

Virtù e limiti del sistema duale tedesco

Intervista a Hans-Peter Blossfeld¹

di **Daniele Checchi**

D.C. Also thanks to your studies, in Italy many scholars refer to the German dual model as a benchmark for Italy because its expected advantages: a) reduced dropout rates from secondary school, which translate into higher educational attainment (at least according to the Lisbon targets); b) quicker transition to the labour market and lower youth unemployment rates. This is confirmed by looking at the final distribution of educational attainment. As a consequence, would you advise Italian policy makers to improve the Italian tracking system in order to make it more 'German-like' ?

H.P.B. The German vocational system has some strength, the main one being that young people – in addition to vocational training in part-time schools – get real work experiences at the workplace. These dual experiences are the reasons why the German vocational training is called Dual System. Based on this work experience, potential employers get to know their young apprentices very well and very often appreciate the individual capabilities, motivation and skills

Daniele Checchi, *Dipartimento di economia, management e metodi quantitativi, Università degli studi di Milano*,
daniele.checchi@gmail.com

¹ Hans-Peter Blossfeld, attualmente all'Istituto Universitario Europeo di Firenze (*Dipartimento di scienze politiche e sociali*, HP.Blossfeld@EUI.eu) ha diretto lo *State Institute for Family Research* (IFB) all'Università di Bamberg (2003-2012) e l'*Institute of Longitudinal Studies in Education* (INBIL). Blossfeld ha concepito, fondato e poi diretto il *National Educational Panel Study* (NEPS), in Germania. È un membro eletto della *National Academy of Sciences* (Leopoldina), in Germania, dell'Accademia di Berlino-Brandeburgo delle Scienze (BBAW), dell'Accademia Bavarese delle Scienze (BAW) e dell'Accademia Europea di Sociologia. Dal 2004 al 2009 è stato Presidente dell'European Consortium for Sociological Research (ECSR). Ha pubblicato 35 libri e oltre 240 articoli sulle ricerche longitudinali e il corso di vita, sulle disuguaglianze sociali e il mercato del lavoro, sulla stratificazione sociale e la mobilità, sui moderni metodi di ricerca sociale quantitativa e sulla sociologia dell'educazione. È in qualità di esperto dei sistemi educativi che è stato intervistato da Daniele Checchi.

of these young people and therefore want to employ them in the firm after the end of vocational training. Thus, the vocational training system in Germany serves as a bridge or a stepping stone to the labour market so that the youth unemployment is very low in Germany. However, the vocational training system in Germany is also confronted with problems today. The main problem derives from educational expansion. It means that more and more gifted young people do not opt for vocational training but go directly to secondary schools leading to universities. Thus, these competent young people, who have been the backbone of the success of the German vocational training system, are increasingly lost for vocational training. On the other side, the German vocational training system defines high admission requirements for people with low competences, e.g. measured in studies such as PISA. Thus, since more than 10 years ago, the German government has introduced preparatory courses for admission to the vocational track. But it turns out that these courses are to a large extent dead-end roads for low-qualified youngsters instead of an opportunity to enter vocational training. Therefore, a huge proportion of each birth cohort does not complete vocational training. They are unskilled.

The problem of these people is that the German labour market is based on the certification of competences, and the vocational system is organised towards this goal. For this reason, those who did not enter vocational training or did not complete a vocational training certificate, are permanently excluded from good, well-paying jobs. These unskilled are at a high risk of permanent or recurrent unemployment, low wages and they end to be strongly dependent on welfare support over their whole life course.

Finally, the admission requirements to vocational training change over the business cycle. In recession years (like the 2000s in Germany) admission requirements have been rising and many young people have been excluded from vocational training. However, in booming years (like the current ones) admission requirements are step by step lowered in order to get apprentices from the pool of NEET (*not in employment, education or training*). In other words, there are lucky and unlucky generations in the German Dual System.

D.C. Some scholars (for example Ludger Wössman) claim that the virtues of the German system are bought at the cost of lower accumulation of competences and increased dispersion of achievements. Do you think that these costs are unavoidable, given the

tracked nature of the secondary (and even tertiary) educational system? Is there any possibility to attenuate these shortcomings?

H.P.B. The German education system is often depicted as being very rigid and tracked, but this has changed drastically over the last 20 years, especially with regard to access to the tertiary level. The German system exhibits much more flexibility than many people would expect. For example, 40% of the people starting the tertiary level do not come from the traditional Gymnasium (upper secondary school) anymore. They come via very different educational pathways, via vocational tracks. In addition, since the early 2000s we observe a drastically rising heterogeneity of school structures and school transitions at the Länder level. Each Land is reforming its secondary school system in a different direction. This has created a new sort of ‘school choice’ problem for parents, if families are mobile across the borders of the Länder. Parents may also move from one Land to another in order to gain qualifications that may be not achievable in their original Land. Unfortunately, data on these new movements are not yet available, but some local studies (like in Bavaria) point in that direction.

D.C. Some scholars describe as a positive spill-over of the German model the reduced wage inequality within occupations. Do you share the view that the German model yields more equality at each educational level? In addition, in case of positive answer, which is in your view the right sequence of implementation: make the labour market more similar to the German legislation (the Hartz IV reforms) and the educational system will then follow, or at the opposite, reform first the school system, and the labour market will adapt?

H.P.B. The German educational system is well known for its high average wage differentials across educational levels and its low wage dispersion within each educational or occupational level. There are only few other industrialized countries where higher education leads to higher wage gains than the German one. The reason is that at each level only the individuals with the respective certificates compete with each other (credentialism). Thus, lower competition at each level leads to higher wages and therefore greater differences between the qualified (i.e. graduates from the vocational track) and the unskilled workers. At the same time, at each educational level or occupation, there are collective agreements regarding the wages. So, individual wage negotiations are rare. This leads at each level to a reduced wage inequality.

I think that changes in the educational system have consequences for the labour market and vice versa. Labour market and educational reforms will affect each other. There is no one-way road here. However, the set of crucial qualifications changes rapidly in modern societies. The German system does certainly have a problem to adapting the contents of the training to the requirement of modern technology. The consensual organisation of the system requires that contents of the training be discussed and negotiated between the employer organizations, workers unions and representatives of the state, which typically tends to last long. This negotiations are often against excess of specialisation in order to favour workers mobility across sectors. This often makes the German system less adaptable to the rapid changes of the technologies. But thanks to the several hundred year old cooperative nature of the Dual System, each employer is aware that he/she is training a worker not only for his firm, but potentially also for the entire economic system. This works only if all firms/companies are part of the system and contribute to this system. The competences created in this kind of training process become competences for the German economic system as a whole. As in gigantic public good game, despite the incentive to free riding, each employer actually contributes to its production. However, if we think of transferring the German system to another country, e.g., Italy, the biggest danger is free riding in the initial phase. If among companies there is no culture of simply contributing to the joint vocational training system, the incentive of free riding is high and that would destroy the success of such a reform. This is a central difference with liberal economies, where it has often been noticed that vocational training is limited by the 'cherry picking' attitude of local employers, who prefer to steal trained workers from their competitors.