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Presseinformation

GERMAN ECONOMIC SUCCESS: THE ROLE OF EDUCATION

The fundamental character and spirit of a country is reflected in its education, which in turn depends upon its schooling system. Every element of a school should develop cognitive and practical skills, achieved through a unique and well-defined curriculum, as well as a strong emphasis on “learning beyond the classroom”.

In a world of globalization education has assumed a paramount role, especially in the days of economic crisis. Europe is reeling under economic recession but the powerhouse of Europe, Germany, stands apart, able (if not necessarily always willing), to lend a helping hand to its more debt-ridden neighbours.

Dynamic economy – Educational enterprise

Education and economy go hand in hand. An in-depth analysis of the German educational system can help to provide answers as to why the economy here is relatively robust. How is this? Basically, there are two main branches that drive economic development - the manufacturing sector and the service sector. Thus, the German education system is a platform which produces highly skilled workers to meet the needs of the nation’s long-established, mighty manufacturing base. This, in turn, has led to Germany being the world’s second largest exporter. But a small gap still exists in the value-added part of the chain, i.e., in the service sector. If this piece can be taken care of, then the German education system could be a real champion in the making.

From the global perspective; the main differences between the German education system and the North American and Anglo-Saxon systems are at the high school level. In both the UK and USA, the service sector plays a greater role; with the orientation of education in that direction. But the German education system tends towards the more hands on, practically oriented experience. Germany, the land of poets and thinkers with a tradition of innovation in industry, is strengthened by a long tradition of craft and trade, brimming with enthusiasm and a radiant dynamism.

The German Education System

I would like to present the two facets of the German education system: the public and private sectors. Interestingly, the public system is under the aegis of respective states (Länder) and federal governments have a nominal role. Private schools are mostly represented by international schools, alongside others like the Waldorf and Montessori systems at a lower level. To understand the system more fully, I visited some local institutions, i.e., a Gymnasium, a Berufsschule and the Leipzig International School. It was interesting to hear an overview of the general structure of the school system from Dipl. Ingr. Wolfgang Walter, Bau und Schulamtsleiter at Stadtwerke Schkeuditz. I also had the pleasure of meeting different school personnel from Schkeuditz, including the headmaster of the Gymnasium, Mr. Herr Jürgen Melzer, who explained the entrance process from Grundschule to Gymnasium and the process of academic evaluation at grade 4.

The structure of the Education system in Germany can be represented in the following schematic diagram. Preschool i.e., Kindergarten, is attended by children aged between 3 and 6 which is optional and not a part of the school system.

Overview of the German education system: DIAGRAM

In Germany schooling is compulsory and all children start school at the age of 6 and attend elementary school, or Grundschule. By the age of 10 they are streamed into 4 different types of what we will call secondary school. The entire system is based on tracking, the ultimate goal being to prepare the students for a particular kind of job. The advantage is that students will earn relatively high wages even if they graduate from a more vocational type of school. In this part of the world, this idea of the dignity of labour still exists and there is less stigma attached to vocational training and attending technical college, or Berufsschule. The students are evaluated at grade 4 for the next level of schooling (the orientation grades); which path the student follows is based on ability, speed of learning, intelligence and preference – or, in other words, academic talent. The students in the lower tracks will end up at a vocational school where they will receive training and do apprenticeships for their respective trades. The remaining one third will have the opportunity to apply for university or other professional colleges. Certificates are very much part of the German culture and nowhere are credentials as important as in this country, at every academic level.

Hauptschule (Grade 5 to 9): One third of students attend high school, receiving the same basic education as the other secondary schools but at a slower pace, normally following on with “hands on experience” at a vocational school and practical training, either full time or part-time, until the age of 18.

Realschule (grade 5 to 10 in most states): Catering full time or part-time for vocational training. At these institutions it is also possible for high achieving students to switch over to the Gymnasium after completing grade 10.

Apart from these two main options, there are also specialised schools for those with learning difficulties which also lead to certificates of secondary education, or CSEs (Hauptschulabschluss).

Gymnasium (grade 5 to 12/13 in most states): These are the schools for more academically-minded children and almost one third of the students are enrolled at these types of schools, which lead to university or a combination of academic courses and vocational credits. Abitur is the exit exam, similar to British A Levels.

Berufsschule: Dual training system

To understand the structure of these vocational training colleges, I met up with Dipl. Ingr. Dietrich Lehne who heads the “Berufliches Schulzentrum BSZ Schkeuditz”. He explained the application process and the intensive training imparted over the three years of study. A professional approach is taken to carry out a work-integrated learning program, with a work related learning methodology, where the IHK (Industrie - und Handelskammer) also plays a prominent role. Emphasis is on both theoretical and social competence, opening up opportunities for leading positions within a hierarchical structure. There are 365 officially recognised trades (i.e., requiring professional training) but to mention just a few: Tischler (carpenter/joiner), Lagerlogistic (warehouse logistics), Fahrbetrieb (Vehicle operation), Friseur/in (hairstylist): which reminds me of an article in The Economist – describing that the result of dual training provides superior German quality in haircuts, as well as in cars. The real winners of such a training program, however, can be seen in the small-scale family businesses – the backbone of the German economy. Dietrich Lehne also shed light on the practice wherein vocational schools provide small and medium-sized companies with the opportunity of recruiting qualified staff - interlinking theory with practice. In his words, “German skilled workers are at least as good as English Bachelor graduates”.

In order to get an impression of the education system during the GDR, I spoke briefly with Ms. Gabriele Unger who teaches at Leipzig’s Volkshochschule. ‘Pioneernachmittag’ was an interesting feature of GDR schooling, which helped students with scientific disciplines, but which, at the same time, also fed them with political ideology. In her opinion, individual personal development was a positive character in the West German system which was not emphasized in the GDR – which was, of course, more community oriented.

Private participation: International Schools: Finally, to understand the private sector, I had a chance to take a tour of the Leipzig International School courtesy of Ms. Liane Lindenlaub and Ms. Doris Dinkel. The Secondary Principal, Mr. Matthew Raggett, explained the significant features of the curriculum and the International Baccalaureate (IB). It was interesting to note that though the main intention of the school was to cater to the educational needs of the international community, many German parents prefer to send their children to LIS to be immersed in a more international community. In this context, Mr. Raggett explained the adaptability of the IB programme to the local system of higher education, to ensure entry into universities or vocational colleges. There is a great emphasis not only on curricular activities, but also on extracurricular activities and with 56 nationalities, and a total strength of 750 students in the campus covering nursery to high school, LIS is truly international.

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Paradigm Shift: Successful formula

At this crucial juncture, the international schooling system in Germany could play a pivotal role in bridging the gap of the much needed 'higher value-added potential of the service sector' with its international curriculum i.e., IB and IGSCE, in conjunction with the already existing, well structured German education system. It is important to realize that there will always be limits in adding value to manufacturing and that in order to move up the ladder it is mandatory to also have a strong position in the service sector. This approach would involve the development of skills in posing and framing problems, which tend to be complex and multidisciplinary and can only be addressed at a global level. So, if Germany can step outside its rigid schooling system and at least partially accommodate an international curriculum, such a system would dexterously fit into the current context of globalization. If not, then private schools with an international curriculum should be encouraged to exist alongside the state sponsored schools. Perhaps the future path of this more comprehensive model could be considered and the 'soft skills' accordingly developed into the curriculum. Such a revitalization of the educational landscape could lead to a more global model, taking into account different inclinations, talents and the pleasures of discovery and learning. Other parts of the world could then look to Germany for inspiration, if not to imitate or emulate. The end result would be a progressive economy with a brand image of 'Made in Germany'.

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"German skilled workers are at least as good as English Bachelor graduates".

By Christina Nielsen-Marsh

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