

Apprenticeships in the German System

With Germany having the lowest unemployment rate within Europe, this paper will focus on examining some of the reasons behind it - one of them being how apprenticeships in Germany are so highly integrated within the system. In a world of high youth unemployment, where the supply of skilled labour often fails to match employer demand, Germany believes help can be found in its Dual Vocational Training System (TVET)—a time-tested economic model now incorporated into the Federal Republic's law. This program, many supporters believe, is the reason why Germany has the lowest jobless rate among young people of any industrialized nation in the world. Apprenticeships are an integral part of the education system in Germany, where some 60% of school leavers undertake an apprenticeship through the Dual System, that is, part time at a workplace and part time at a vocational school.

Education and training are devolved to the Länder (states within the federal system) and therefore differ from region to region, there are different pathways at secondary level and transition can take place at different ages – but the general process from school to training is relatively straightforward. Primary school pupils enter an 'orientation phase' (Orientierungstufe) at ages 11-12, where a degree of streaming is decided, usually through teacher reports in consultation with parents. A range of schools are available at lower secondary stage, where approximately a third go to grammar school (Gymnasium), a third to the less academic secondary school (Realschule) and the remaining third to a 'general' or secondary modern school (Hauptschule), which covers similar ground to the Realschule but at a slower pace, or to a comprehensive school (Gesamtschule), which combines the streams of the Gymnasium and the Realschule. At around age 15-16, around a third of pupils will be streamed towards attaining the academic qualification for entering university (Abitur), mostly from a Gymnasium or Gesamtschule, while the remaining two thirds will undergo some form of vocational study, most in the Dual System (Duale Berufsbildung), which combines study at a vocational school and an apprenticeship at a place of work.

The system is established in statute, the Vocational Training Act (Berufsbildungsgesetz) 1969.

Finding employment without having completed an apprenticeship is almost impossible. For some particular technical university professions, such as food technology, a completed apprenticeship is often recommended; for some, such as marine engineering it may even be mandatory.

In Germany, there are roughly 350 recognized trades (Ausbildungsberufe) where an apprenticeship can be completed. They include for example doctor's assistant, banker, dispensing optician, plumber or oven builder. The dual system means that apprentices spend about 50-70% of their time in companies and the rest in formal education. Depending on the profession, they may work for three to four days a week in the company and then spend one or two days at a vocational school (Berufsschule). This is usually the case for trade and craftspeople. For other professions, usually which require more theoretical learning, the working and school times take place block wise e.g. in a 12–18 weeks interval.

In 2001, two thirds of young people aged under 22 began an apprenticeship, and 78% of them completed it. One in three companies offered apprenticeships in 2003, and in 2004 the

government signed a pledge with industrial unions that all companies except very small ones must take on apprentices.

Advantages of the Dual System

The German Federal Government promotes the system of vocational education and training as a key factor in maintaining youth unemployment at the lowest in Europe. Indeed, observers have noted significant advantages to the system, including the following:

- A job is available for every young person enrolled in an apprenticeship contract
- Trainees know what they are getting into in the workplace.
- Trainees gain qualifications while being socialised into the work environment.
- Employers gain an appropriately trained person at relatively low cost, whose competencies and productivity increase over time.
- The vocational training is specific to a job, whereas many leaving university with a degree do so with uncertain prospects.

The duration of an apprenticeship in Germany in comparison to other countries reflects in increased confidence for students to follow this path. Leonardo Duricic, Chief Technical Officer for C. Bechstein, which has been making pianos in Germany since 1853, quoted: "In the apprenticeship which is three-and-a half years you learn practical work which is about eight to nine months of the year". According to figures from the Federal Statistical Office (Statistisches Bundesamt, Destatis), about 8% of individual apprenticeship contracts signed in 2005 included a two-year training period, 71% set a three-year training period and about 21% spanned over 42 months of training.

Competition for apprenticeships in Germany is strong. Unlike in the UK, there is not the same sense of them being a last resort. A survey in 2008 by the City and Guilds Centre for Skills Development found that vocational education has a higher public esteem in Germany than in any of the other countries covered. In Germany, it was rated 8 out of 10. In the UK, it scored just 6. The consistent quality of Germany's vocational training means a large proportion of the country's school graduates do not give university much thought. In 2011, 570,000 signed up for new vocational apprenticeships, compared with only 520,000 university enrolments.

Within some apprenticeships in certain sectors, students can earn 1,200 Euros per month.

With on the job learning, high salaries, and a credible system, it is no wonder apprenticeships are highly valued by all members of society in Germany. With the lowest unemployment rate in EU, Germany is most undoubtedly a world economic model to follow and take inspiration from.