

Baumann, F-A.& Krichewsky-Wegener, L. (2019). The internationalisation of VET: German VET providers abroad –transfer vs. pragmatism?. In F. Marhuenda & M.J. Chisvert-Tarazona (Eds.), *Pedagogical concerns and market demands in VET. Proceedings of the 3rd Crossing Boundaries in VET conference, Vocational Education and Training Network (VETNET)* (pp.251-260) <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.2641013>

The Internationalisation of VET: German VET Providers Abroad – Transfer vs. Pragmatism?

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Abstract

Germany has a strong VET system, which is commonly seen as a key factor explaining its persistently low youth unemployment rate, high productivity and social cohesion. Many countries across the globe have therefore expressed their interest in establishing a similar system. At the same time, German commercial VET providers are not very active on international markets, compared with their counterparts of English-speaking countries. The German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) therefore launched a program for the “internationalisation of VET” which tries to combine export promotion with the promotion of the dual VET system, as it has traditionally been pursued in the context of German development cooperation. This paper sets out to explore the ideological and theoretical premises of this program. Furthermore, it examines how these premises are reflected in the design of the funded projects and whether and how the projects, once they have started to be implemented, adapt their plans to the context of the targeted country.

Keywords

internationalisation; VET; dual system; commercial VET providers

In the light of a rediscovery of apprenticeship (Rauner and Smith 2010) and due to its presumed capacity to conveniently resolve issues related to both economic competitiveness and social cohesion, VET- more specifically dual forms of VET- have increasingly been subjected to “cross-national attraction” (Philipps and Ochs 2003). Germany, too has found itself pushed to gradually internationalise its VET system. Historically, internationalisation referred above all to attempts at transferring the so called “dual system” to other countries. Currently internationalisation includes opening up German VET to foreign students, establishing transnational trainings as well as the expansion of German training providers’ activities on international markets. These developments, which are to a large extent actively supported by governmental funding schemes, are being monitored and critically reflected by VET research. This paper was produced in the context of an ongoing research project funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) in connection with its program “Internationalisation of VET” (*Internationalisierung der Berufsbildung* – “IBB”).



1 Contextualisation of the Ministry of Education's Program "Internationalisation of VET"

1.1 Internationalisation of VET

Germany has a long tradition of international VET cooperation. During the 1950s, the first German training centres for skilled workers were established abroad, in the framework of a program called "VET aid for developing countries" (Wolf 2009, p. 49). This first initiative was followed by a growing number of programs involving different ministries, international and multilateral organisations, governmental agencies and non-governmental organisations with sometimes conflicting interests and aims (cf. Wolf 2009, Heller et al. 2015, Stockmann and Silvestrini 2013). In order to improve the effectiveness of international VET cooperation, a strategy was drafted and adopted in 2013 by the federal government in close consultation with other German stakeholders called "VET cooperation from a single source" (*Berufsbildung aus einer Hand*). One of the main elements of the strategy is a common definition of the core principles of German VET underpinning cooperation activities in this field.

Against the background of long-lasting debates about the feasibility of a "transfer" of the German "dual system" to other countries, it states that 'international cooperation is not about transferring the German vocational training system as such abroad. Rather, partner countries are supported in introducing and adapting elements of dual vocational training into their respective system according to their own needs. The independent implementation and the further development in a sustainable way of the dual or cooperative principles are of highest importance' (Deutscher Bundestag 2013, p. 6).

The five core principles of German VET, according to the strategy, are the following:

- Cooperation between social partners, business organisations and the state
- Learning in the process of work
- Acceptance of national standards
- Qualified teachers and trainers
- Institutionalised VET research and consultancy.

1.2 "IBB", a multi-purpose program

Building on the experiences of international VET cooperation as described above, the IBB program is set to meet three main challenges, identified in the program description. The first challenge pertains to the relatively weak performance of German training providers on the international market for VET services. A market study commissioned by the German government in 2012 points to the strong position of Australia, UK and New Zealand, which have taken various measures to support the export activities of their VET providers (cf. Posselt et al. 2012). By contrast, German VET providers are struggling to enter foreign markets, especially given the barriers represented by language and a very demanding and difficult to convey national understanding of VET. A second challenge, which is also an opportunity for Germany, lies with the growing interest of other countries in the German dual system. This interest is reflected in about twenty bilateral cooperation agreements signed between the BMBF and equivalent Ministries from across the globe since 2012. These agreements need to be underpinned with projects, raising the question of funding for a ministry which by law is not allowed to fund foreign partners. Finally, a third challenge is felt strongly by German em-

ployers, who struggle to find skilled workers for production, distribution and support services abroad.

At the heart of the IBB program lies the aim to address the aforementioned challenges by linking export promotion to the political agenda of VET cooperation. In its main funding stream (the c-stream), German training providers are encouraged to submit project proposals for the development of a sustainable business model in order to introduce their products to foreign markets. Providers are encouraged to adapt their products to the demands of a previously chosen country and follow the approach of co-creating their products with foreign clients.

To be funded, projects have to adhere to at least one of the five core principles¹ of German VET and focus on work-, practice- and action-oriented training. As regards countries which have entered bilateral cooperation with the BMBF, projects have to refer to the objectives of the cooperation agreement.

The double purpose of IBB is revealed in the following anticipated program outcomes: First, the program should lead to the “internationalisation of the sector of German VET providers” and second it should “support VET reform in the partner countries”. Projects are funded for a duration of up to four years with a grant amounting to up to 50 per cent of the project costs.

1.3 State of research

The question of transfer, especially of the dual VET system, or of elements and underlying principles to other countries has been subject of extensive academic discussion in Germany. A large body of literature focuses on describing and commenting on the evolution of government policies for international cooperation in VET, specifically in the context of German development cooperation (e.g. Arnold 1989, Stockmann and Resch 1993, Greinert et al. 1997, Georg 2006), including evaluations or meta-evaluations of projects and programs (e.g. Stockmann 1997, Wallenborn 2006, Arnold 2006). By critically reflecting on the transferability of German VET, some authors refer to policy-transfer-literature, for instance Barabasch and Wolf (2009, 2010, 2012). Pilz (2017) has developed a six-point strategy as a framework for demand-oriented transfer, while Hummelsheim and Baur (2014) conclude that there are five core elements of a dual system which might be successfully transferred. Finally, other authors question the conceptualisation of the dual systems as “good practice” worth transferring (for instance Deissinger 2015; Euler und Wieland 2015; Heller, Grunau und Duscha 2015; Frommberger und Baumann 2016).

What is lacking so far is research on international cooperation in VET that is theory-driven, or for that matter, dedicated to the development of theory. At the same time, very few studies to date have actually analysed processes of transfer (cf. Gessler 2017, cf. Li 2017) or the adaptation of elements or principles of one VET system to another.

1.4 Research design and questions for this paper

The research conducted for this paper is based on a small-N sample. The unit of analysis are the projects currently being funded through the IBB-scheme, specifically those in the c-stream

¹ Note that in practice, the fifth principle regarding research on VET is not addressed by the IBB funding scheme. Instead, a separate program has been developed which specifically targets the internationalisation of VET research.

which is dedicated to supporting German VET providers in accessing foreign markets (“internationalisation”).

The current sample comprises 11 projects in nine countries that started their work between June and September 2017 in different economic sectors and with diverse combinations of project actors (also see 2.1). A peculiarity regarding the sample should be noted here: due to it being based on the funding scheme IBB, the sample was given rather than chosen on the basis of theoretical assumptions.

As the research starts out with a “[...] more or less vague notion of possible hypotheses [...]” (Lijphard 1971, p. 692), the purpose of this study is exploratory and aims at getting a clearer picture of the sample regarding the relevance of the five core principles. At a later stage of research hypotheses have to be generated in order to advance with theory development on the subject of internationalisation of VET.

Data for the present research undertaking was gathered through qualitative and quantitative methods. Semi-structured expert interviews were conducted with representatives of German project organisations between February and April 2018. Project documents in the form of project descriptions, interim progress reports and presentations held during workshops or conferences were also analysed. In addition, an extensive online-survey was submitted to project representatives in autumn 2018 which was answered by all respondents.

The puzzle that the authors of this paper encounter evolves around the following issues: projects are supposed to adhere to at least one of the core principles that are thought to characterise German VET and thereby contribute to VET reform in the targeted country. However, recent research has emphasized the historicity of VET institutions and has pointed to the fact that institutional change in VET- arguably a prerequisite for core principles of German VET to take hold in another country- occurs only under certain circumstances and is likely to be incremental and subject to contingency (cf. Thelen 2004, cf. Busemeyer and Trampusch 2012, cf. Vossiek 2018).

Thus, questions for which answers are warranted at this stage are the following:

1. Which role do the core principles of German VET actually play for the product i.e. business model of the projects?
2. To what extent and how do the projects, once they have started implementation, (have to) diverge from the core principles?

2 Empirical findings

2.1 Project Portfolio²

The projects funded through IBB’s c-stream display variety as regards the country, the branch, the type of organisations involved – but also the product or service to be developed. Out of 11 projects having already started implementation, seven focus on the development of curricula, training courses and materials to be implemented in existing training centres or schools, while four aim to establish a new private training centre to offer initial or continuing VET courses and certificates. Most projects develop trainings for the manufacturing sector,

² We decided to omit from the analysis one project in Greece because its set-up rather fits the b-stream of the IBB funding scheme.

two projects also target the logistics sector and one plans to expand into tourism at a later stage. In accordance with the funding requirements, project partners from the private sector justify their application by stating their willingness to develop self-financing activities in the country after the end of the project. Therefore, all projects plan to develop a sustainable business model for future activities in the project country.

The projects are always carried out by consortia involving at least one academic partner (usually a university) and a private training provider or service provider in the field of VET. In half of the projects, not-for-profit organisations such as regional networks or business associations are involved as well. As IBB only provides funds to German organizations, the projects have to find cooperation partners in the respective country. In just about half of the cases, the German Chamber of Foreign Trade (*Außenhandelskammer* or AHK) is among them. Local training providers including VET colleges are also often involved. Some projects also have cooperation agreements with local businesses or business associations and with regional or national VET agencies. Cooperation partners are mainly involved in training provision and networking activities, especially with firms.

Only two countries, China and Iran, are host to more than one project (see Illustration 1).

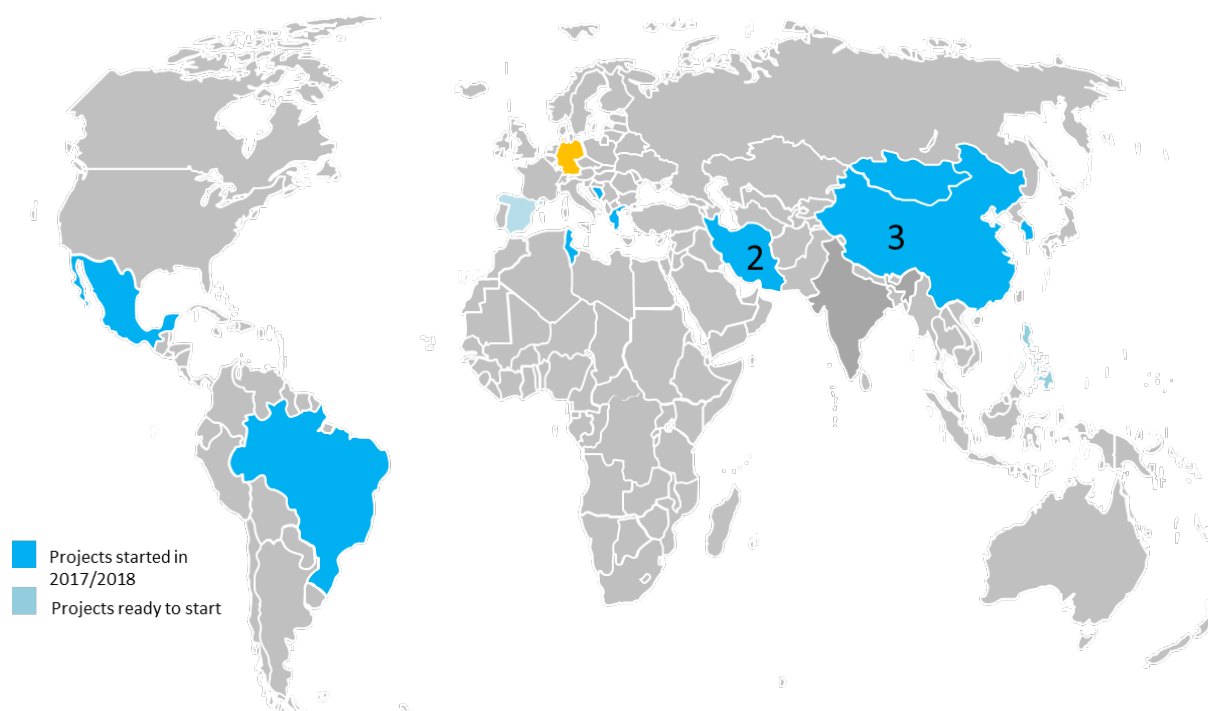


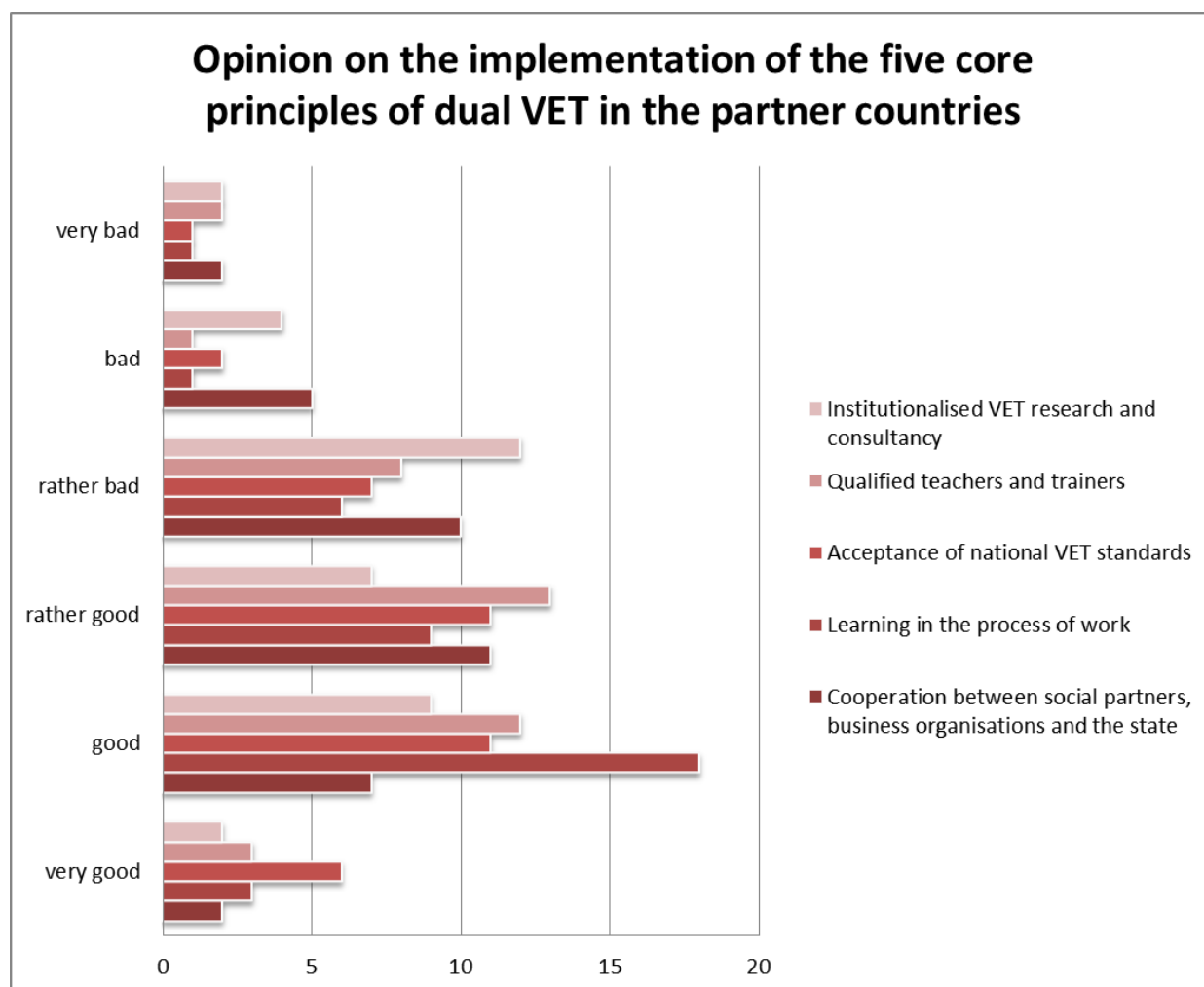
Illustration 1 Projects funded in IBB c-stream (December 2018)

Except for two projects within the European Union and one in Serbia, the majority of projects are being implemented in emerging economies. Many of these countries have introduced reforms to develop new forms of “collective” VET (cf. Busemeyer and Trampusch 2012), but there are some exceptions, such as South Korea.

It is still too early to assess the influence of contextual factors on the implementation of the IBB projects. Nonetheless, it is possible to outline the subjective view of the project actors on the readiness of the respective country for implementing key aspects, albeit in adapted form, of German VET. The online survey conducted in September 2018 reveals that, a few months after kicking off, the majority of projects is especially optimistic as regards the second

principle, “learning in the process of work”. Most negative expectations pertain to institutionalised VET research and the cooperation between social partners, business associations and the state (Table 1)

Table 1 Question to the IBB-funded projects: „How do you rate the conditions in your partner countries for implementing the five core principles of German VET?” (Online survey, September 2018, n=40)



In their comments, the respondents justify their pessimism regarding these key principles mainly by pointing to the perception that institutions in the respective country are not supportive of cooperative processes and that this does not fit the dominant political culture. As regards Teachers and Trainers and Learning in the process of work, the respondents point to the great interest and demand of their local partners as well as their readiness to innovate due to skills mismatch and a dissatisfaction with the current situation. The views on the acceptance of national standards are ambiguous, as respondents seemingly do not share a common understanding of that principle.

2.2 Five key principles of German VET as mirrored in the project designs

The analysis of project proposals, interim project reports as well as expert interviews and the online-survey conducted among the projects provides an overview of how the core principles of German VET feature into the product that is being developed and whether and how projects so far had to adjust their plans during implementation.

The first principle pertains to the collaboration between the state and social partners in all aspects of VET, from curriculum development to financing and learner assessment. While this principle is closely linked to the other three principles below, it is not explicitly addressed by any of the projects. Indeed, the projects do not intend to have an impact on VET governance structures as they feel that this would be beyond their reach. However, they might collaborate with the state at national, regional or local level as in the case for MAliTeck (South Korea) or GeKaVoc (Kasakstan). Still, collaboration with state entities is regarded as particularly difficult mainly because of bureaucratic constraints and diverging interests among the stakeholders. None of the projects so far involves labor unions or workers' organisations, while a few collaborate with business associations.

The second principle regards learning in the process of work. This principle is relevant for all projects, although its implementation differs, reaching from alternance between school and company to micro-learning tools to be used by employees at the workplace. Two projects (IRI (Iran), MAliTeck) have participants come to Germany for training. Interestingly, while most projects find it challenging to involve companies in the delivery of their products because of a perceived lack of experience and readiness on the companies' side, some try to build on existing practices of informal, work-based training, for instance in Serbia or Iran. Most projects report a great amount of interest for the principle of learning in the process of work in the respective countries. Didactic approaches building on that principle seem to be a strong marketing argument for the projects.

The third principle pertains to the acceptance of national standards. While one project is planning to deliver national certificates, the majority either intends to offer German or joint certificates or is still weighting different options. Many respondents to the online-survey mention the positive image of German standards in the partner country, where they are often perceived as more up-to-date than national standards.

Principle four, the training of VET teachers and trainers, is explicitly addressed only by a few projects, however, almost all of them include some elements of train-the-trainer during the implementation phase. The focus is on the training of multipliers who are supposed to be in charge of actually implementing the training course developed during the funding period. This preparatory training also includes conveying practical, workplace-related skills, which teachers and trainers in the targeted countries are thought to lack.

None of the projects addresses the fifth principle of institutionalized VET research.

3 Discussion

Looking at the role of the core principles of German VET in the project design, it appears at this stage of research, that learning in the process of work is the most relevant as it is addressed by all projects. As is highlighted in an interview with the project in Tunisia, this principle is seen as the core feature of "Training made in Germany". A closer look at the project documents reveals, however, that the adaptation of this principle to the local context leads to very different results. On the one hand, a project in China aims at implementing initial VET training based on German curricula with school-based and company-based training phases as is common in the 'dual system'. On the other hand, a project in Mexico develops blended-learning modules for the continuing training of skilled workers in German and local automotive companies. Accordingly, the project in China is forced to collaborate with government authorities and Chinese VET colleges, while the Mexican project operates on a free market. Its blended-learning concept does not require local teacher or trainer training, nor is there a need for collaboration with the federal or state government.

Looking at the data gathered so far, it seems that all hitherto analysed projects generally stick to their original plans as regards the integration of the above-mentioned principles of

German VET. However, divergence takes place with a view to the details of the products which are developed, for instance increased modularization of training courses as a reaction to the reluctance of companies to engage in long-term training of apprentices, as is the case for the project in Serbia.

On the basis of this first tentative analysis, several questions are raised for further research:

- How do the project actors interpret the five core principles? Which similarities and differences can be identified concerning the interpretation by the individual projects?
- To what extent does the interpretation of the principles depend on the features of the project on the one hand and on the local context on the other hand?
- How are the projects embedded in the local VET system?
- Which effects does embeddedness have with regard to
 - the incidence of divergence from the original product design?
 - the impact of the projects on local VET systems?
- How willing are the project actors to engage in a co-creative product design process and how does this affect the adherence to the core principles?

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Biographical notes

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