

Recruitment at the intermediate qualification level – case studies from Germany, England and Switzerland

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The project involves an investigation of company recruitment strategies for intermediate level employees in three countries: Germany, England and Switzerland. The reasons for recruitment decisions are investigated to shed light on which qualifications best cover the requirements companies have for certain activities. The objective is to identify the strengths and weaknesses of recruitment from vocational education and training (VET) compared to graduates for a certain activity profile as well as to facilitate discussion about equivalences between qualifications among the three countries.

1. Objectives or purposes

The recruitment strategies and behaviours of companies are changing, and in future will more companies have greater faith in graduates than holders of VET qualifications or will they differentiate their approach by country or sector. The project takes an international comparison of the recruitment behaviour of companies as a vehicle for focusing on the interface between the educational and employment systems. Individual qualitative case studies form the basis for the international, cross-occupational and cross-sectoral reconstruction of company recruitment strategies and decisions in the context of changing VET pathways Germany, England and Switzerland.

The aims of the comparative study are to examine aspects of the effectiveness of VET (as against graduate recruitment) in intermediate skills formation in the three countries and to facilitate a discussion on the strengths and weaknesses of different approaches and the extent to which different qualifications can be regarded as equivalent. The importance of research contributing a basis for evidence-informed political negotiation processes aimed at being able to demonstrate the quality and level of VET in comparative European terms is readily apparent, within the context of the European 5-level system from 1985, the revision of the ISCED-97 classification and the allocation processes of qualifications against the new European Qualifications Framework.

2. Perspective(s) or theoretical framework

International comparisons of recruitment strategies/behaviours

Only a very small number of studies comparing international company recruitment strategies are in existence, although some investigations touch on aspects of recruitment.

The general perception that companies adapt their work organisation, personnel recruitment strategies and training programmes to fit the respective output from educational systems is

one which has long held sway within internationally comparative VET research. In a Franco-German comparative study, Maurice/Sellier/Silvestre (see also Müller/Shavit 1998) take the view that the way in which qualifications are “produced” and subsequently used by companies has led to complex and system-specific relationships between qualifications and activities/jobs. On the other hand, growing similarities between educational systems are being identified, arising from the convergence of social systems (Benavot et al. 1991) or which are viewed as having resulted from a rationalisation in production, international competition and an increasing number of companies operating on a multinational scale (Treimann 1970). Festing (2004) emphasises the culturally independent validity of certain behaviours, existing differences being ascribed to different organisational structures in some cases.

Within the scope of a project involving working groups at twenty universities in nineteen European countries, a strong degree of heterogeneity in respect of recruitment practice in Europe was identified (Brewster et al. 2004), although the focus of the study was on how recruitment took place rather than on the issue of the prior learning of the applicants.

Company training strategies form the object of investigation in a further joint German, English and French comparative study, which finds that it is scarcely possible to demonstrate any significant country effect in respect of the proportion of skilled workers within companies and available qualifications. The study concludes that although training pathways may be of differing length, companies operating under various institutional conditions develop their own routes to put the necessary skills potentials in place (Backes-Gellner 1999, 87). As far as the banking sector is concerned, the changes in corporate organisation which took place in Germany and England in the 1990’s as a result of the intensification of global competition led to the identification of a trend towards recruitment of more highly qualified applicants (Quack et al. 1995, 13, 17-18).

A wide range of sector-specific German/British comparative studies focussing on the relationship between productivity and differences in educational programmes have been conducted (Prais et al. 1991 for the hotels sector; Campbell/Warner 1991 on the microelectronics industry; Steedman et al. 2006 on ICT skilled workers).

Mytzek/Schömann (2004) took four case studies relating to various sectors within trade and industry as the basis for a study into the significance of transparency within the recruitment process with regard to cross-border mobility in Europe. The investigation encompassed companies from the financial sector, the automobile industry, the health sector and the information and technology branch in nine countries. Aspects highlighted included how recruitment took place and the opportunities for German job applicants on labour markets abroad.

Comparing German and English vocational qualifications

As far as comparative investigations of German and English qualifications are concerned, one study (Fulst-Blei 2003) is particularly worth to be mentioned here: it is an exemplary approach to determining the positioning of a German VET qualification within the European 5-level framework of 1985. This study was based on a comparison of the effectiveness of an English and Welsh vocational qualification (GNVQ "Advanced Business") and the German vocational qualification of "Industrial clerk" and found that both qualifications corresponded to the requirements of Level 3 of the framework (cf. also Fulst-Blei 2005). This contrasts with the alignment of the German qualifications in the framework of 1985, when German initial vocational education and training was by definition aligned to Level 2: "...including apprenticeship training".

Acceptance/applicability of academic and vocational qualifications

The employability of higher education graduates is currently a topic which is very much on the agenda in England (Little 2003). The past 15 years have seen a development towards "mass higher education", and this has meant that the United Kingdom is now above the OECD average for the proportion of higher education graduates it produces (Moreau/Leathwood 2006). At the same time, a critical investigation has been undertaken of the development of NVQ's and the degree of acceptance they enjoy amongst companies (Roe et al. 2006). A survey of 1523 employers resulted in an extremely mixed picture of the significance of NVQ's and company acceptance.

The critical factor in the competition to secure the services of high-ability young people in Germany will be the attractiveness of the career perspectives offered by a vocational qualification and the nature of the positions Bachelor graduates will occupy on the labour market (Weiß 2006). The signals being sent out by trade and industry in respect of acceptance of Bachelor qualifications are contradictory.

A study conducted by the German Institute for Business Research (Werner et al. 2008) has found that most companies in Germany value such aspects as the generalist training provided within Bachelor courses of study and thus view the Bachelor degree as a fully fledged academic qualification. It seems that most companies don't see a direct competition between graduates and people with VET qualifications in Germany. Companies rather accord Bachelor graduates the same career opportunities as other higher education graduates (Bergs/Konegen-Grenier 2005). In general terms, the study finds out that the acceptance of Bachelor and Master diploma increases in line with the company size.

When asked how much they know about the new courses of study and about their recruitment behaviours towards Bachelor graduates, 11.5% of companies surveyed stated that they employed bachelor graduates (Konegen-Grenier 2004, 11-14). One third of companies interviewed put Bachelor graduates at the same level as those who had completed upgrading training, a further third accorded them equal status with higher education graduates and 7%

saw them as at least having completed the equivalent of initial vocational education and training (ibid.). On the other hand, a “certain aloofness” is being identified on the part of the companies. Doubts are being expressed, for example, whether it is possible to impart competences which are comparable to the traditional German “Diploma” course of study within the six semester Bachelor course (Habermann/Lohaus 2006; Hisbus Kurzinformation No. 17). In a similar study on higher education recruitment, 50% of companies surveyed stated that they expected Bachelor graduates to have to undergo follow-up training (cf. Campus Career Network 2006, 13-16). In overall terms, the Bachelor degree does not yet appear to have secured a clearly allotted place within the employment system (Minks/Briedis 2005, Möhrle 2006).

Competencies

The theoretical framework consists of an interdisciplinary approach building on insights from labour market research and human capital theory (Schultz 1992), as well as vocational socialisation and competence development (Eraut 1994, 2003). To enable a holistic interpretation of the interviews with HRD staff by company, sector and country, a special focus was placed on the concept of competence, as a means by which the different views and judgements of the enterprises regarding the relative merits of recruits from VET and HE could be made. The model with a holistic approach to competence was formulated by the German Education Council in 1974, and largely adopted by the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the individual states (Länder) (KMK). From an anthropological perspective Roth (1971) describes the development process of an individual as being influenced by socialisation and upbringing and how mature, autonomous action competence constitutes the highest level of individual development, requiring a range of competences to be incrementally developed: professional competence (intellectual autonomy), social competence (social autonomy) and self-competence (self-determination and moral autonomy). ‘Competence’ in this context expresses the behaviour which enables a person to act and this holistic approach is increasingly influential in international debates (Winterton *et al*, 2005; Straka, 2004; Vonken, 2005; Mulder *et al.*, 2007).

3. *Methods, techniques, or modes of inquiry*

The project comprises two parts. The first maps the key features of the national labour market, employment, educational (including VET) and qualifications systems, while the second focuses on case studies of company intermediate level recruitment strategies. Two rounds of semi-structured guided in-company interviews were scheduled. The first phase (November 2008 - July 2009) involved questioning company heads of human resources responsible for recruitment decisions in a semi-structured relatively open way, which represented an explorative search for meaning. During the second phase (September 2009 – April 2010), manag-

ers from the relevant operational divisions of the same companies will be interviewed. The HRD managers confirmed that operational managers play a major role in recruitment decisions, so the perspectives of both parties are needed in order to gain a holistic picture of recruitment motives.

Choice of countries, sectors and companies:

The German Federal Institute for Vocational Training (BIBB), the research lead, wanted to compare the German VET system with national systems that were similar and different but operated within the European labour market. The wide range of training strategies and control mechanisms in place in England compared to Germany (an approach based on employability versus regulated occupations) made the former a prime candidate for study. England also has a traditionally developed three-level system within HE (Bachelor, Master, Doctorate), which is just being implemented in Germany (the so-called 'most different system' design, as defined by Georg 2005). Switzerland, on the other hand, is considered to be one of the countries in which vocational training plays a primary role within the educational system, meaning that the starting position is comparably similar to that in Germany ('most similar' design). The three sectors for investigation were chosen to represent different branches of industry, and also because major companies in each of the sectors operated in each country: they employed intermediate (technician) level staff in banking, chemicals and ICT/mechatronic fields. Companies selected for the case studies had to have large numbers of employees and had to operate on a worldwide level. We chose three companies for the study from the field of banking, one with headquarter in Germany, one in Switzerland and one in the UK. From the mechatronic sector we selected two companies, one with headquarter in Germany, one in Switzerland, the same goes for the companies in the chemical sector. All selected companies had to have a branch office in all the three countries and we interviewed the human resource manager of the main branch in each country to see if there are differences across countries within the same company. All selected companies needed to have some experience with applicants from the vocational education system and also with bachelor candidates.

Development of the Phase 2 recording instrument

For the second round of interviews, a recording instrument has been developed outlining a range of competences, based on typical activities (work tasks) performed and professional and social competences required by intermediate level staff in the respective branches and occupational fields, which the operational managers will evaluate as a basis for facilitating cross-country comparison of qualifications from a company perspective. The relevant training regulations in Germany, research results and the interviews with the HRD managers formed

the starting point for the description of the fields of activity contained within the questionnaires, with professional competence divided into knowledge and skills alongside personal and social competences. The specification of personal and social competences reflected debates in Germany, UK and elsewhere (notably Ireland) (see, for example, British Council 2006).

Analysis of the reasons/motives for recruitment decisions

The evaluation of information from both interview phases on the reasons and motives for recruitment decisions will be facilitated by computer-aided content analysis of the transcribed interviews (Merten 1995).

4. *Data sources, evidence, objects or materials*

The main data sources are the company interviews with HRD and operational managers from 6 major companies in each sector in each country (with some companies belonging to the same group) making 36 interviews in total. Supplementary data will be obtained from existing literature.

5. *Results and/or substantiated conclusions or warrants for arguments/point of view*

The transcribed interviews from the first round of interviews are currently being evaluated and provide the basis for the following findings.

Due to the project's methodological design – which entails conducting case studies – it is not possible to generate blanket statements or generalisations that compare countries or sectors. Reducing the findings to key 'messages' regarding, for instance, comparisons of the countries covered by this study would possibly devalue them. It would also be methodologically objectionable. The information / data that will be obtained in the course of this project will not be representative but, rather, personal, company-specific and diverse. This, however, is what constitutes its special value. The need for a nuanced examination is particularly evident in connection with the considerable differences in the importance and kinds of Bachelor's degrees. There exists in Germany a wealth of programmes with different structures at different types of educational institutions such as universities, universities of applied sciences (*Fachhochschule*) and colleges of advanced vocational studies (*Berufsakademie*). However, there are also differences between Germany and Switzerland with regard to the educational background of students at universities of applied sciences. In Switzerland, almost all such students have previously completed formal vocational training. In contrast, in Germany most students at a university of applied sciences are upper secondary school leavers who have

earned the qualification to enter higher education (*Abitur*). In some cases this has an effect on companies' expectations and the area to which the individual is assigned in the particular company. The very different vocational qualification models in the three countries examined constituted another reason for the choice of the qualitative-methodological approach used in this study.

For this reason the evaluation of the interviews demands a close and thorough examination of the statements. This in turn also makes it possible to obtain deeper insights into the respective issues.

The following presentation of the results of this evaluation reflects this thorough examination and analysis.

The evaluation and analysis of the interviews are presented here for the following aspects of the survey:

- a. General assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of applicants with formal vocational qualification / applicants with a Bachelor's degree
- b. Selection criteria and expectations during recruitment
- c. Typical activities and areas of responsibility for employees with formal vocational qualification / employees with a Bachelor's degree
- d. Typical career paths
- e. Satisfaction with the education system
- f. Use of competence models

a. General assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of applicants with formal vocational qualification / applicants with a Bachelor's degree

As part of the European Bologna Process, participating countries agreed to harmonise their university systems. In Germany, this led to an extensive restructuring of *Diplom* degree programmes to convert them into Bachelor's and Master's degree programmes. The first university graduates with a Bachelor's degree are now entering the labour market in Germany and Switzerland. Companies are currently gathering their first experience with graduates who hold a Bachelor's degree. They have however already familiarised themselves with this 'new' qualification in recent years.

In general, there is a tendency to class Bachelor's degrees with other academic degrees. For example, in Germany, the university Bachelor's degree, Master's degree and *Diplom* are given equal treatment in connection with, for example, trainee or graduate programmes for persons with one of these types of degrees (see also No. 4 below, Typical career paths).

Apparently the kind of educational institution where the individual earned the particular degree is important here. Consequently, in Germany, holders of a Bachelor's degree are expected to have a clear academic profile and be capable of academic/scientific work. Doubts whether Bachelor's degree programmes meet these requirements were noticeable in some cases. Expectations were formulated: "... a graduate holding a Bachelor's degree is an academically-trained worker who must be familiar with the use of scientific methods for solving problems and must be able to apply and progressively develop these methods in appropriate ways. When an individual is unable to do so, he is not a 'Bachelor' and we consequently do not hire him. Since we have other segments from the vocational training system, since we have other segments via the experience and know-how of our employees, we don't need him." (BDW 127).

There is the view in Germany that *Diplom* degrees will correspond to Master's degrees in the future (CTR 112-115). One company in Germany (ADB 141-143) explicitly placed the same expectations on holders of a Bachelor's degree that it had previously placed on holders of a *Diplom* degree.

Companies reported very positively on their experience with graduates – in other words, holders of a Bachelor's degree – from colleges of advanced vocational studies. Large segments of such degree programmes are conducted in actual companies. The respondent from one company spoke of a 'hybrid' which "belongs to vocational training" (CDR 169-177; ADB 155-161). Such graduates play a large role in companies' management planning. Companies value the fact that these individuals already have ties to the company and have gathered practical experience there. One company in Germany has steadily expanded its collaboration with colleges of advanced vocational studies. It reported that a number of its divisions had a strong demand for graduates from these schools. The participating company in the telecommunications sector in Germany also has considerable experience with graduates from dual study courses that combine academic studies with in-company training. This even appears to be the priority field for the company's recruitment activities: "Up to 99% of our recruits are persons who earned a Bachelor's degree that involved practical training in our company" (TDS 87-94). Due to the involvement of the company in these degree programmes, they do virtually no external recruitment. They train their recruits themselves.

Persons who have earned a formal vocational qualification are considered to have less theoretical training whereas persons who hold a Bachelor's degree – with the exception of a Bachelor's degree from a college of advanced vocational studies – are thought to lack practical experience (CDR 317). This lack of practical experience is definitely viewed as a disadvantage with regard to, for example, activities that involve direct contact with customers. It was said that persons who had earned a Bachelor's degree needed a breaking-in period of more than 18 to 24 months until "they can walk on their own" (ADB 71).

The following quotation illustrates the differentiation that is made between a Bachelor's degree and formal vocational training in Switzerland: "I believe that the way they work is fundamentally different. Someone with a Bachelor's degree is academically-oriented, research-oriented in their work when we go in the direction of universities of applied sciences, or then in the direction of vocational training, then the approach tends to be more practical. In other words, scientific research is not as important. Working in scientific ways is not a primary focus." (NCK 190-195). "Craft skills" and "refreshingly pragmatic approaches" are cited as advantages offered by employees who have completed vocational training.

In Switzerland, double qualifications are viewed as the ideal solution in all sectors because they satisfy both criteria for a top-flight education. In other words, they signal an education that is both academic and practice-oriented. Accordingly, the respondents in Switzerland strongly differentiated between a Bachelor's degree from a university of applied sciences – nearly all persons who have earned this type of degree have already completed formal vocational training (in contrast to their counterparts in Germany) – and an academic Bachelor's degree from a regular university (DCA 146-159; CSW 174-177; NCK 190-195). Due to the fact that they have practical experience as a result of their double qualification (vocational training plus a Bachelor's degree), graduates from universities of applied sciences are classed with vocationally-trained people. In some cases however they are ranked even higher than individuals who have earned a Bachelor's degree from a regular university (TCL S 138-141; 72-83). The companies surveyed regard them highly and employ them in large numbers. Practical experience is clearly considered a strength. By contrast, the companies were critical in their view of Bachelor's degrees that are earned at a regular university – in other words, Bachelor's degrees that are not followed up with a Master's degree. According to the companies surveyed, these graduates are still very young and have no practical experience. One company surveyed even had reservations about offering such individuals a one-year period of practical training following their graduation from a regular university. This company felt it would be better to integrate a period of practical training into Bachelor's degree programmes – or possibly even interrupt one's university studies to complete a period of practical training (CSW 210-215). The participating firms in Switzerland noted that Bachelor's degrees from universities of applied sciences are in competition with Master's degrees from regular universities (CSW 210-215).

All in all, it was found that all interviewees in England have theoretical knowledge of the possibility of having formal vocational qualifications. This type of qualification, however, plays only a very small role or no role at all for human resources managers. The situation is somewhat different in the case of the surveyed banks and chemical enterprises that have a Ger-

man headquarters. These respondents had a positive picture of dual vocational training and tried to foster this type of training in England as well. The respondent at a bank that is particularly active in the area of vocational training recommended that individuals with formal vocational qualifications should go on to study a higher national diploma and then a degree. This would put vocationally-qualified employees on par with employees who hold a Bachelor's degree, or even give them advantages over the latter: "Yes, I will be careful to say that when one of our vocational trainees finally gets their higher national diploma and then their degree, then that will take them three-and-a-half to four years. Then they are exactly the same as a graduate. Then, if a vocational trainee moves into a front office, you won't spot the difference. So they know more about the bank because they have been there three-and-a-half or four years." (CEX 25). One interviewee from a chemical company would assign vocationally-trained employees to work which requires a "pragmatic and more structured approach". This person also made the critical remark that there are too many graduates in the UK who are not up to academic standard, noting that there are many cases where graduates are equivalent to "higher-level vocational people" (BUX 63).

b. Selection criteria and expectations during recruitment

The respondents' lack of direct experience with people who have earned formal vocational qualifications also means that the survey conducted in England did not produce any concrete information regarding selection criteria for the recruitment of vocationally-qualified applicants. One statement illustrates this situation quite clearly: According to the respondent, applicants who wanted to undergo vocational training in that company were asked why they hadn't gone to university. The perception that a vocational qualification is a second-class qualification is quite evident here. The companies surveyed had more clear-cut notions about their reasons for recruiting university graduates.

All in all, the expectations that companies place on applicants have grown (BBUX 66). Respondents underscored the tough competition between graduates with a Bachelor's degree (CEX 46): "hundreds of graduates' CVs coming in". This is a sharp contrast to the number of applicants for vocational training. In this case, companies receive "maybe 25 for five or six placements".

Enterprises continue to recruit directly and on a targeted basis at particular universities: "We tend to market at certain universities" (CUX 27). However, online applicants are becoming increasingly important for recruiters. Here, applications from "diamonds in the rough" – individuals who don't come from relevant elite universities, but rather take the difficult path, be it due to cost or other personal reasons – are particularly valued. These applicants are thought to be capable of working very hard. They are subsequently "polished" at the company. Aca-

demical skills are not particularly in demand. Instead, companies look for the ability to work with numbers and a particularly high level of motivation.

As to be expected, expressions such as "transferable academic capability", "high potential" and "more generic" are to be heard in this connection in England. It is of secondary importance whether the applicant's training is a precise match for the position (BUX 90-95). Applicants who come from outside the particular field – theologians, for example – are definitely also hired (CEX 59-60). It is evident that the emphasis here is on the personal potential ascribed to university graduates.

The criteria in Germany for selecting applicants with formal vocational qualifications are very similar to those in Switzerland. The starting point for these criteria is naturally the actual function or duties that the position involves in the respective company. This is followed by the impression the applicant makes plays a major role, alongside their final grades (CTR 91; CSW 108-119; TDS 61-62, TCL 39-42). Competences that applicants are expected to possess such as the ability to work in a team, adaptability and motivation were also frequently cited as important criteria when selecting applicants (DCA 122-127). "Interest" – along the lines of finding enjoyment in the banking profession – is additionally expected. Some of these competences are called soft skills. It is assumed that applicants who have passed their final exams possess an adequate level of professional competence. Soft skills therefore constitute the criteria for selecting applicants. Structured interviews with situational questions are used to determine whether an applicant fulfils the selection criteria (CSW 108-119). In an attempt to assess applicants' motivation, they are requested to write an essay (personal statement regarding one's motivation for applying).

From the surveyed companies' point of view, however, competences and attitudes such as entrepreneurship, creativity, innovativeness, the ability to reflect on one's own choice of occupation are also of key importance (BDW 99). This was emphasised as the opposite of the attitude "We'll pass the time somehow."

Although the in-company part of vocational training is generally given favourable marks (CSW 208-209), respondents say it is not comparable with the demands placed on persons who hold a "specific function as an employee". According to the respondents trainees "successfully complete" their vocational training. However, this does not always result in the quality that is required in everyday working life. Although they acknowledge the value of training that is geared to day-to-day practice, the respondents made it clear that they view such training only as a foundation for vital continued development in the areas of personal dedication and responsibility. Positive mention was made of the ability to be deployed on a productive basis without delay (DCA 174-175).

The selection criteria for holders of a Bachelor's degree exhibit a number of differences compared to the selection criteria for persons who have successfully completed formal vocational training. As a rule, respondents described the expectations placed on persons holding a Bachelor's degree as "higher" than those placed on vocationally-trained individuals (CTR 103; CSW 122-123 TCL 130-137).

According to the companies surveyed, the individual's academic record is important, as well as their level of interest and motivation. In areas that involve close contact with customers, great importance is attached to "personality" because, according to the respondents, employees must be "on the same level as the customer" (similarly also: DCA 140-141). The "ability to resolve conflict" and "communication skills" (CDR 203-207), "analytical and conceptual skills" and "internationality" (DCA 136-139) were particularly stressed. Companies surveyed expressly stated that candidates with a Bachelor's or Master's degree are assumed to have greater analytical skills and learning ability than persons who have completed formal vocational training (SCE 145). In contrast, one respondent viewed banking apprenticeships as being "highly tailored to the particular bank" (DCA 166-167) with the consequence that although persons who complete this training can be put to use faster, some activities require a broader range of skills than are taught during the apprenticeship.

The willingness to work on a "hands-on" basis is also important (DCA 142-145; ADB 73). Academic "detachment from reality" was considered to be a minus point.

A reciprocal effect between the companies' assessment of graduates with a Bachelor's degree and these applicants' expectations could be observed during the interviews. Participating companies reported that persons who hold a Bachelor's degree usually expect to enter their company at a higher level, specifically with regard to their salary and chances for promotion (DCA 168-175, 176-179).

c. Typical activities and areas of responsibility for employees with formal vocational qualification / employees with a Bachelor's degree

Asked about typical areas of responsibility, the respondents answered with very differing degrees of specificity. This perhaps depends on how close the respective individual is to the operational level, their knowledge about their own company's production processes or services, or the relevance of the question in light of the form of the vocational training system in the respective country.

The level of correspondence between all three countries in the banking sector is striking. Asked about typical areas that vocationally-trained applicants would be deployed in, bank employees all mentioned "the retail side" (BBUX 41, CDR 70-83; CSW 96-97). Some cited

the standardised retail banking business (CDR), "bulk business", "service transactions for customers", "commission sales" (CDR 124-128), advisory services for "standardised products", and the areas "products and services" (DCA 66-71). Not only a Swiss bank (CSW 104-105), but also a German bank (CDR 124-128) stressed "private customer assistance" – an assistance function of financial consultants.

In the UK, graduates with a Bachelor's degree are assigned duties which place considerably greater demands on the individual's professional analytical skills, are more complex and thus lead directly to a front office position (CEX 23). The statements made by the Swiss interviewees were similar. Analytical, conceptual tasks such as business development and market analyses are considered to be part of the duties of graduates holding a Bachelor's degree (DCA 128-131, 164-167). "Junior Relationship Manager" was cited as an example of a job title for a graduate with a Bachelor's degree (CSW 132-133). There are areas such as research, development and financial controlling (CDR 267-273) for which companies expect their employees to hold an academic degree. These companies do not however make any further differentiation between a Bachelor's and Master's degree in this connection.

Companies in Germany also differentiate right from the start. Holders of Bachelor's degrees are assigned to so-called high-income customers. The advisory services provided to these customers are more sophisticated, less routine in nature and more tailored to the individual case (CDR 181-189, but also CSW 132-133). Persons who hold a Bachelor's degree perform tasks at the bank counter only as an exception. In the investment banking field, one tends to see graduates with a Bachelor's degree (CTR 177).

Looking at the other sectors, interviewees in England were the least specific in their responses regarding typical functions for vocationally-trained employees. It appears that HR managers find it difficult to imagine what duties a "technician" would have. These activities are described as "diverse" (AUX 86-87) or as "working on the factory line at a range of levels" (SUX 37): "The opportunities are fairly transparent." This lack of knowledge could be due to the fact that in, for example, the large technology and mechanical engineering companies that were surveyed for this study the HR managers in England do not have – in contrast to their counterparts in Germany and Switzerland – a system in which the respective occupation is practically automatically assigned a specific range of duties and vice versa. There is no connection between a particular professional qualification and the corresponding areas in which an individual with that qualification would traditionally be deployed in a company. The systemic difference between the Anglo-Saxon vocational training system and the German/Swiss system is evident here in the HR field.

Thus, the precise ideas about, for example, the tasks of IT technicians which the interviewee in Germany had – "programme systems, adapt systems, operate computer centres, operate

desktop services" – were a sharp contrast to the ideas cited by her English counterpart: "fix PCs" and provide customer support (TUX 22-25). The difference in the specificity of their perceptions could be due to the fact that German enterprises themselves provide vocational training on a large scale.

In the chemical sector, the interviewee in Switzerland outlined the tasks typically assigned a chemical and pharmaceutical technician (NCK 86-93). The respondent cited "running and controlling equipment" and the monitoring these processes. All in all, he reported that a large portion of these duties revolve around monitoring and process control activities. The interviewees in Germany also had a precise idea of what a chemical technician's tasks and skills would be (BDW 69). The description of typical tasks for a chemical technician is very similar to the description of the tasks foreseen for chemical and pharmaceutical technicians. Here too, the respondents cited the operation and monitoring of production facilities (BDW 69, 83). "Clearly, the work that is done by a foreman or shift manager in our company is done in England by a person with a Bachelor's degree." (BDW 69).

d. Typical career paths

The statements made regarding career paths during the interviews confirm and expand upon the opinion expressed by the companies surveyed that vocationally-trained persons and persons who hold a Bachelor's degree are not in competition with one another.

It was often noted that anyone who has proven themselves could work their way up to nearly any position in the respective company (for an example, see also CTR 132-135) and that after several years the type of education one has no longer plays a role. However, all of the companies surveyed had separate and clearly delineated career paths for vocationally-trained employees and for employees who hold a Bachelor's or other degree. This differentiation consequently means different advancement programmes such as management trainee programmes (DCA 218-225; NCK 146-154; CDR 323-329). A distinction must be made here between the theoretically desirable motto "may the best man win" (CEX 43-44) and day-to-day practice where, particularly in the companies in England, there is a large degree of separation between vocationally-trained persons and individuals who have earned a Bachelor's degree.

Looking at this issue from a different angle confirms the existence of different development paths. In fact, it explains them. Namely: people chose either practical vocational training or a more or less theoretical academic education and thus expect to be employed in areas that correspond to the personal inclinations that are indicated by their choice of educational path and to be able to develop in those areas (TDS 67-74). The respondents said they note a definite difference between the expectations of vocationally-trained individuals and the expectations of persons who hold a Bachelor's degree. See also Point 3 above.

There are interesting indications that the notion of what a career is or what type of career is of use to employers is changing. Respondents expect an increased delayering of hierarchies as projects gain in importance. In other words, today "careers" no longer closely follow the company hierarchy route where the crucial measure is the number of people for whom one is responsible. Other criteria such as remuneration that rewards successful project management now play a role (NCK 155-170). It is also important for companies to hold on to employees with technical know-how and expertise. However, it can be in some cases that technical know-how and expertise are not consistent with the requirements for a typical career when the way to the "top" entails responsibilities that revolve around other fields of activity such as tasks that are more administrative or managerial in nature (TDS 79-86). To solve this potential dilemma, "specialist career paths" are now being developed alongside the traditional "management career path".

e. Satisfaction with the national education system

The companies surveyed in all three countries were found to be relatively satisfied with the respective national education systems.

The respondents in England felt that there is a shortage of applicants with an academic degree, particularly in engineering and in mathematical / technical fields. On the other hand, they also said that there is a wealth of university graduates with degrees which they do not specifically need.

A shortage of skilled workers with vocational qualifications is also lamented, particularly in the technology and chemical sectors. The respondents regret that England has devoted too much attention to academic education. "I think in UK even more so, because our education is pushed out. It has drawn a lot people into the graduate route who, probably in the past, would have gone through the vocational training route. I am not sure that that was necessarily a good thing." (BUX 62).

As a rule, the companies surveyed in Germany are satisfied with vocational training even though some noted that it has become more difficult in recent years to find very good trainees. "This means that the quality of the applicants for banking training has declined continuously in recent years." (CDR 632). Companies in the technology or telecommunications sector pointed out that there are not enough applicants with a university degree that would be a good fit. One point of criticism expressed about the content of Bachelor's degrees is the lack of practical relevance. This criticism was combined with the demand that universities should take the Bologna Process seriously and view employability as the aim of Bachelor's degree programmes. Generally speaking, a fundamentally negative attitude toward the Bachelor's degree is not, however, to be observed in German companies. The Bachelor's degree pro-

grammes at colleges of advanced vocational studies are rated very highly because practical in-company training comprises a large segment of these programmes.

All sectors in Switzerland gave vocational training very positive marks. Training that is provided by universities of applied sciences – whose students have generally already completed formal vocational training and then earn a Bachelor's degree – is held in particularly high regard. The chemical and pharmaceutical sectors reported a shortage of suitable candidates for their vacancies. The telecommunications sector was even more emphatic about the shortage of engineers. There was also no criticism of vocational training to be heard in the interviews conducted with respondents from the mechanical engineering sector. Instead there was criticism of the Bachelor's degrees granted by universities. Here the respondents charged that social and methodological competence is not taught in Bachelor's degree programmes at universities. In Switzerland, however, satisfaction with the different forms of training applicants have to offer is very high as a rule. It is highest with formal vocational qualifications.

f. Use of competence models

Recruitment is geared to the competence model used by the respective firm. All of the companies surveyed use their own competence model, which most firms regard as a confidential internal document. In most cases, these models were developed by external service providers, the majority of which were management consultancies. Most of the companies surveyed have been using a competence-based model in their recruitment activities for an average of approximately six years. These models usually take a behaviourist or generic approach to the concept of competence. In other words, core competences which a company's employees should have are outlined in a competence model where they are described and explained in greater detail. Core competences apply to employee behaviour in specific work contexts. Some models provide for different levels of the respective core competence. For example, a vocationally-trained employee is not expected to reach the same level of accomplishment in a core competence as an employee who holds a Bachelor's degree. Professional competence also plays a role in competence models. It should also be covered during the recruitment process. However, the substantive focus of these models is clearly on social / personal competences.

6. Conclusion:

The human resources managers of the companies surveyed in Switzerland and Germany have a better understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of vocationally-trained appli-

cants and the areas in which they can be deployed than their counterparts in companies in England. Vocational training is very positively rated in both Switzerland and Germany. All of the companies surveyed in Switzerland and Germany provide in-house vocational training. In England, some of the companies surveyed expressly regretted that there were too few good applicants and/or employees with vocational qualifications. All in all, the interviewees in England had considerably less experience with vocationally-trained individuals. Only in a few rare cases were vocationally-trained people perceived as a useful pool for recruiting skilled workers for mid-level positions. This can be observed across various sectors. These companies provide almost no in-house vocational training, even though they all have fellow subsidiaries in Switzerland or Germany. In fact, the headquarters of six of the seven companies surveyed are located in Germany or Switzerland. Only one company – in the banking sector – had its own training programme.

The companies surveyed do not consider vocationally-trained applicants to be in competition with applicants who hold a Bachelor's degree. Not only the envisaged career path but also one's continuing professional development within the respective company is different, depending on whether the individual is vocationally trained or has earned a Bachelor's degree. This correlates with the expectations of persons who hold a Bachelor's degree. It is interesting that a strong differentiation is made in Switzerland between a Bachelor's degree from a university of applied sciences and a Bachelor's degree from a regular university. The double qualification offered by graduates from a university of applied sciences is very positively rated and is accordingly credited during recruitment. In Germany this differentiation is made between persons who earned a Bachelor's degree from a college of advanced vocational studies (whereby in some cases the respective company was actively involved in the particular individual's training) and persons who earned their Bachelor's degree at a university. The first group is perceived as very vocationally-oriented and practice-oriented. In the case of the second group, there was uncertainty in some instances over what competences and skills these persons actually had to offer. It was not clear what the positive unique feature of this type of education is. Although persons who hold a Bachelor's degree from a university are currently given access to widely-offered trainee and graduate programmes on the strength of their degree, there is however doubt whether, after completing what is presently a 3-year degree programme as a rule, such persons actually have the qualifications and tools needed for working on an academic/scientific level. In addition, many holders of a Bachelor's degree from a university have only rudimentary practical experience. Due to their 'education portfolio' such individuals are therefore at risk of being at a disadvantage vis-à-vis graduates from a college of advanced vocational studies in Germany or a university of applied sciences in Switzerland during recruitment.

In terms of improving the attractiveness of vocational qualifications in Germany and Switzerland, this means that such qualifications must offer individuals different options, namely, the option of earning a double qualification at one time and the option of earning a double qualification on a successive basis.

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