education and the various reform measures are exactly what China can learn from in the process of vigorously developing vocational education. For example, the content of vocational training to broaden, the narrow specialization of the curriculum to change, the curriculum more comprehensive and modular to make, the quality of training to improve, and an early warning system for training in response to changes in occupations to establish and so on.

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