

“Dual Learning” Combining Practice-Orientated and Theoretical Learning in Higher Education

Organised by the Permanent Representation of Germany to the EU and the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) on Monday, 20th April 2015 in Brussels

Summary of workshop discussions/proceedings

On 20 April 2015 37 participants from 13 different EU Member States (representatives from ministries, permanent representations and stakeholder organisations) as well as EU institutions (European Commission, European Parliament) came together to discuss different models of “dual learning” (= combining practice orientated and theoretical learning) in higher education. A specific emphasis was laid on the German model of “**dual study programmes**” that combines a higher education degree with elements of vocational training.

Background

The seminar was organised against the background of current high levels of youth unemployment in many European countries, by which also higher education graduates are affected. This is often coupled with a shortage of qualified workers. The situation calls for an enhanced cooperation between higher education institutions and companies/employers. At the same time, companies increasingly show willingness to invest in their future employees. The provision of study programmes that combine elements of theoretical learning at universities with practical training in companies can help make sure that graduates are equipped with the skills required on the labour market. European countries currently offer different forms of “dual learning” in higher education and can therefore learn from experiences made.

Objective

The workshop’s aim was to exchange information on “dual learning” programmes in higher education in European countries; identify good practice as well as to discuss the potential of developing a “dual learning” approach in interested European countries where similar study forms are currently not existing.

Inputⁱ

Representatives from **Germany, Romania, Croatia and Hungary** provided input on different forms of “dual learning” in higher education in their respective countries. The presentations showed that there are several ways to link practice and theory: ranging from the integration of internships, a work-based semester, writing a thesis at a company to programmes that combine a higher education degree with vocational training, such as provided in many “dual study programmes” in Germany. Students of dual study programmes are learning and working in parallel at two institutions, the university and the company, and receive in some cases even two degrees, a university degree (Bachelor or Master) and a recognised vocational training degree. Hungary has adopted a similar approach to Germany, which is however adapted to the national situation. For example, Hungary has

made provisions for facilitating the participation of small and medium sized companies in dual study programmes. In Croatia professional studies, mainly provided at polytechnics, provide for more practice-based higher education. Students are provided with ECTS credits for practical training that is mandatory within the study programme. Croatia is currently looking to further develop this approach with support of the European Social Fund. Romania has passed a law that allows practitioners to teach at higher education institutions and is providing a wide-range of options, such as internships and the development of thesis at companies to allow students practical training. Specific professional master programmes have been set-up in cooperation with companies.

Jochen Goeser from the **University of Applied Sciences Aachen** and Prof. Dr. Bartz-Beilstein from the **University of Applied Sciences Cologne** both in Germany presented concrete examples of how theory and practice can be combined. In the example of Aachen students are following a classic “dual study programme”. The programme alternates between study phases at university and practical training in companies, especially foreseen for semester breaks and when students are working on their BA thesis. The workload for these students is particularly high. They are, however, compensated, for example by a salary paid by employers and excellent job prospects after graduation. The example from Cologne showed how practice and theory can be combined in a more flexible way, such as through project work with industry, internships and close cooperation with companies in all study phases.

The view of employers was presented by Christian Hoffelder of **Siemens AG**. He made clear that is in the interest of companies to invest in education as they need the best talent to preserve their position on the market. Siemens is active in many dual study programmes around Germany. Graduates from these programmes are already trained on the job and can therefore contribute immediately to productivity when starting the employment. It is in the interest of the company to take on as many of the graduates of dual study programmes as possible.

Peter Baur of the **European Commission** presented EU policy relating to the seminar topic. He referred to the modernisation agenda of higher education adopted by the Council already in 2011 as well as to the knowledge triangle linking higher education, research and business. Many of the EU funding programmes, such as Erasmus+ and Horizon 2020, support closer cooperation between business and higher education institutions. The “Knowledge Alliances” as well as the “Prospective Initiatives” under Erasmus+ were mentioned in particular. The latter programme is directed at ministries and public bodies of EU Member States to support them in implementing innovative policy measures.

The DAAD has observed in the last years an increasing interest from its international partners in the dual study programmes in Germany. Against this background DAAD has commissioned a study on (among others) the potential of transferring the system of dual study programmes to interested countries. Katharina Maschke from DAAD presented five success factors that the authors of the study identified for a successful transfer of the dual studying model:

- i) Understanding of dual educational models
- ii) Governance of education policy in the target country
- iii) Existing exchange and partnership relations
- iv) Economic structure
- v) Interest of all actors involved

Main outcomes of discussion:

- In future, more jobs will require a higher education qualification, but graduates need to be equipped with more practical training and soft skills in order to respond to the expectations of employers. Dual study programmes or others formats integrating practical training in higher education can respond to this demand.
- The integration of practical training in higher education should follow a flexible approach and can be done through many different formats, ranging from internships, summer courses, practical training in companies to full two-way degree programmes, such as in many German dual study programmes.
- There is a particular need for closer integration of practical and theoretical elements in order to match learning outcomes at both places of learning (company and higher education institution). This should be taken into account in the design of studying programmes.
- The integration of practical elements in higher education and the cooperation with business should not stop at BA or MA level, but should also include cooperation on research projects and PhD training.
- In many countries vocational training has a low reputation. Dual study programmes, however, attract many students – often the best-performers.
- There is no “one size fits all” model. A potential transfer of dual study programmes to interested countries needs to be adapted to the particular national and local context.
- There is an interest for further exchange on experiences and good-practice among European countries, respectively in the implementation of this policy approach that can be done, for example, through EU funding programmes.

ⁱ Please note that all presentations are available on bruessel.daad.de