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Expanding Work-Based Higher Education

Policy Lessons from Germany and the U.S. By Lukas Graf



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At the moment many countries experience a strong renewed interest in apprenticeship training. However, what is often overlooked is that dual apprenticeship training at the secondary level is no longer the only way in which advanced work-based training is offered. Key examples for this are Germany and the U.S., two of the world's major players in the global diffusion of educational models and ideals. In Germany, due to structural changes, such as the shift to the service and knowledge economy and the increased flexibility of labor markets, employers as well as individuals increasingly demand higher-level academic competences. As a consequence, so-called dual study programs in Germany have massively expanded. Dual study programs are apprenticeships offered at the higher education level and they have begun to attract high school graduates with excellent grades. In fact, in terms of recruiting talent, they can compete with prestigious German research universities for talented youth.

In the United States, work-based higher education has an even longer tradition and is offered through community colleges but also by universities through co-operative

study programs. What, if anything, can policymakers, higher education administrators, and employers learn from the German and the U.S. experience in work-based higher education?

Germany: Dual Study Programs

Dual study programs are hybrid organizational forms that integrate institutional and organizational elements from the fields of vocational training and higher education with regard to curricula, governance, and funding structures. The core principle of such programs is that they combine the workplace and the seminar room as two distinct learning environments. Dual study programs are most common in economic sciences, engineering sciences, and computer sciences, but are also growing in other fields such as the health-related sciences. Students apply directly to the firm, which in turn has an agreement with a higher education organization that provides the theory part of the training. All involved parties – the student, the firm, and the higher education organization – are bound by a formal agreement and students stay with the same firm for the whole undergraduate study period.

The firm is responsible for financing the in-firm training. It also pays the student a salary, which is typically equivalent to or even higher than that of traditional apprentices in the respective industry. A great part of the costs for the theory part of the program is usually covered by the state, as most dual study programs are offered through public higher education organizations. Dual study programs most often lead to a Bachelor's degree in about three to four years (dual studies at Master's level are still rare but also growing) and connect two didactical principles, namely practical training and scientific grounding. For example, the teaching staff is composed of both trainers from industry and university lecturers.

U.S.: Community Colleges and Co-operative Study Programs

For U.S. standards, community colleges typically offer a low-cost way to gain a higher education degree – namely, the Associate's degree – in two years and tend to fulfill multiple functions: they extend both vertically from high school to four-year colleges and horizontally from very basic career training to advanced technical education. As such, they play an important role especially for the respective local community in making higher education accessible also to non-traditional students. The Associate's degree can either provide direct access to the labor market or to the third year of a

four-year college.

Furthermore, community colleges are locations of life-long learning, offering, for example, credit as well as non-credit courses for adult learners. Beyond that, community colleges can offer industry training through apprenticeship programs. Thus, community colleges sometimes cooperate with firms to offer the classroom-based part of an apprenticeship program. However, the success of community colleges in ensuring the timely completion of studies and avoiding drop-out is varied. More generally, community colleges, which usually have an open enrollment policy, are sometimes seen as an option mainly for those students who cannot gain immediate access to a four-year college, for example, because they do not meet the entry criteria or lack the financial means.

In the domain of universities, some four-year colleges offer co-operative (co-op) study programs leading to a Bachelor's degree. In co-op programs, students usually rotate between the university and several firms. However, typically the students first apply to the university and then try to find an employer that accepts them for a co-op phase. There is no general standard with regard to whether the firm pays the students a salary or whether it bears the tuition fees. Overall, co-op study programs are still rather marginal in the U.S. higher education system. Yet, they have seen significant growth over the past decades.

Potential for Mutual Policy Learning

As apprenticeship training in Germany is expanding beyond the traditional upper-secondary level and partly moving to the post-secondary level, where it was already located in the U.S., it can be argued that the American and German systems to some extent are becoming more similar while retaining distinct comparative advantages. German dual study programs may well provide policymakers in the U.S. with concepts useful to increase the curricular integration between the workplace and the seminar room and to further develop complementary high-skilled apprenticeship programs attractive enough to also encourage enrollment of high school graduates who would otherwise opt for a four-year college degree. The German system of work-based higher education, on the other hand, lacks an organizational form like the U.S. community colleges that provides an alternative, multifunctional, and more flexible form of access to work-based higher education.

Furthermore, Germany could look to U.S. co-op programs for ideas how to design dual study programs in Germany in which students have opportunities to complete practical training with more than one firm. They thus widen their learning experiences and limit their risk if and when employers focus their training efforts too heavily on firm-specific skills. In any case, the potential for the successful transfer of such institutional and organizational elements is currently supported by a very strong interest in advanced work-based training on both sides of the Atlantic.

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