

Quality Initiatives of intermediate Institutions using the example of the IHK und HwK (Central project results)

Due to the high quality of training in companies and the resulting rapid entry into the labour market after completion of training, dual vocational training enjoys a high status in Germany. In view of demographic developments, the advancing academisation of educational pathways and other challenges, there is no question that the quality level of vocational training programmes must continue to be reliably ensured and constantly developed. Only in this way can young people continue to be convinced of the value of vocational education and training, and only in this way can companies continue to meet their demand for high-quality trained, professionally capable skilled workers.

In Germany, quality assurance and development of training is a cross-sectional task that encompasses all levels of vocational education and training. It is mainly regulated from the systemic level with the involvement of relevant actors, such as the social partners, and implemented in training practice at provider level. In this structure, however, the intermediary level in between is of central importance. In view of their legal mandate to monitor the proper implementation of training (organisation of examinations, counselling and monitoring of training companies, etc.), the chamber organisations in particular occupy a central position here for the quality assurance of training.

In addition to these quality-assuring regulatory activities, the chambers have launched a variety of special initiatives in recent years that are aimed at the additional assurance and development of training quality at company level. These offers, which deal with the topic of training quality, e.g. in the format of label and certificate programmes, training courses or series of events, have the goal of promoting the attractiveness of dual training in particular and are aimed at training companies for this purpose. Their emergence can be seen as a reaction to changes in the training market that face SMEs in particular with increasing challenges. It is true that the idea of quality assurance for the education sector in the sense of quality management systems was generally "in the air" from the 1990s onwards. However, the quality management systems that were also widely introduced in other education sectors (vocational schools, further education institutions) often proved to be inadequate for SMEs in particular or - in the case of their use - were not tailored enough to the area of training. This circumstance and the changes in the training market were the starting point and reason for those special initiatives that are offered to companies by the chambers as additional support for quality assurance.

With this study, the German Reference Point for Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training (DEQA-VET) has undertaken a first systematic stocktaking of such "quality initiatives" of the chamber organisations (Chambers of Trade and Commerce and Chambers of Crafts). The overarching aim of the study was to gain an overview of the large number and variety of initiatives. The study was particularly interested in the distribution and development of the corresponding offers, their topics, goals and designs.

In keeping with the comprehensive nature of the research project, a multi-stage, multi-method approach was chosen, which, starting with a literature search, included both an online research and a telephone survey as well as a standardised online survey of intermediate institutions. The research subject could thus be examined and analysed from different perspectives and with the inclusion of several data sources. The resulting pool of data was then evaluated qualitatively and/or quantitatively - depending on the research question - and the results from the individual research steps could be interrelated at various points. Since it became apparent at an early stage in the course

of the study that the format of award initiatives represents the most frequent, externally visible and at the same time the most elaborate form of quality initiatives, this type was analysed in the context of a special evaluation. This allowed deeper insights into this format and also overarching findings, as the corresponding award offers often also integrate training, advisory offers and tools for training practice.

Based on the large number of quality initiatives which were overall identified as well as the large number of individual research foci, questions and methods, it was possible to gain numerous individual insights into the quality initiatives of the chambers from the surveys. In summary, these findings can be condensed to the following conclusions:

- The quality initiatives that go beyond the standard activities of the chambers anchored in the BBiG have now reached a significant spread: This is reflected in the total number of 192 individual initiatives recorded, which are distributed among 100 of the 132 chambers of skilled crafts and chambers of industry and commerce and among all of the Länder (Ø 1.45 initiatives per chamber). The large number of quality initiatives documents the great commitment of the chambers in the area of quality assurance and development of in-company vocational training that goes beyond the legally defined tasks.
- According to the surveys, the chambers have been offering corresponding support formats sporadically since the 1990s. Most quality initiatives, however, have emerged since the 2010s, during the course of which the training market in more and more sectors, occupations and regions turned into a provider market. Against this background, the overarching goal of the initiatives is to actively support companies in recruiting trainees and thus in securing skilled labour. This is done under the premise of increasing the attractiveness of dual training by increasing and proving the quality of training. In this respect, the growing spread of quality initiatives can also be seen as a crisis evoked development.
- The genesis of quality initiatives is historically embedded in the emergence of quality management systems in the area of vocational education and training. While these have been comprehensively implemented in (vocational) schools and further education institutions, this is only true to a limited extent for the company as a place of learning. Particularly for small companies, quality management systems have proven to be too costly in terms of the resources required and thus not very practicable. Against the background that even small and medium-sized enterprises do not sufficiently gear quality management systems to the specific needs of quality assurance in training, the quality initiatives represent an alternative to quality management systems: Basically, many of these initiatives borrow from the principles and structural elements of quality management systems. This is expressed in the claim to deal with the issue of training quality in a systematic, structured way and in accordance with a continuous improvement process (Deming circle). In addition, some initiatives include a formalised procedure of auditing and certification. On the other hand, many quality initiatives explicitly break away from their established models in order to address the specific needs of SMEs more precisely: they are designed to be low-threshold (usually free of charge), integrate advisory services and practical working aids and are also specifically designed to meet the needs in the area of training. In contrast to more formal quality management systems, many of the quality initiatives already communicate concrete, substantively elaborated quality standards to the training practice via complemented quality criteria and assessment benchmarks. This makes it easier for companies to transfer quality assurance concepts to in-company training practice and to implement the corresponding measures and instruments.

- Despite the diversity of formats, activities and offers that can be classified as quality initiatives on the basis of the underlying definition, five main types of initiatives could be identified, each offering different approaches to quality assurance and development. They are to be understood as ideal types, which can be distinguished from each other primarily conceptually and are not empirically separable in every respect:

(1) Award initiatives

Award initiatives are characterised by the fact that companies receive awards for their efforts in the area of training quality. This takes place in the form of the awarding of prizes, placement in rankings - but above all through the awarding of labels. The spectrum here ranges from initiatives that make the efforts of training companies more visible to the outside world and are thus primarily to be located at the marketing level (summative quality assurance) to elaborate initiatives that also support companies in improving their training processes (formative quality assurance). The significant spread of award initiatives is evidence of an increased demand on the side of companies in recent years for externally visible evaluation of in-company training quality and capability. In this respect, the award initiatives supplement the training approval by the chambers, which - regulated by the BBiG - represents the legally relevant "certification" of the training competence of companies.

A historical view reveals an evolution of award initiatives: Starting with the idea of "honouring the best" and competitions, the initiatives have developed into elaborate concepts of formative quality assurance. The closed formats that emerged at an earlier point in time (a few companies are selected) attempt to set impulses for efforts to achieve good training quality by identifying individual role models. The open award initiatives that emerged later (companies actively apply), on the other hand, address the broad range of companies. They focus on quality assurance of the training process and encourage intensive self-evaluation of the quality of in-company training. Certification programmes with optional audits take up quality management logics most clearly with their certification processes, only to break away from their role models in essential points in order to meet the specific needs of SMEs.

The temporary validity of certificates and the associated recertification option reflect the basic idea of a quality development cycle and thus the maxim of a continuous effort to achieve quality (according to the Deming circle). This maxim is reflected at European level in the EQAVET framework. Further correspondences to the European requirements can be found with regard to the use of quality criteria, which in many cases can be assigned to the EQAVET indicators.

2) Training initiatives

Training initiatives include teaching-learning offers that focus on the transfer of specialised knowledge, methods and competences and thus primarily pursue an educational function. These can be lectures, seminars, trainer academies, courses and workshops, through which content and methods relating to the topic of quality of training are didactically prepared. Training initiatives are therefore a central vehicle for qualifying VET staff and thus support successful teaching-learning processes.

(3) Guidance initiatives

Within the framework of guidance initiatives, companies are supported in an advisory manner with regard to their efforts to further develop their training quality. In contrast to training initiatives, the focus is on the specific concerns of individual companies. The focus is on working out potential courses of action and practical solutions in dialogue with those responsible for training, which can then be fed into the respective company's training practice. At the same time, guidance initiatives are also a means of quality control.

(4) Networking initiatives

Networking initiatives aim at bringing different actors responsible for VET quality into dialogue with each other, so that training is perceived, coordinated and shaped as a joint task. Within the framework of networks and working groups, trainer forums and round tables, a platform is created for knowledge transfer on content-related, didactic and organisational issues of quality training design. In the sense of peer learning, the focus here is particularly on the collegial exchange of experience in dealing with practical training problems. The chambers usually assume a coordinating function in this context.

(5) Working aids

Initiatives of this type are characterised by the fact that working materials and tools that can be used in day-to-day training are created and communicated to the companies. This is intended to provide practical support for the companies' efforts in quality assurance and development. On the one hand, these can be instruments with which the quality of training can be diagnosed, training planning can be professionalised and the assessment of teaching and learning outcomes can be supported. The production and dissemination of guides on the subject of quality of training also falls under this type of quality initiative.

- Despite all the differences in approach and methodology, the various types of quality initiatives have in common that they want to promote awareness of the relevance of the topic of training quality among companies. Most initiatives also offer support for a continuous and systematic preoccupation with training quality. The formats used for this are either comprehensive in terms of content or focus on specific topics. In addition to challenges such as the integration of refugees or digitalisation, they focus above all on the qualification of training personnel. This shows that the chambers see the professionalisation and further training of training personnel as a central field of action for quality assurance of in-company training within the framework of the quality initiatives.
- The minimum standards set for quality assurance of in-company training at system level mostly concern the input and output dimensions of quality and, against the background of different company sizes and sectors, leave a great deal of scope for the implementation of in-company training processes. The quality initiatives address precisely these areas by focusing in particular on the process quality of training and taking into account the specific operational realities of SMEs. In this respect, the initiatives aim to take a look at the entire process of training design under quality assurance aspects. The corresponding quality criteria provide numerous suggestions, e.g. for proactively addressing heterogeneous applicant groups and conducting feedback procedures. The fact that the criteria are not quantifiable

indicators but predominantly qualitative descriptors reinforces the finding that the aspect of control and external evaluation is subordinated to the goals of awareness-building and the promotion of self-empowerment.

- With the quality initiatives, the chambers have thus created a complementary, innovative and multifaceted set of instruments to promote training quality, with which they support SMEs in the development of a quality culture. To this end, they do not primarily choose the means of external control and monitoring, but rather, in the sense of "empowerment", they rely on the ability as well as the intrinsic motivation of the companies to self-evaluate and optimise. The innovative content of the quality initiatives manifests itself not least in the obviously successful balancing act between the high thematic differentiation of many programmes on the one hand, which goes hand in hand with sometimes considerable demands on the companies, and on the other hand the claim to offer low-threshold programmes tailored to the needs and resources of SMEs.

The great commitment and creative ideas of the chamber organisations to additionally promote the quality of in-company training are documented in the large range and different design of the quality initiatives recorded. The vast majority of the programmes extend thematically beyond the legally regulated minimum standards and thus address the company's freedom to organise training. Quality initiatives thus offer support for successful training practice, which is particularly important for SMEs with regard to the challenge of developing and securing motivated skilled workers. The fact that the initiatives often follow on from the instruments and measures developed in the pilot project programme "Quality Development and Assurance in In-company Vocational Education and Training" and are compatible with the recommendations for action derived from it can also be seen as a positive indication of the sustainable transfer of results from pilot projects.

The overarching aim of this project was to first of all measure the distribution, design and thus relevance of the quality initiatives launched by the chambers by systematically taking stock of quality initiatives. Even if it was not possible to demonstrably fulfil the claim of a complete survey of all quality initiatives, representative results were achieved and thus, for the first time, empirical-analytical basic knowledge on the topic was presented. On the one hand, this can be disseminated and, on the other, used as a starting point for subsequent studies. Even though the present study has provided new, fundamental insights into the diversity of quality assurance approaches and instruments at the intermediary level in various respects, the crucial question of the effects, effectiveness and impact of the corresponding initiatives has remained open. To what extent and under what conditions the efforts and commitment reflected in the many quality initiatives actually have a verifiable contribution to the individual factors or fields of action of training quality (qualification of training personnel, etc.), only a few findings or conclusions can be derived from this study. In this context, there is also the question of whether the quality initiatives represent a top-down phenomenon coming from the intermediate level or whether their genesis should rather be located bottom-up, i.e. whether they were ultimately initiated by the training companies. Further research projects can tie in here. The project implementers would also be pleased if this study promoted the dissemination of the examined quality assurance approaches in in-company training in order to make a supportive contribution to their further development. At the same time, it is hoped that the project results will serve as mutual inspiration and stimulate the exchange of experiences and ideas between the providers.