Chapter 3
Exploring Intermediate Vocational Education and Training for 16–19-Year-Olds in Germany and England

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Introduction

In England and Germany, there are groups of young people who do not have the qualifications or opportunities required to progress to advanced post-compulsory study, whether vocational/practical or liberal/academic in nature. The groups include those who wished to, but were unable to, enter the dual system in Germany or undertake an advanced apprenticeship in England. Nonetheless, the state has assumed responsibility to provide these young people with appropriate intermediate level full-time educational and training provision with suitable progression routes to advanced level further education, training or employment. This chapter will focus on aspects of the provision for these groups of young people, specifically those in full-time vocational education in England and Germany.

We have chosen to focus upon these groups of young people not only because the provision available offers some instructive comparisons between German and English approaches but also because these groups have attracted relatively little attention from policymakers, media or researchers in either country, and thus, the vocational characteristics of what is provided for them are ripe for exploration. We have also chosen to focus upon new aspects of provision: the introduction of personal learning in vocational schools in Germany and diploma courses in England, since this will give access to latest official thinking on what is needed (and, by implication, what has been missing in existing provision).

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Research Problem

Historically, in Germany, the dual system has accommodated over 60% of an age cohort within the 350 occupations which make up the system. Over 1.5 million young Germans have typically been participating in the dual system at any given time. However, in recent years, serious problems have emerged with the dual system (Deissinger and Hellwig 2005; Ertl 2004; Kupfer 2010) which have given rise to the range of full-time intermediate vocational provision which is the subject of this chapter. The problems of the dual system over the past years can be briefly summarised as (1) overall more young people seeking places than were available; (2) substantial variations between sectors with a surplus of places in a few sectors and insufficient places in many others; (3) sectors with no tradition of engagement in the dual system, for example, information technology, which offer few places; (4) an increasing number of young people deemed unsuitable for entry to the dual system (although it might be argued that this is a 'problem' of the school system rather than the dual system); (5) new forms of full-time vocational education in competition with the dual system.

These problems with the dual system have given rise to a so-called *transition sector* designed to cater for young people who cannot find a place within the dual system. It has been growing rapidly and currently includes some 500,000 school leavers and thus has become a significant feature of German provision.

In England, 41% – around 273,000 young people – of the 2006 cohort of 16-year-olds did not reach intermediate level at the end of their compulsory education. This means that they failed to achieve at least five passes at grades A*–C in GCSE or equivalent qualifications. Therefore, whilst there is no formal prohibition, it was unlikely that these young people would be able to embark on post-16 advanced level study in academic, vocational or work-based learning. Their post-compulsory choices within the education and training system were to continue in full-time education and attempt to reach intermediate level as 'second chance learners', embark on work-based learning within the Entry2Employment programme or begin an intermediate level apprenticeship. Further alternatives were to leave the education and training system and either get a job without training or not engage in employment, education or training at all. The most popular option for this group of young people was to engage in full-time education, either in schools or further education colleges. In 2006, 52% of post-compulsory 16-year-olds participating below advanced level were in full-time education, 11% were in work-based learning, that is, jobs with training (the nearest English equivalent to the German dual system) and 36% were either in jobs without training or were not in employment, education or training (DCFS 2007). These data show that full-time provision was the most likely destination for young people unable to progress to advanced level and accounted for 23% of the total cohort of 16-year-olds in 2006. This group, the focus of this chapter, thus comprises significant numbers of young people in England.

Having established the relative sizes of the English and German groups we are focusing upon in this chapter, we now provide brief sketches of the provision which has been available to these groups over the last 20 years or so, before turning to a detailed analysis of contemporary provision in England and Germany.

In Germany, the dual system provides the benchmark and the preferred destination for young people wishing to undertake VET. It provides a well-established route into work and vocations. It has 'cultural strength', derived in no small measure from its salience to the concept of *beruf* (Deissinger and Hellwig 2005). However, because of the emerging problems with entry to the dual system described above, the transition from the educational system to vocational education and employment is becoming problematic for more and more young people. The growing transition sector is a reaction to these developments.

Current provision in the transition sector takes place in vocational schools in four main forms: (1) The *basic vocational training year (Berufsgrundschuljahr)* provides specialised vocational training. It can be accepted as a substitute for the first year of the dual system. This provision is regulated by the individual states (Länder) and thus takes different forms in different Länder. In some sectors, it can also be taken in Berufsfachschule. (2) The *pre-vocational training year (Berufsorientierungsjahr – BVJ)* is a 1-year training course giving experience of a range of occupational fields. The aim is to prepare young people for more specific vocational training, often through the basic vocational training year. (3) *Courses for pupils without apprenticeships (Klassen für Schülerinnen und Schüler ohne Berufsausbildungsverhältnis)* combine 2 days per week in vocational schools with 3 days per week in a company, a pre-vocational experience provided by the labour agency or in the Werkstattjahr. Again, the main purpose of this provision is to facilitate entry to the dual system. (4) *Full-time vocational training leading to vocational certificates (Höhere Berufsfachschule)* is provided in a range of occupational fields. Success in this may allow young people to switch to the academic route or enter the dual system.

One feature of these forms of provision is that they are mainly designed to prepare young people for subsequent entry to the dual system, by providing some pre-dual system experience and, in some cases, by mimicking the dual system itself. In these ways, they appear to be addressing perceived deficits in potential entrants to the dual system, that is, attending to supply-side problems. However, the provision appears unlikely to address the demand-side problems of the dual system outlined above.

English provision has had three main characteristics. First, it has been predominantly vocational or pre-vocational with very limited general education provision, certainly no distinct general or academic pathway (Hodgson and Spours 2008). Thus for 16-year-old intermediate learners, vocational courses have been the default provision. Often alongside this, they were expected to retake examinations in English and Mathematics if they had not achieved at least a grade C in these during compulsory education, though these courses have not been linked with their vocational learning. The second characteristic has been that vocational provision itself has been subject to frequent change, mainly through the reform

of qualifications which has been the favoured means deployed by policymakers. Vocational qualifications which have appeared and then disappeared since the mid-1980s have included the Certificate of Pre-Vocational Education, the Diploma in Vocational Education, General National Vocational Qualifications and Applied General Certificates of Secondary Education. Qualifications which have endured somewhat longer include the Business and Technology Education Council First Diploma and National Vocational Qualifications. The latest qualification, introduced from September 2008 are the new Diplomas which by 2013 were planned to be available to all 14–19-year-olds in 17 subjects each at three levels.

These qualifications have differed widely in terms of their philosophy and orientation, for example, the extent to which they emphasise specific occupational skills, the role of theory, the ways in which they are assessed, the extent and forms of employer engagement, their intended pedagogy and the ways in which they have been marketed to students. The constant instability of provision reflects deep uncertainty about what provision for this group of learners should be, or can be, and more fundamentally about the role of 'middle track' curricula and qualifications (that is, curricula and qualifications which stand between academic and occupationally specific provision) within the English system (Hodgson and Spours 2008). The third characteristic has been that, while some individual programmes have been designed to be internally coherent, there has been lack of national coherence in provision (Pring et al. 2009). This is despite attempts by central government to create such coherence, for example, through the development of new qualifications and qualifications frameworks.

The research problem which this chapter addresses is thus the characteristics of full-time intermediate level provision in Germany and England. We have shown that this provision caters for a significant, growing minority of young people aged 16 and 17 in both countries. It has a potentially important role to play in enabling these young people to acquire knowledge and skills and qualifications, which are seen as requirements for progression to further and higher education and, in the context of this book, to advanced apprenticeships in England and the dual system in Germany.

Methodology

We turn now to the main focus of the chapter – an analysis and comparison of aspects and examples of full-time intermediate level provision for 16–19-year-olds in Germany and England.

The German element ("Personal Learning in Germany") is based upon initial research into the introduction of personal learning in the transition sector in 11 vocational schools in NRW. The research project commenced in February 2009 and will run until February 2012. It is being undertaken by researchers in the Centre of Vocational Education and Training, University of Paderborn and by teachers in the vocational schools. A range of methods are being used including questionnaires, focus groups and interviews. The research has a strong developmental component

involving the cooperative design and development of instruments for personal learning by the researchers. Since both the programme and the research are in their early stages, the account of the findings which is provided is inevitably tentative and provisional. (Beutner et al. 2009)

The English element ("Intermediate Level Diplomas in England") is based upon the National Evaluation of Vocational Specialist Schools undertaken by researchers at the University of Leeds between 2006 and 2009. The research involved a combination of annual questionnaires to all vocational specialist schools and case study visits to 15 of these schools (Higham and Yeomans 2009). Most of the case study schools were visited on two or three occasions. These visits involved interviews with local authority and school staff, staff from partners including colleges and employers and students. There was also some observation of vocational learning. Relevant documents were collected and analysed.

In the longer term context of our research, we are in the process of developing a framework for analysis which will allow for the identification and comparison of key aspects of vocational provision in England and Germany as well as in other contexts (we have recently conducted research on vocational provision in Canadian high schools which is also likely to be susceptible to analysis using the framework). In this chapter, we deploy some elements of our emerging analysis including the aims and purposes of interventions, planned and enacted curricula, pedagogical approaches, student recruitment and institutional resources.

Research Findings

Here, we present brief accounts of two of the latest developments in intermediate level vocational provision in Germany and England. We see this as significant because they provide access to latest policy thinking about intermediate level provision in both countries.

Personal Learning in Germany

Personal learning is not a completely new challenge for vocational education. There are links to a variety of discourses or reform agendas such as the 'learning area concept' *(Lernfeldkonzept)*, 'learning with new media' and 'self-regulated learning'. However, personal learning as a distinct concept is now being powerfully promoted, and in NRW, the right to personal learning is guaranteed through an education act (Kunze 2009; Zoyke 2009).

Personal learning in the 11 vocational schools in NRW is intended to be implemented in the context of existing qualifications. The 11 schools involved in the project have been allowed to select the courses and qualifications in which they will aim to develop innovative practice in personal learning. Thus, a range of courses and

qualifications within the transition sector are being used as contexts within which to develop personal learning. Competence development and career/vocational choice are areas for developing innovative practice across all qualification contexts. Three learning areas (Ertl and Kremer 2006) are defined in the project: (1) from general education to vocational school – analysing the competence and environment of the students; (2) learning in working areas – cooperation and interaction in multicultural environments and (3) from the transition sector to apprenticeship or work – attitude and competence profile.

These three areas, and indeed the concept of personal learning itself, are very loosely defined and described in policy. The schools and the teachers are expected to transform the concept of personal learning into innovative practice. Personal learning is consequently emerging as an enormous challenge for the teachers in the transition sector. While there is some commonality across the schools in terms of curricular and qualifications frameworks, there are substantial differences in relation to school localities and size and in the sorts of students with whom personal learning is implemented. It is likely therefore that a number of different versions of personal learning will emerge.

As noted above, personal learning has been defined in policy only in the most general terms. It appears to have implications for the pedagogical relationship between teachers and learners, and the intention is to enable students to learn on the basis of their individual needs, experiences and contexts in ways which bring about individual personal competence. In order to achieve this, it would seem that it will be necessary for schools to create complex learning environments which support self-regulated and situated learning. However, the detailed implementation of competence diagnosis and development and the creation of complex learning environments have been left to the individual schools and teachers.

Students participating in personal learning are heterogeneous in their educational and social backgrounds. They have a wide range of existing competences and different motives and circumstances which have led to entry to the transition sector. There are also huge local differences between the types of participating students in different vocational schools. However, it is possibly significant that across the 11 schools, there is a high proportion of students with a migrant background. Local differences appear to be more significant than any differences which occur across qualification types. Thus, in addition to the institutional and qualification differences, the research will also provide opportunities to explore the ways in which personal learning plays out with different groups of students.

Across the schools, a wide range of learning approaches including learning diaries, portfolios and study workshops have been developed. However, there are no common approaches across all the schools, and much depends upon the willingness, skills and competence of the teachers to develop these.

The curriculum depends upon the course type being followed. These courses include a range of vocational orientation and preparation courses, some leading to secondary and/or vocational qualifications and, through the vocational foundation year, giving possible credit in the dual system. These course types contain different combinations of vocational and general education.

Personal learning itself, however, is not a curriculum as such in that it does not specify any particular content but is an approach or orientation to a range of courses and qualifications within the transition sector. Perhaps the key point to emerge from the research so far is that the concept of personal learning is currently more of a political slogan than an action framework for the teachers. Thus, the teachers have the task of realising personal learning based upon their individual theories about the concept. It is not therefore surprising that even at this early stage, there are significantly different interpretations and experiences of personal learning and the associated learning environments in the vocational schools.

Intermediate Level Diplomas in England

As noted above, the characteristic English approach to perceived weaknesses in full-time vocational education has been to use qualification reform to bring about change. The latest reform has seen the introduction of a new suite of diploma qualifications from September 2008. This now comprises 14 diploma 'lines of learning' (three lines were dropped by the new Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government in June 2010) which are being progressively introduced during the period 2008–2012. The lines of learning include business, administration and finance; construction and the built environment; engineering; creative and media; hair and beauty studies; sport and active leisure.

Each diploma will be available at foundation, intermediate and advanced levels. The intermediate level diploma, which is our main focus in this chapter, can be offered both pre-16 as part of compulsory education (as an alternative to GCSEs) and post-16 as an alternative to (or replacement for) existing vocational qualifications (e.g. BTEC, City and Guilds). At pre-16, the intermediate level diploma is normally taken as a 2-year course; at post-16, it is more likely to be a 1-year course. The intermediate diploma (both pre and post-16) promises possible progression to advanced level full-time study or advanced work-based learning. At both pre- and post-16, the intermediate diploma can be offered by both schools and further education colleges (although when they were introduced, heavy emphasis was placed on collaborative working between a number of different partners).

The then new labour government's stated intention was that by 2013, a substantial proportion of post-16 learners would be taking diplomas. In relation to the group of learners who are the subject of this chapter that government's policy was that the main, perhaps the only, full-time courses open to them would be the diplomas. Thus, when participation in education and training was planned to be made compulsory for all 17-year-olds in 2013 and for 18-year-olds in 2015, government policy anticipated that the diplomas would play a major part in catering for this increased participation (DfES 2005).

Some early accounts of the development and implementation of diplomas are now beginning to emerge together with commentaries on their general

characteristics (e.g. 14–19 Alliance 2010; Ertl et al. 2009; Hatcher 2008; Hodgson and Spours 2007, 2010; Lynch et al. 2010; Ofsted 2009). We draw upon these accounts in what follows as well as our own research in vocational specialist schools which was undertaken as planning and early implementation of the diplomas was taking place.

The purpose and aims of the diplomas have been outlined in a number of official publications and websites (Directgov 2009; QCA 2009). They are intended to have the dual purposes of both preparing young people for employment or further and higher education through engagement with broad vocational sectors. The official aims also place considerable emphasis on curricular and pedagogical innovation, especially the blending of theoretical and applied learning. Publicity aimed at attracting young people to the diplomas is targeted at those students who are believed to want something different, especially in terms of teaching and learning styles and assessment methods, from GCSEs and A-levels. Diploma learning is also stated to include learning through doing, interaction with other learners through group work and learning through the application of transferable skills.

One of the features of the difference of diplomas is the stipulation that 'a minimum of 50% of all (principal) learning must be applied, that is, knowledge and skills must be set within the contexts of tasks, problems and situations that are related to work in the sector' (14–19 Alliance 2010, p. 7; OCR 2008, p. 7), although precisely how this 50% should be calculated, for example, whether a distinction should be made between real and simulated contexts, remains unclear as does the enforcement of the stipulation. However, there is a clear necessity to establish good links with employers. In this context, much attention has been paid to the need to recruit employers able to provide 10 days work experience to all diploma students, but while this is undoubtedly a major challenge, the provision of a good supply of 'tasks, problems and situations' which provide realistic contexts for diploma work seems far more challenging.

All diplomas have three main components. These are (1) principal learning which provides the main sector-based content and accounts for 52.5% of the intermediate diploma, (2) generic learning which provides functional and wider skills (25% of the diploma) and (3) additional and specialist learning which allows the inclusion of a wide range of specialist and other courses (22.5% of the diploma). The overall approach to diplomas therefore reflects the general approach to vocational education for 14–19-year-olds in England with its emphasis on generic employability skills, combined with vocational contextualisation, experience and employer involvement.

A limited amount actual assessment of diploma courses has taken place, and therefore, it is still too early to reach any judgements on the ways in which this may interact with curriculum and pedagogy to shape the learning experience. The diploma places more emphasis upon internal assessment than is the case with academic courses with typically over three quarters of work internally assessed. However, this internal assessment is subjected to what one awarding body refers to as a 'medium to high level of control' (OCR 2008), meaning the application of tight assessment criteria and extensive moderation procedures. This is reminiscent

of the 'curriculum reinforcement' role of assessment in the earlier General National Vocational Qualifications in England (Higham 2003).

Diplomas are intended to be provided by partnerships of schools, colleges, training providers and employers working together. Those intending to provide diploma courses have been required to go through a 'gateway' process in which they demonstrate the strength of their partnership, including employer engagement. Thus, there is an expectation that a range of partners will contribute to each individual diploma course, perhaps by teaching different components or units.

Institutions taking on diplomas have received some additional funding, but this is unlikely to be ongoing, and to a large extent, they are expected to provide the courses from their existing resources. Partnership arrangements are expected to ensure that a wide range of staff expertise and facilities are available, with the more specialist equipment provided through colleges and employers rather than schools. Several of the vocational specialist schools we visited had been able to take advantage of the opportunity to establish post-16 centres (sixth forms) to equip themselves with new resources, for example, construction and engineering workshops, ICT suites with state-of-the-art digital editing equipment, hairdressing and beauty salons depending upon the diplomas they were taking on.

Student recruitment to diplomas in the first 2 years is considerably lower than had been anticipated, especially for post-16 students, including those studying at intermediate level (14–19 Alliance 2010). There is also some evidence that diploma students have lower prior attainment than those not taking diplomas (O'Donnell et al. 2009).

The future of diplomas is highly uncertain. While evaluation and inspection reports have shown that well-planned and taught courses can engage and motivate young people, including the group which is the subject of this chapter, the take-up has been much smaller than anticipated, and there is evidence of ignorance, indifference, caution and suspicion among some teachers (Times Educational Supplement 2010). The response of higher education has also been mixed and cautious (Hodgson and Spours 2010). The diplomas were a flagship New Labour government policy, and the formation the new coalition government in May 2010 has placed their future in jeopardy. At the very least, it seems likely that diplomas will have a considerably lower profile than they had under the previous government. This though begs the question as to what provision the new government will favour for full-time intermediate level students.

Concluding Remarks

Most comparative accounts of VET emphasise differences between Germany and England and advance a range of historical, social, economic and institutional factors which explain these differences (e.g. Dehmel 2005; Green 2000). Concomitantly, these accounts also tend to argue for the weakness of vocational education in

England compared to Germany. It is not our intention to challenge the overall thrust of these accounts. While there is good VET practice in England, it is evident that at a systemic level, the German dual system is more extensive, has higher status and delivers better quality than much English vocational education.

However, at this relatively early stage in our comparative project, we found significant similarities between Germany and England in relation to the provision for the group of young people who are the subject of this chapter. We conclude by highlighting five of these similarities:

1. Provision in both countries lacks identity and clarity of purpose. In England, this is evident through the constant chopping and changing of qualifications, of which the diplomas are latest, over a long period of time. Their aims and purposes remain subject to uncertainty despite, or perhaps because of, successive attempts by government to clarify these (House of Commons Education and Skills Committee 2007). In Germany, the growth of the transition sector has produced a jungle of qualifications with differing purposes and aims – a criticism frequently levelled at English VET.
2. Closely linked to our first point, provision in both countries is defined against and shaped by other higher status provision – the dual system in Germany and the academic track in England. In Germany, this has led to attempts to simulate aspects of the dual system but without the distinctive and central employer contribution. In England, full-time intermediate level vocational provision has long lacked status. It has arguably acted as at best a refuge and at worst a warehouse for those deemed unable to proceed to advanced level study. In addition, the search for parity of esteem with academic provision has resulted in persistent academic drift within vocational education, including intermediate level provision. This typically manifests itself in greater emphasis on knowledge acquisition in the curriculum and formal, often written, external summative assessment. This is not yet the case with the diplomas but remains a distinct possibility.
3. There is heavy emphasis on pedagogical innovation in both countries. Personal learning is pursued within the transition sector in Germany. In England, the diplomas represent an attempt to blend applied and theoretical learning. The clear implication of this emphasis is that the official policy diagnosis that the weaknesses of provision in both countries are fundamentally internal rather than being rooted in their structural locations, for example, as a middle track qualification in England or in demand-side limitations, for example, a shortage of apprenticeships in the German dual system.
4. The provision provides uncertain progression to work, training or higher education in England and to the dual system in Germany. In England, the track record of progression from intermediate level courses has been mixed to say the least, and there are no grounds for thinking the diploma will do better. In Germany, while the transition sector may address ‘deficiencies’ in potential dual system entrants, it can do nothing to produce increased and broader demand within the dual system itself.

5. Provision in both countries is complex and lacks coherence, and therefore, it is not surprising that there is often limited understanding among students, teachers, employers and parents. Early findings from our German research, for example, suggests that many students are not clear why they are doing the courses they are doing nor where they might lead. In England, inspection evidence from the first group of diploma students suggests that many are not aware or do not understand the programmatic, integrated character of the diploma and focus only upon the principal learning (Ofsted 2009).

While there are differences between provisions in the two countries, these significant similarities suggest that there may be comparable shaping forces operating in both countries. The possible identification of these forces and the ways in which they play out in the different contexts are likely to be subjects of our continuing collaboration. We have found this comparison between German and English provision fruitful, not least for the similarities which have emerged, in contrast to the differences which many comparative accounts highlight. However, what is ultimately crucial for both countries is the extent to which intermediate level vocational provision is fit for purpose in meeting the learning and progression needs of the young people themselves, employers requirements and wider societal purposes. It is too early to make definitive judgements in relation to the initiatives which we have examined in this chapter, but the indications are that significant problems and issues are emerging in both countries.

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