



ReSeCo

RETAIL SECTOR COMPETENCIES



Working Paper 4

Retail Sector Context – GERMANY

Universität zu Köln
Lehrstuhl für Wirtschafts- und Sozialpädagogik
Venloer Straße 151-153
D-50672 Köln

Author:

Sabrina Theis
Lehrstuhl für Wirtschafts- und Sozialpädagogik
Venloer Str. 151-153, 50672 Köln
Tel: +49-221-470-5899
Sabrina.Theis@uni-koeln.de

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1. Introduction

The apprenticeship system in Germany

In Germany, the high importance of the dual vocational training system is unanimously agreed in the vocational training policy area. Despite the global financial and economic crisis, the training situation for young people in Germany has continued to improve. It is attractive, provides high quality professional skills and qualifications. Furthermore, there are high rates of transition into the labour market and with a rate of 5.5 percent in May 2012 (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2012), a comparatively low level of youth unemployment (Federal Ministry of Education and Research, 2011).

But what exactly is behind the vocational training system in Germany? Vocational education and training takes place in Germany within the dual system. Due to the fact that education and training is provided in a company as well as at part-time vocational school, it is called “*dual*”. Thus, it is possible for the trainees to acquire practical skills in a real working environment and learn general and vocational knowledge related to their training occupation (Hippach-Schneider, 2007).

The duration of training is generally between two and three years. The aim of the dual system is to provide a broad basis of vocational education as well as qualifications and skills, which are necessary to carry out a qualified occupation in an ongoing changing world. The successful completing of the traineeship entitles the young people to practice an occupation as a qualified skilled worker in one of the currently around 350 recognized training occupations (Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training, 2011; Hippach-Schneider 2007).

Before starting a traineeship, full-time compulsory education has to be fulfilled. In order to enter the dual system, there are no other formal entrance requirements. It is generally open to everyone. However, the majority of the trainees have an intermediate or upper secondary school leaving certification (Hippach-Schneider, 2007).

The dual system has become increasingly important within the secondary sector. Currently, approximately two thirds of an age cohort learns a recognized training occupation within the dual vocational training system. Figure 1 emphasizes this large field of education at upper secondary level in Germany (Höckel und Schwartz, 2010).

Moreover, in Germany a close relationship between technical training and professional application exists. This fact is reinforced by the existing job concept in Germany, which is built on a concept of work and training, in terms of structural integrity and consistency of the qualification certification process. Therefore, an early professional qualification is highly valued in the Federal Republic of Germany (Deißinger, 1996; Ryan, 2003).

Beside all these outstanding facts, there are problems in the transition from the vocational training to the employment system. Potential employers bemoan a lack of educational maturity, both in terms of technical skills and in terms of *personal* and *social* skills. This development leads to the situation that trainees, who are right before the entry into professional life, are not employed on a permanent basis after they have finished their apprenticeship despite a high labour demand by enterprises.

Therefore it is essential to gain the greatest possible fit of vocational education of young people in the field of key competencies to the current requirements of the job market. This can be achieved within the vocational training system by providing an adequate preparation and support regarding personal and social skills.

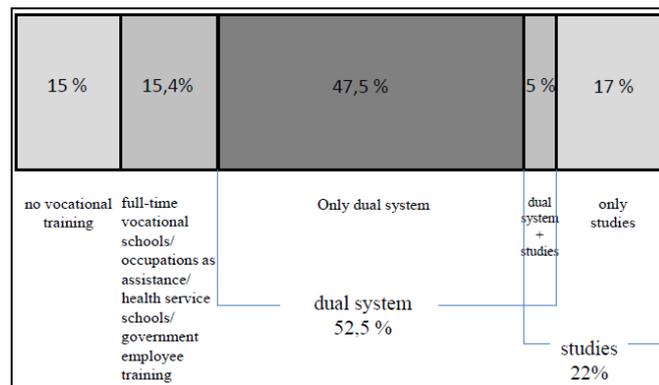


Fig. 1 Cohort structure by type of qualification
 (Source: own illustration on the basis of BIBB, 2006)

The retail labour market

The retail sector remains an engine of the labour market in Germany. With 400,000 businesses, an annual turnover of 414.4 billion Euro, 2.9 million employees and 160,000 apprentices, the German retail sector represents the third largest sector. The transaction volume of the retail sector accounts for 16 percent of the gross domestic product of Germany (HDE, 2012a).

The German retail companies are investing intensely into their employees. With annually around 60,000 new apprenticeship contracts in the retail sector and an above-average training rate of over 7%, the retail sector is an important factor for vocational training in Germany. Some retail businesses even reach an apprenticeship ratio of around 15% (HDE, 2012b).

It is remarkable that the proportion of retail employees with a professional vocational qualification is significantly higher than in the overall economy (81.0% to 73.2%). In return, the degree of academization drops intensely in the retail sector: While the percentage of the workforce that has a tertiary school leaving certificate amounts to only 2.7% in the retail sector, on a macroeconomic level this percentage is considerably higher at 10.1% (HDE, 2005).

Despite a low academization rate, Fig. 2 emphasizes a generally high rate of qualified, skilled workers within the retail sector in comparison to the overall economy. For this reason, the sector seems to be highly structured in regard to vocational qualifications.

	Retail sector	Overall economy
Without completed apprenticeship	16,3%	16,7%
With completed apprenticeship	81,0%	73,2%
Tertiary education certification	2,7%	10,1%
Total	100%	100%

Fig. 2 Structure of qualifications in the retail sector compared to the overall economy

(Source: own illustration on the basis of IAT, 2005)

In addition to that, the German institute for work and technology (IAT) found out that an activity, which is carried out without a qualified vocational education, has a higher labour

turnover rate than an activity that is carried out by skilled, qualified workers. Therefore it seems that there exists a fluctuating boundary area with instable occupational relationships next to a stable core of qualified workers. In order to reduce the labour turnover rate, companies are advised to train young people even more (Kalina/Voss-Dahm, 2005).

Governance

In Germany, the responsibilities of the vocational training system are very complex. As already explained, it is a dual system, where vocational schools as well as training enterprises take part. Thereby, the state's functions are shared out between the Federal Government and 16 "Länder". Figure 3 gives an overview of the responsibilities in the field of vocational training.

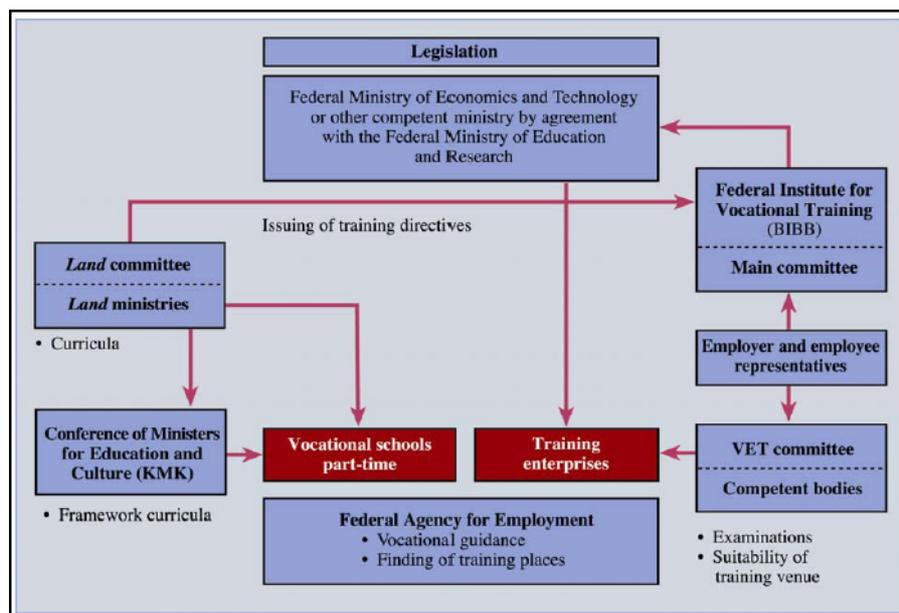


Fig. 3 Responsibilities in the field of vocational training

(Source: Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training, 2006)

The *Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF)* is the guiding and coordinating ministry on the federal level. It is responsible for in-company and non-school vocational education and training as well as for the general coordination, like the central management of the Vocational Education and Training Act or the responsibility for fundamental issues of VET policy. In addition to that, only by agreement of the BMBF, new training directives can be adopted within the vocational training system in Germany (Hippach-Schneider et al, 2007).

Another relevant federal institution is the *Federal Institute for Vocational Training (BIBB)*, which enacts regulations as well, but is subject to the legal supervision of the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF). The BIBB is an institution in which representatives of employers, unions, the “Länder” and the federal government are working and coordinating together. Its research, development and advisory work is focused at identifying future tasks of vocational education and training, promoting innovation in national and international context and developing new, practice-oriented solutions for initial and continuing vocational education and training. Training directives are also prepared by the BIBB and submitted for approval to the BMBF (Hippach-Schneider et al., 2007; Federal Ministry of Education and Research, 2003).

Whereas the Federal Government is responsible for regulating training in **companies**, the “Länder” are responsible for vocational training in **schools**. For this reason, all legislation of vocational schools is called “*Land legislation*”. *The Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Länder in the Federal Republic of Germany (KMK)* (abbr.: *Standing Conference*), a national body of “Länder” ministers and senators, is an important institution working to harmonise education policies for vocational schools in the 16 “Länder” of Germany. It is responsible for education and training, higher education and research and cultural affairs. In addition to that, it emits framework curricula for vocational education at vocational schools, which are balanced with the Federal Government’s training directives by the BMBF (Federal Ministry of Education and Research, 2003; Hippach-Schneider, 2007).

On a regional level, social partners like the *chamber of industry and commerce* or *craft chambers* have important responsibilities as well. The various chambers are in charge of consulting and monitoring companies, which offer training vacancies within their district. Furthermore, they analyse the suitability of these companies as training facilities as well as the ability of their training supervisors. Aside this, the chambers register trainees, certify supervisors’ ability, accept examinations and carry out the social dialogue at the regional level (Federal Ministry of Education and Research, 2003; Hippach-Schneider, 2007).

The negotiations about the offer of training places as well as the collective agreement on salary of training take place on a sectoral level, whereas the planning and implementation of training in companies is carried out on a company level (Hippach-Schneider, 2007).

Qualifications

The official description of the field of activity of the state-recognized training occupation “management assistant for retail services” reads as follows:

“Management assistants for retail services work in trade enterprises of different sizes, types and goods assortments, or may run a business of their own.

Sales activities form the focal point of the commercial tasks they perform. They also control product and data flow in assisted-service and self-service enterprises. Further areas of activity include product management, product range development, marketing, trade logistics, procurement and acceptance of products, accounting, human resources management, controlling and e-commerce.” (Nationales Europass Center, 2002).

The entry requirements are not arranged by legislation. Normally, young people are permitted after completing the general education. Nevertheless, there are some key aspects on the part of the companies, which are seen as necessary for school leavers wanting to enter retail. Next to sociableness, friendly appearance and openness for new things, retail companies attach importance that applicants have an easygoing appearance, enjoy customer services and are service and team oriented. Basic competences like basic arithmetic operations (incl. rule of proportion and percentage calculation) and the German language are very important aspects as well. In addition to that, companies attach importance to a willingness of mobility, flexibility and lifelong learning (Stellenreport, 2012).

However, the mechanisms for assessment are very different and depend on the particular company. Big retail companies, like for example ALDI, REWE, etc., have implemented assessment centres. Other enterprises have put into practice only personal interviews. Basis for the invitation to an assessment centre or to an interview are the grades of the elementary school. But even here, there are different terms of reference, when an applicant is invited to an interview (Stellenreport, 2012).

The training is provided within three years in a retail company as well as at part-time vocational school. During the apprenticeship, management assistants for retail services should learn how to sell goods and services and how to operate the till and calculate the till balance. Next to this, they should be able to use the learned product knowledge in order to inform and advice customers as well as provide them a good service. Within the training, the trainees assist in developing the product range and are involved in sales promotion activities, in the company's logistics processes, in planning and organizing work processes as well as

in accepting and checking products. In addition to that, the young people should know how to arrange and present goods in the sales area, how to check and maintain product stocks and how to label and store products. Furthermore, they should be able to determine which and how many products are needed, procure goods and plan staff assignment in their own field of activity. Moreover, it is essential that the apprentices are able to work in a team and how to use their customer service skills in a customer and process-oriented way. Finally, it is important that they know how to analyse sales statistics in order to monitor success and use this information to develop measures (Nationales Europass Center, 2002).

In order to pass the final examination in the training occupation “management assistant for retail services”, apprentices have to complete the dual training in a retail company as well as the part-time vocational school. Thereby they need a minimum of 50 grade points out of a total of 100 reachable points in the final examination, which is carried out by the chamber of industry.

The German education system is based on qualifications. Here, each educational institution a person attends normally determines what subsequent education proposals he or she may pursue on the next higher level. The International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) by UNESCO developed a classification and characterization of school types and school systems. Thereby it classifies the level of the certificate “management assistant for retail services” into level 3B, which means that it allows working in a specific working field. Furthermore, it allows access to the next level of education like for example a certified senior commercial clerk, a certified commercial assistant or a trade economist (Federal Ministry of Education and Research, 2003; Nationales Europass Center, 2002).

In addition to this, the German qualification framework (DQR) is a translation tool that allows assigning all skills and qualifications, which are acquired in Germany, to the eight levels of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF). This improves the comparability of qualifications within Europe and increases the mobility of students and employees. The DQR tries to reflect all educational, academic, vocational and other qualifications and thereby provides a framework for lifelong learning. The training occupation “management assistant for retail services”, which enfolds three years of apprenticeship, is classified to level 4 in the DQR (BMBF/KMK, 2012).

Delivery of apprenticeship

The retail sector in Germany presents itself with a wide, constantly renewed range of goods - from fashion items to glass, porcelain, ceramics, jewellery and cosmetics, technical consumer goods, including entertainment and communication electronics, food and furniture and hobby needs. These products are offered, presented and sold from special stores, hypermarkets, supermarkets, department stores, boutiques, mail order companies or internet retailers. All these enterprises offer training places in the retail sector, which emphasizes the wide range of it (Stellenreport, 2012).

All companies sign contracts with the trainees, in which they engage themselves to provide professional competences for the relevant training occupation to the young people, which are listed in the training directive by the BMBF. Due to the binding requirements of the training directives, a unique national standard can be guaranteed independent of current company needs. The training may only take place in companies in which the required qualifications of the training directive can be arranged. Therefore, it is essential that the training supervisors are appropriate both personally and in terms of specialised knowledge.

Each company creates a training plan for the apprentices. This plan has to match with the training directive of the BMBF in terms of its practical and time structure, so that uniqueness can be guaranteed within the retail sector. Nevertheless, a small deviation is allowed if a specific aspect of enterprise practice requires this and remaining training content can be implemented as agreed.

The remarkable aspect concerning the delivery of an apprenticeship within the dual vocational training system in Germany is that both the enterprises as well as the government strive for an equal execution across all delivering retail companies. Despite the wide range of companies who offer apprenticeships, the procedure, the contents as well as the learned skills are nearly uniform everywhere in Germany.

In order to improve the apprenticeship within the retail sector, the project "EuCoCo – European Commerce Competence", which is promoted by the *European Union* and organised by *Lindenstraße vocational college ("Berufskolleg an der Lindenstraße" BKaL)* in Cologne/Germany, has developed a qualification system, which should support the delivery of apprenticeship within the retail sector (Beirat Schule und Wirtschaft am Berufskolleg an der Lindenstraße e.V., 2012).

EuCoCo includes a qualification by means of e-learning programs with six modules on the value-added chain in the retail sector. This generates many advantages for the retailing operations. It relieves supervisors of instruction and training tasks and therefore saves time. It enables a uniform level of knowledge and guarantees varied and effective learning. In addition to that, the learner has to do a work placement in commerce, which gives learners the opportunity to apply their theoretically acquired knowledge to general trading practice. Finally, the learner has to solve a complex, situational practical exercise as well as an oral exam in order to get the certification “EuCoCo”.

The certificate is evidence that the competence level of apprentices or employees are in accordance with the standards of the European Commerce Competence project. This increases the market value and clearly sets the apprentices/employees apart from other employees.

The official retail partners of the qualification and certification program by Lindenstraße vocational college are METRO Group and REWE Group.

Another research project called “Flexible Learning” also tries to improve the delivery of apprenticeship both for the learner and for the enterprises. The project is organised by “Zentralstelle für Berufsbildung im Einzelhandel e.V. (zbb)” and supported by “Handelsverband Deutschland (HDE)”, Ver.di and the Federal Institute for Vocational Training (BIBB). The aim is to meet current challenges within the retail sector and improve the flexibility of educational processes. *Flexible learning* tries to offer learners and/or companies a flexible, manageable range of training opportunities that meet the individual, corporate and social objectives and with which specific requirements can be met as optimally and effectively as possible.

The selection refers to all components of the educational process: from content-related aspects to methodical, didactical implementation as well as the consideration of possible learning places or the recognition of partial qualifications, etc. (Zentralstelle für Berufsbildung im Einzelhandel e.V., 2008).

The official retail partners are as well as in EuCoCo METRO Group and REWE Group.

Both research projects emphasize the high significance of a qualitatively good delivery of apprenticeship in the retail sector in Germany.

Social competencies in retail

Given the current complex and challenging environment for young professionals, the innovation transfer project *ReSeCo – Retail Sector Competencies*, which is promoted by the *Nationale Agentur Bildung für Europa beim BIBB (NA beim BIBB)* and organised by the *University of Cologne* tries to improve the apprenticeship in the retail sector. In order to gain the greatest possible fit of vocational education for young people in the field of key competencies to the current requirements of the job market, the project tries to develop an adequate preparation and support regarding personal and social skills.

It is based on the already completed research project, named “*SeSoko-Fit*”, which was developed for the eighth grade of secondary schools. Here, four teaching-learning arrangements (LLA) were developed (team competency, criticism, time management and self-evaluation of the own performance potential), tested and evaluated in order to promote personal and social skills at grade eight.

The present project is a development in the European context. As part of one of the including working packages, interviews with national experts (employers, employment organisations and unions) were carried out in all participating countries (Germany, Poland, Italy and UK). Thus, a development and adaptation of the teaching-learning arrangements to the new target group (young apprentices in the ***retail sector***) as well as country specific features can be considered.

During the phase of preparation, the four teaching-learning arrangements resulting from the forerunner project “*SeSoko-Fit*” were translated from German into English. This ensured a uniform information base for all partners, so that country-specific features and formulations could be considered in the design.

The target group of the underlying analysis was already established before the project began and was assured by a written confirmation in all cooperating countries. The aim was to interview at least six national social partners in all countries. The selection of interviewees in Germany was focused on the *chamber of industry and commerce* in Cologne and Hanover, the *Federal Institute for Vocational Training (BIBB)* in Bonn, the *German trade association HDE* in Berlin as well as *workers' organizations (ver.di)* in Cologne and Berlin.

This heterogeneous group was suitable for the present study context for several reasons. The needs of the promotion of personal and social skills could be considered both from the perspective of training companies as well as from the perspective of school authorities. This

allowed taking both parties into account for the later adaptation of the learning units. Furthermore, the regional diversification of the social partners in all cooperating countries prevented that possible requirements may end out of regional causes and therefore result in any distortion.

The questionnaire was developed with all project partners during a kick-off meeting in London, UK. Thereby, the form of a semi-standardized interview was chosen. The questionnaire should not be used as a rigid list of questions, but rather as a flexible memory aid to guide the interviews without restricting the natural flow of narration.

Although this method of data collection can be made the accusation that it may lead to an overestimation due to the subjectivity of responses, it is much more flexible in its implementation and allows the interviewer to ask spontaneous questions when an answer, for example, has to be discussed in more detail. This allows the interviewer to change the order of the questions spontaneously (Bortz/Döring, 2006; Kleinig, 2007; Schnell et al., 2008).

The questionnaire is divided into five parts. After a brief explanation, in which context and objectives of the project are explained, the interview started with questions on socio-demographic data. While part 1 of the questionnaire addressed general questions about the importance of personal and social skills in the retail sector, the following four parts of the questionnaire focus explicit the existing teaching-learning arrangements and tries to meet specific needs of these. The experts do not know the particular content of the teaching-learning arrangements. A summary of the main content, work materials and methods were available for the social partners in advance. During the interview, the interview partners had the possibility to have a look into the existing teaching-learning arrangements in order to get an idea of it to maintain and make an informed judgment about it.

In order to test the entire survey instrument to substantive consistency, clarity of questions and survey length, two pre-tests were conducted with the assigned "Critical Friends" of the project in advance (Kleinig, 2007).

After these preparations, seven interviews were carried out within the time period of about five weeks. Six of these interviews were conducted personally, one by phone. With the aim to create a very realistic situation and thereby gain authentic information, qualitative interviews were carried out preferably in the everyday environment of the respondents (Lamnek, 2010).

Due to this reason, the majority of interviews were held in the building of the particular institution.

The length of the survey varied between 45 and 60 minutes. The difference in time resulted out of the contextual situation, as some social partners were less familiar with the subject, while others reported more detailed and were more willing to talk about the topic.

The contents of the teaching-learning arrangements have been tried to present as neutral and value-free as possible in order to avoid influencing the responses. After answering the general questions, contents and working methods for each teaching-learning arrangement were explained and visualized in detail. Here, particular methods were discussed and potential improvements were rethought together.

All interview partners regarded social competencies generally as being indispensable in the retail sector and chalk increasing importance up to it in future. The retail sector is characterized by a high customer contact, where personal competencies as well as appearance play an important role. The trainee is like a presentation to the outside world of the company and therefore he has an enormous effect on its environment. One interview partner said, that he/she would overlook possible functional deficiencies, if the climate and the way how to deal with customers is very comfortable. In his point of view, social competencies are seen as *core competencies* in the retail sector.

First of all, the teaching-learning arrangement "*Criticism*" was discussed. In comparison to the later themed learning packages, here, the fewest modification needs were named. The retail sector is characterized by the cooperation in teams. Thereby it is essential to handle with criticism in an adequate, understandable and distantly way. All of the interviewees supported the promotion of the ability to accept criticism in the retail sector. It is seen as much more important than, for example, detailed product knowledge. One of the social partners stated, "I define professionalism as to learn from mistakes". The interviewees plead throughout to transfer the photo story as well as the movie to a situation in the retail sector. This should be an everyday situation that makes you think, reflect and talk. The use of these media has been found as very good in this branch and for this age group, due to the fact that the acceptance of students in terms of newer media seems to be very large.

In a next step, the participants discussed the promotion of "*Time management*". This has become an essential factor in the retail sector, because of the intense 'personal dilution' of the recent years. In addition to that, the daily life of students was structured very well before

they entered the vocational education and training system, so that young people are often unable to structure a whole day by their own. Therefore, all of the interviewed partners regarded the promotion of time management in the retail sector essential and necessary as well.

The social partners stated uniformly that the illustrated comic of the student Marc is not appropriate to the age and is too much outside the subject area. While some social partners stressed replacing it with real photos from the life of a retail clerk, others pleaded taking it out completely. Moreover, it was discussed to promote "time management" in a real situation. For example, the students could plan to welcome the new students to vocational school or other festivities within the institution. The advantage will be the existing real-time pressure, the high proportion of personal power and practical relevance.

The teaching-learning arrangement "*Team competency*" was also perceived as extremely important. The retail sector is mostly characterized by shift work, where an adjustment within the team is very important. One should keep in mind that the different patterns of goods are in charge of certain teams. Often, each member of such a team tries to gain the highest revenue as possible, so that in practice there is no real team culture existing. Especially against this background, it is important to promote team competency. "The success of a company depends on its employees and their cooperation", said one of the social partners.

However, all interviewees saw the illustrated example ("bridge") as too abstract and strange. A later transfer into everyday life of a retail clerk is not so obviously. A situation, which is more meaningful, would be much better from the perspective of the social partners. It should be noted that such a situation for the target group won't be designed too unsubstantial. With regard to the grouping of teams, it has been pointed out that the teacher should do this in order to avoid the formation of so-called 'peer groups'. Even in practice, a determination of their colleagues is not always possible.

Next to this, the competency "*Self-evaluation of the own performance potential*", was discussed. It was seen as the most important one for all of the interviewed social partners. The majority said that this poses a conglomerate of the other presented competencies (team competency, time management and ability to accept criticism). External assessment is very important when someone is in contact with customers. Therefore, it picks up the additionally mentioned aspect "emphatic capacity". The same applies to the self-assessment of individuals. In order to find out for oneself in which area he or she wants to work in future, it is essential to learn this as early as possible. However, it was also stated that this constitutes

the most complex and challenging learning package and therefore it should be paid special attention.

The use of a fish was seen as not appropriate to the age group and too abstract. The medium should be more specific to the retail sector. In addition, the interviewed partners criticized the low willingness of students to entire their own strengths and weaknesses in class. The more heterogeneous the class is, the more difficult to implement this method. Here, a stronger anonymity should be made and a clear focus should be given on the strengths and weaknesses with respect to the activities as a retail clerk.

The ball of wool, as a second method within this teaching-learning arrangement, has also been heavily criticized and found no acceptance among the social partners. All partners questioned the sense of this method and the relation to the retail sector. The social partners advised to completely skip this method. Unfortunately, a suitable alternative could be identified by any of the interviewed persons.

Generally, some of the interview partners criticised that it might be too late to promote social competencies during vocational education and training. Preliminary work should be done within secondary education stage I, on which vocational schools may build up. Thereby, it is seen as very important that a curricular connection should be made between the promotion of self and social competencies within secondary education stage I and II.

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Author: Sabrina Theis

Contact: Sabrina.Theis@uni-koeln.de

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