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Quality Management in Vocational Education and Training: A Reflection on Educational Governance in Austria, Germany and Spain

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Abstract

In many European regions, the introduction of New Public Management in the 1990s led to decentralised school development. The increased freedom of school organisation raised the demand for system-wide coordination and steering elements. Therefore, the development of comprehensive quality management (QM) systems plays a key role in educational governance across Europe. Various QM systems reflect different governance approaches prevailing in individual countries. This paper analyses which understanding of educational governance is reflected by different conceptions of QM in Austrian, German and Spanish VET systems and how the coordination of actions in these complex multilevel systems is shaped by QM? The first findings of this study indicate that it is not the democratisation of the understanding of quality which is in the focus of current QM systems, but the decentralisation of responsibility of predefined outcomes and the operational realisation of governmental requirements. The findings show that in the formalised VET system, the accountability and performativity function seems to be on the rise. In the non-formal VET system, the marketing function is prevalent.

Keywords

quality management, educational governance, vocational education and training, Austria, Germany, Spain



1 Introduction

Until the early 1990s, the school system (including school-based vocational education) in many European regions was hierarchically structured and centrally organised. Schools were externally steered and were tasked with fulfilling administrative instructions from the relevant school authorities. Increasing criticism of the inefficiency of this bureaucratic form of control and the introduction of New Public Management led to decentralised school development in many countries and consequently to a separation between strategic and operational school management (Dubs, 2003). Thus, the school has evolved from a state enforcement organ to a service organ that is given more decision-making autonomy and is expected to comply with educational objectives set by the state (Schedler, 1995). The increased freedom of school organisation is associated with the concern about possible undesirable developments of individual schools and, in turn, increased the demand for system-wide coordination and school-wide steering elements. Therefore, since the late 1990s and early 2000s the development of comprehensive quality management (QM) systems and the regular monitoring of the school's performance play key roles in educational governance across Europe (e.g., Altrichter & Heinrich, 2007; Dubs, 2003). At the same time, the European quality assurance reference framework for vocational education and training was designed to guide member states in developing and improving the quality of their vocational education and training (VET) systems. However, various QM systems have been implemented across Europe, reflecting different governance approaches prevailing in individual countries.

In recent years, the concept of governance has been applied to the analysis of VET, as VET systems are systems with complex action coordination mechanisms and structured by different levels of governance (state, private providers, social partners, etc.) (e.g., Bürgi & Gonon, 2021; Deitmer, 2015). Individual VET systems contain varying forms and levels of organisation to enable coordination and steering of actions (Daun, 2011). Using an educational governance perspective, in this paper we would like to analyse how QM is framed in selected European countries and how this structures VET schooling differently. We follow the understanding of QM which includes systematically applied procedures with which VET quality is evaluated, improved and assured. QM includes both the teaching and learning process and organisational management of VET institutions (Cedefop, 2015; Dubs, 2003). Based on this understanding of QM, the following research question is pursued:

Which understanding of educational governance is reflected by different conceptions of QM in selected European VET systems and how is the coordination of actions in these complex multilevel systems shaped by QM?

In international and comparative VET research, this question has not been analysed and discussed in depth so far. The countries Austria, Germany and Spain are selected because they belong to different facets of educational governance regimes and different VET systems in Europe.

2 Theoretical framework

To examine the current levers of steering in the VET systems, we use the perspective of educational governance according to Altrichter (2010), and Kussau and Brüsemeister (2007). This approach rejects the assumption of direct controllability by the state and follows an extended understanding of steering. Educational governance is perceived as a complex interaction of different actors with partly contradictory interests. At the centre of this perspective is the problem of coordination of actions of different actors, who are all co-producers of system performances. The concept of coordination of action serves as a tool of analysis and explanation of how actors at different points in a complex system participate in the regulation and performance of that very system (Altrichter, 2010; Altrichter & Heinrich, 2007).

Altrichter and Heinrich (2007) propose several categories for analysing governance constellations. Possible categories of analysis are guiding values and impact claims, individual and organised actors within the regime, different system levels, rights of disposal and structures of regulation. The focus is on the question of how various actors with different rights of disposal coordinate their actions in a multilevel system. For the analysis and description of the action coordination of a specific governance regime, an orientation towards “classical models of societal coordination” (Altrichter, 2010, p. 148) such as network, market or hierarchy is possible. Moreover, Altrichter (2010) suggests as heuristic framework for analysing differences between education systems five dimensions that de Boer et al. (2007) have identified in a country comparison study of the governance structure of university systems: state regulation, external guidance, competitive pressure and quasi-markets, managerial self-governance and professional self-governance (of teachers). These models and dimensions are ideal-typical descriptions and usually do not occur in pure form in reality, but only as a combination or in a more differentiated form. The heuristic categories can thus be helpful in obtaining an initial orientation about the specific governance structure, but they can never represent the empirical complexity (Altrichter & Heinrich, 2007).

3 Methodology

The study is based on the analysis of documents in the three selected countries, including government reports, recommendations, regulations and requirements, but also research studies, including theoretical and empirical publications as well as reports from schools and school associations. The document analysis is following the three steps: 1) selecting, 2) sampling, and 3) thematic analysing (Morgan, 2022). The factors authenticity, credibility, representativeness and meaning are used for a qualitative validation of the documents (Flick, 2018).

Based on the document analysis, a structured programme theory of quality management concepts is elaborated for each country. A predefined structure of the programme theory enables a systematic comparison between the countries. So, the tertium comparationis are driven by the change and action model of the programme theory (see in detail Chen, 2005) and the categories of the educational governance perspective (Altrichter & Heinrich, 2007).

4 Findings

The following is a brief overview of the initial findings of the governance analysis of the individual countries. A summarised comparison is given in the discussion section.

Austria

In Austria, the Federal Ministry of Education (FME) introduced a new QM system called QMS (Quality Management System for Schools) for all vocational and general education school types in the school year 2021/22. A fundamental principle of QMS is the four-phase Deming-quality cycle with the idea of systematic, evidence-oriented and continuous improvement (Gramlinger & Jonach, 2022). In addition, QMS is inspired by the Q2E function model according to Landwehr and Steiner (2020) and serves both data-based development of school and teaching processes and outcomes as well as provision of accountability to all stakeholders of a school (FMESR, 2021). Key objectives are to ensure high-quality education, to foster learners' individual potential and to promote teacher professionalism and cooperation (FMESR, 2021).

In order to achieve these objectives, a clear structure of the organisation, the processes and the responsibilities of the QM system at each school, a quality framework with a set of quality criteria that constitute “a good school and good teaching in Austria” (FMESR, 2021, p. 8), and various steering tools to guide the QMS activities are centrally specified. Strong emphasis is also placed on generating data about the quality and effectiveness of the school's processes and teachers' actions through regular internal and external evaluations and systematic educational

monitoring by the school inspectorate. QMS is designed as a multilevel system (see in detail FMESR, 2022). It is coordinated and conceptually further developed at a centrally organised national level by the FME. The regional school inspectorate is responsible for supporting the implementation of QMS in schools, for ongoing quality controlling and for conducting review and target setting meetings with the school management (FMESR, 2019). At school level, three central actors – the school management, teacher teams and individual teachers – are designated as being responsible for the realisation of the specified measures and the achievement of the targeted outcomes of QMS (FMESR, 2021).

Overall, QM in Austria is characterised by a governance regime that is shaped by centralised external steering through output orientation, standardised targets and prescribed forms of monitoring and control. In addition, VET professionals in schools are supposed to be motivated and actively engaged in QM for which schools are promised increased organisational and pedagogical freedom of design (FMESR, n.d.). However, the supposed self-governance takes place within a limited, pre-structured scope of possibilities (see in detail Hautz, 2022). Within the framework of QMS, the intention is to align the behaviour of teachers to policy objectives by making them more accountable for learners' outcomes and guide their decisions with common standards of comparison.

Germany

QM in Germany is seen as an impulse provider for the further development of the school system (Schulministerium NRW, 2023) and as a link between a school's self-evaluation and external evaluation, with the focus on fulfilling the supra-regional educational mission (Becker et al., 2006). This mission implies equal opportunities in vocational education along the path of sustainability and digitisation of learning processes (BMBF, 2023). Derivative goals are anchored in regional frameworks for actions used by QM-teams and internally at schools (MK, 2021). The implementation of these goals places high demands on all stakeholders and expect schools to act in a highly participative manner (MSB NRW, 2023).

Various actors coordinate the QM system in Germany. First, it is the German state in the form of the ministries of education in the federal states that sets normative documents and regulations. Second, school inspectors recruited from among the school personnel and working in teams act based on reference frameworks as external evaluators. Third, school internal inspectors elaborate the internal evaluations within the school. Furthermore, the principals and teachers are expected to serve as implementers of the evaluated measures. The current processes in the German QM system are characterised by a redistribution of power. Thus, decision-making and responsibility for the school development has shifted more and more from the ministries to the vocational schools. At the same time, the increased accountability to higher-level authorities and society should make the school more transparent (Becker et al., 2006). Yet, the focus remains on the pursuit of standards, and reliance on qualitative feedback systems rather than evaluation of outcomes alone (Becker & Spöttl, 2007). Also, external evaluation experts from private organisations could be newly accentuated as players in QM as well as the national reference point DEQA-VET which plays a mediating role between the national and the European level (DEQA-VET, 2023).

Hence, it could be concluded that the governance of QM in Germany is still driven by a central external control through output orientation (e.g., comparative tests), unified overall substantial goals and mandatory modes of supervision and evaluation procedures but with tendencies towards higher school autonomy.

Spain

The Spanish education system has experienced a change from a highly centralised governance structure in the 1970s to a regional decentralisation. Nowadays, the Spanish Ministry of

Education establishes the national framework laws (education and vocational education), but it only administrates schools in Ceuta and Melilla, the two Spanish cities in Northern Africa. All other schools are accountable to the regional administrations, known as *comunidades autónomas*. Therefore, in the case of formal vocational education, QM in Spain aims to promote coordination and integration of various actors involved in its governance structure. Together with formal VET, there have been two other subsystems. One starting in mid-1960s, known as vocational training to train and qualify both adults and young people that are unemployed; and a second one, the continuing vocational education and training system (CVET), which was constituted in 1993 to support the training of the active occupied population. Vocational training providers in the latter have been mainly employer federations, trade union foundations and private providers, while the former was run by non-for-profit organisations, municipalities as well as private providers. QM in the formal VET system is supervised by the regional inspection (Martínez-Morales & Marhuenda-Fluixá, 2020). However, that inspection does not apply to the non-formal VET subsystems. The external supervision is mainly of financial character.

Thus, QM instruments are used by private providers, non-profit organisations and even municipalities as a trademark to show to their customers, providers and authorising administrations that they were complying with quality measures. Both employer federations and trade union foundations for training have also entered the QM market. Training providers who are not making the effort to accredit their quality through ISO or other standards might risk losing competitiveness in the training business.

The implementation of a dual model of school-based VET since 2012 has also highlighted the importance of QM in the formal VET sector, so that QM in Spain is determined by the relationship between school and markets. For this system to work, there needs to be a solid alliance, cooperation and trust between the three coordinating bodies (national, regional and local) and three actors (administrations, schools and teachers, and companies).

Regarding non-formal vocational training, the authorities have established a working group responsible for developing the annual plan for the evaluation of the quality, impact, effectiveness and efficiency of the whole vocational training system for employment. At the same time, through educational inspection and evaluation of formal VET, the Spanish government places emphasis on teaching and learning processes, supervising teaching practice, outcomes in the educational process, guidance for management teams, and ensuring compliance by the educational administrations themselves.

5 Discussion

First findings are finally briefly analysed from the lens of action coordination to reflect on different patterns of agency in responding to VET governance and QM in the selected countries regarding various eco-systems of skill formation.

Since the trend towards New Public Management in the 1990s, there has been an increased expectation of governance participation of the educational actors in the VET system in all three countries, especially on the part of the school management, teachers and also the training companies. On the one hand, a democratisation of QM through decentralised educational governance seems to be emerging here. On the other hand, the findings show that standards, quality requirements and educational objectives continue to be set top-down by the ministries of education, and that the actors in the VET institutions are held accountable fulfilling them. An explicit participatory design of these standards and performance targets at school level is not in the focus of the analysed policy documents.

Consequently, the findings of this study indicate that it is not the decentralisation of the understanding of quality which is in the focus of current QM systems, but the decentralisation of responsibility of predefined outcomes and the operational realisation of governmental

requirements. A shift of operational tasks from the ministries of education to the actors of the VET institutions is apparent, which in part leads to additional workload and changes in the scope of duties for pedagogical actors. Participation in shaping governance is limited. Thus, the democratising function of current governance regimes in the formal VET system of all three countries must be viewed critically. In addition, it can be seen that where the VET system is not formalised or QM is not determined by the government, a market-driven need for a QM system has evolved. Here, QM is less about accountability or democratisation and participation, but rather about customer-oriented signalling and differentiation from competitors in the market.

From an educational governance perspective, the comparison of the first findings shows that two central functions of QM are dominant in the investigated countries, depending on the existing governance regime. In the formalised VET system, the accountability and performativity function seems to be on the rise. In the non-formal VET system, the marketing function is prevalent. The function of quality development or improvement at the level of teaching and learning tends to be a secondary aspect. Due to this accentuation, there is a danger that “non-intended results” (Altrichter, 2010, p. 150) are produced in VET systems through the coordination of action, where the “pedagogical core business” (Coffield et al., 2007, p. 736) loses its attention and significance.

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