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Crossing borders and boundaries by borrowing education policies: lending, learning or just cherry picking?

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Abstract

This paper aims at linking two discourses in educational research, i.e. educational policy borrowing and learning predominantly discussed by the Anglosphere community and policy transfer activities in the field of VET (vocational education and training) dominated by the perspective of a German-speaking community. The paper reviews past and present initiatives by the Germany government that aim at “exporting” elements of VET to numerous regions including e.g. Mediterranean, Northern Africa, Latin America and South-East Asia countries. Referring to the theoretical framework of policy borrowing developed by Dolowitz & Marsh (2001), Phillips & Ochs (2003) and Phillips & Schweisfurth (2011), the paper examines three issues considered important to sustainable policy learning and borrowing, i.e. a) the role of ownership and internalisation, b) the level of coercion indicating the conditions under which the transfer was developed, and c) the relation between borrowing/lending, mutual learning processes, and cross-national attraction.

Keywords

policy borrowing; VET; education policy; Germany

1 Introduction

Numerous studies have pointed out the strengths and weaknesses of vocational education and training (VET) and see it as a role model to integrate (young) people into the labour market (e.g. Canning et al. 2000; MacLean & Lai 2011, 5). One of the models that has gained substantial attention is the German VET “system” including a strong public-private partnership model in initial VET (“dual apprenticeship model”) and certificates such as the Master craftsmen certificates regulated at national level which are strongly interlocked with the apprenticeship model and build part of continuing VET.

Advocates of the German dual apprenticeship model point at the country’s low unemployment rate, its strong linkage with employers, its reliable involvement of social partners and a sound fundament built on mutual trust and shared responsibilities (e.g. Gehin & Méhaut 1995). One of the societal preconditions, however, is its century-old tradition – a fact that cannot be transferred at all. The factor dominating most discussions, however, is the low youth unemployment rate which often resulted in what Phillips and Ochs called “cross-national attraction” (Phillips and Ochs 2003, 451): a model that promises an adequate solution for solving unemployment-related problems and that seems to guarantee labour market-relevant skills as well as a shift of responsibilities towards employers – an issue of particular relevance with respect to financing VET and remuneration of apprentices.

Against this background, I will focus on a particular type of policy transfer, i.e. those initiatives supporting VET that were financed by the German government and aim at supporting capacity building in emerging and developing countries.



2 From Germany to elsewhere: State-supported policy transfer initiatives in VET

With respect to the past 60 years, policy transfer in VET (particularly from Germany towards emerging nations) was much imprinted by a number of policy documents developed by the Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ). In this period, the German government mainly supported policy transfer initiatives aiming at implementing the dual apprenticeship system or at least elements of it to emerging and developing countries (Heitmann 2018; Stockmann & Kohlmann 1998). However, these initiatives have hardly been linked with the discourse on the underlying process of policy borrowing, policy transfer and policy learning in education. Though similar at first sight, the notions vary with respect to the underlying intention: While policy transfer refers to processes “by which knowledge about policies, administrative arrangements, institutions and ideas in one political system (past or present) is used in the development of policies, administrative arrangements, institutions and ideas in another political system” (Dolowitz & Marsh 2000, 5), the notion of “policy learning” focuses on mutual learning processes, ideally between all stakeholders and aiming at tailoring individual solutions rather than transferring existing ones (Chakroun 2010; Raffe & Spours 2007). Ideally, policy borrowing and learning include learning about the home system, identifying policy options, understanding processes of change and anticipating issues that possible policies would raise.

However, this distinction is more analytical than practical. In praxis, the degree of borrowing or learning is much dependent on who is involved in the process of borrowing and learning and on the degree of coercion by which a reform is designed and implemented, and even though interrelations between countries may be strong this is not necessarily an indicator for adopting foreign policies: “The degree to which there has been a reciprocal relationship of sharing between countries, however, is questionable with each country making decisions in light of what is best for development in its own nation” (Kubow & Fossum 2007, 8).

Such decision taking is part of a more complex process of policy transfer and policy borrowing. For example, in the model by Phillips and Ochs (2003, 452), policy borrowing covers four steps – with some levels of variety depending on the particular reform needs and (political, economic, cultural) contexts:

- Cross-national attraction (problem identification and search for what seems the same problem and an attractive solution elsewhere)
- Decision (on how to adapt the ‘solution’ in the home country)
- Implementation of the somehow adapted ‘solution’ in the home country
- Internalisation/indigenisation of the ‘solution’ (developing ownership)

Moreover, though there are several models of policy transfer and policy borrowing including various stages, phases and steps (e.g. Dolowitz & Marsh 2001, Phillips & Ochs 2003; Phillips & Schweisfurth 2011), such models are hard to apply in reality and rather serve a retrospective analysis of policy transfer.

This can also be stated with respect to the German policy transfer initiatives referring to VET where numerous papers and studies document German initiatives to support countries with implementing VET structures (e.g. Borrmann & Stockmann 2009; Stockmann & Vest 1997). However, the documentation landscape is somewhat fragmented given that in many cases evaluation of initiatives was (and still is) not mandatory and apart from a lack of involvement of local evaluators “[i]nternal and external domestic evaluation staff not only lacks experience – they also lack appropriate qualifications. In spite of this obvious deficiency, only very few development cooperation agencies support their partner organisations [...] through

systematic programmes in the area of vocational education and training” (Borrmann & Stockmann 2009, 15).

As a consequence, comparing such initiatives and deriving trends, findings and consequences is difficult. For example, Heitmann (2018) identifies five stages of VET policy transfer initiated by the BMZ’s launch of strategy papers in 1969, 1986, 1992, 2005, and 2012. His analysis is based on the assumption that all initiatives should (ideally) apply a value chain model developed for VET transfer including a) governance structures, b) funding, c) information systems for VET planning, d) qualifications and curricula, e) training partnership with private sector and f) quality assurance—a value chain “model” that was recently adopted by the European Commission (2017, 12). With respect to the same time period, Stockmann (2018) identifies similar chronological stages which he links with content-related shifts in the respective programmatic strategies. These shifts refer to a stronger focus on poverty reduction, gender equality, peace building and public-private-partnership building as well as a stronger linkage with active labour market policies and business development (Stockmann 2018, 145–148). From a content point of view, however, it seems that the more complex the transfer initiatives are and the higher the envisaged aims, the less it is possible to actually realize the aims which, in turns, leads to excessive demands of those involved in the process and a failure of what the initiatives were made for (Stockmann & Silvestrini 2013, 115). Even more, one of the key results of the same meta analysis of policy transfer in VET is that key success factors in policy transfer include the process of planning and implementing the initiative, performance of coordinators and key stakeholders and widespread impact. However, it is striking that it is particularly the aspect of internalisation/indigenisation that is least mentioned and which seems the most difficult aspect with respect to its long-term impact on policy transfer.

3 Conclusions

Studies on VET transfer supported by the German government are well-documented and have been reviewed in several meta analysis. All these studies result in similar findings all pointing at two reciprocal processes:

- A shift away from the idea of dismantling and deconstructing the German VET system into its element, then transferring its elements into foreign countries and finally reconstructing it on the ground;
- A shift towards a systemic perspective of VET, its interlocking with other societal sub-systems (labour markets, health, welfare) including a stronger focus on financing and (local) stakeholders as well as a raising awareness that “less is more”, i.e. that only single elements (ideas, methods) of the VET system can be borrowed rather than transferred – if at all.

Those findings may sound simple and logical; however, for a very long time they emerged in parallel and quite decoupled from similar international experience with policy transfer in VET in other countries.

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Biographical notes

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