

THEMATIC PAPER: APPRENTICESHIP

Modularized vocational training for adults: Supporting entry to skilled employment through guidance in network structures

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ABSTRACT

The world of work and therefore companies and employees are increasingly being challenged by megatrends such as a shortage of skilled workers. One important strategy of the federal government in Germany is to increase the proportion of skilled workers. This can be achieved, among other things, with the concept of modularized vocational training for adults by using "partial qualifications". The article explains the aims, functions and actual developments of the concept of "partial qualifications". Based on a literature review and case studies, the question of how guidance regarding partial qualifications takes place will be the focus of the paper. In the second step, preliminary results of an empirical study from a current European Union (EU) project on vocational guidance in networks are presented. Case studies are used to illustrate examples of good practice in guidance in networks.

Key words: modularized vocational training, partial qualifications, low-skilled workers, network guidance

INTRODUCTION

Today there are a number of fundamental changes in the world of work that challenge both companies and employees. In particular, a variety of strategies is undertaken to cope with the shortage of skilled workers seen as a crucial problem worldwide. In Germany, one major strategy of the federal government hereby is to increase the proportion of skilled workers in the workforce (Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, 2022). This goal can be achieved, among other things, by fostering skills through initial but also further training in companies (Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, 2021). Partial qualifications consisting of training modules play an important role in this strategy which this paper will look at in more detail, including an international perspective.

Partial qualifications

In Germany, partial qualifications based on training modules play an important role from an employer perspective (Arbeitgeberinitiative Teilqualifizierung, 2025; DIHK, 2025). Partial qualifications are for people over the age of 25 who wish to complete a subsequent vocational qualification in stages. They are defined as delimited standardized units within an overall structure that represents a recognized training occupation (Ausbildungsberuf) in the dual apprenticeship system (DIHK, 2025). Specific combinations of partial qualifications can lead to a vocational qualification by sitting a final examination (Arbeitgeberinitiative Teilqualifizierung, 2025). Studies show that modular, qualification-oriented further training supports rapid career entry and long-term integration into the labor market and also improves chances of increased income in the long run (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2020; Bönke *et al.*, 2022).

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Nevertheless, there is no doubt that a number of challenges to the sustainable implementation of partial qualifications at a structural and institutional level remain. For individual clients guidance is seen to motivate them to strive for these qualifications. Comprehensive advice and support for those involved in partial qualifications seem, in addition to the structural framework conditions, crucial for the success and sustainability of this kind of continuing training. So far we know little about how guidance is actually provided for clients, and what kind of network activities exist, what the challenges of guidance are, but also whether there are examples of good practice that could be used for the further implementation of partial qualifications based on network guidance.

The underlying research question of this paper deals with activities at an institutional and practical level to increase the awareness and utilization of partial qualifications. The main focus is to look at counseling activities for individual clients provided by employment agencies, training providers, employers, trade unions and corresponding network structures. The paper depicts good practice in the context of current developments and activities regarding partial qualifications that are supported by guidance activities.

European Union (EU)-project DigiTrans

Preliminary results from the EU project DigiTrans are used to understand whether guidance activities can help make partial qualifications work (Weber *et al.*, 2023; Weber & Schulz, 2023; see also <https://digitransformation.net>). The project, in which the author is actively involved as an associate member, is based at the University of Applied Labour Studies (HdBA) in Mannheim (project leader Prof. Dr. Peter Weber). The project focuses on a consulting concept to promote the digital skills of both employees and unemployed people which can help them to enter the labor market. The consulting concept includes five phases of a consulting process and the possibility of flexible integration of guidance network partners in all phases. This concept of "counseling in the network" was tested by counseling practitioners in their counseling facilities. When implementing the method in practice, the counseling practitioners created case vignettes that provide important information on good counseling practice based on the "CGC roundabout Method" counseling approach.

METHODS AND RESEARCH DESIGN

The case vignettes created in the project depict the development of clients' professional reorientation and the relevant support structures within the qualification phases and are the core element of the research on which this paper is grounded. The answer to the first

research question (structures and development strands of partial qualifications and the associated guidance in network structures) is based on a systematic literature review. For this purpose, studies on the development of partial qualifications will be referred to that take into account the relevance of completing partial qualifications with respect to the employability of clients (Bönke *et al.*, 2022) and the evaluation of partial qualifications from the perspective of different actors (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2020; Biebeler & Blum, 2024; Fischer *et al.*, 2020).

For the second question (practices of support for clients through guidance networks), five case vignettes will be looked at. These were analyzed qualitatively in order to find out in what way the counseling approach in the network has been helpful for clients in relation to their professional reorientation and qualification. The case studies from the Netherlands, Italy and Germany, each comprising two to five pages, involved three men and two women aged between 22 and 55. The case vignettes provide important information on the success of a multi-actor counseling approach as well as information on risk factors in the counseling process.

RESULTS

Results on partial qualifications and counseling

The development of partial qualifications is coordinated by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research. One objective of coordination at the federal level is the standardization and wider use of partial qualifications. Various stakeholders are involved in the process to achieve this objective at the federal level, including, *e.g.*, the Association of German Chambers of Industry and Commerce, the peak body of educational providers, as well as the Confederation of German Employers. These institutions work together on the further development of partial qualifications at different levels (Arbeitgeberinitiative Teilqualifizierung, 2025).

Undoubtedly, partial qualifications represent an opportunity for the 4.6 million low-skilled workers in Germany as well as for refugees and migrants without vocational qualifications. These people need low-threshold further training offers that are flexible in terms of time and content (with credit transfer options for previous qualifications) in order to obtain a vocational qualification at the end. Semi-skilled and unskilled people can build on the vocational knowledge and work experience they have acquired and are given a (further) opportunity to obtain a vocational qualification.

At the same time, there are still numerous challenges to the sustainable implementation of partial qualifications.

These include the fact that partial qualifications are still too little known or are still offered too rarely. Also, further efforts are needed to ensure that partial qualifications are standardized and up-to-date throughout Germany.

Offering partial qualifications in a region is also generally not a "sure-fire success". In order to establish a partial qualification program in a region, close and committed cooperation between various stakeholders (employment agencies, employers, training providers, chambers) seems to be imperative. This means that the target group of low-skilled workers can only be advised successfully within an existing network of companies, chambers, training providers and employment agencies.

Also, Biebeler and Blum (2024) point out that advising participants regarding a partial qualification is very important throughout the whole process. Interest in partial qualifications arises predominantly through advice from training providers, chambers and employment agencies or job centers. Participants also have a high need for personal support during the measure. Support can be provided by training providers in the form of accompanying coaching, which requires appropriate funding. Accompanying coaching significantly seems to increase the chances of success in the process of completing a partial qualification.

Results of the DigiTrans project

The structural factors of guidance on partial qualifications are well documented. However, there are not yet profound insights into what the guidance processes for clients exactly look like. Using the preliminary results from the DigiTrans project as an example, it is possible to illustrate that successful guidance for people in situations of professional (re)orientation (e.g., low-skilled workers) works although it requires a lot of preconditions (a multi-actor approach, long-term guidance and support). The results from the case vignettes show in a very differentiated way what advice in the network for developing new career prospects can look like. Each of the five phases of guidance used in the method (engagement, assessment, planning, action and evaluation) seems to be significant for the success of sustainable career development and decision-making. Also, guidance actors were supportive once they were involved in all phases (e.g., employers, training providers, trade unions, funding institutions). In this way, agreements could be reached on the formal and content-related fit of an educational offer (e.g., online format, hybrid format, face-to-face format). Advice on funding, support in finding a suitable course, support in making arrangements with employers and training providers and

assistance with any problems that arose were also relevant and helpful. The permanent focus on the needs of the clients and the search for solutions together with other actors is crucial for successful guidance. Hereby, the whole procedure goes along with learning processes among all stakeholders.

CONCLUSION

The results of the research on partial qualifications and related guidance show that the acquisition of partial qualifications is dependent on committed and stable cooperation between key players (employment agencies, chambers, employers, and training providers) in a region. It is only on this basis that guidance for the target groups (e.g., low-skilled workers) that strive for partial qualifications can be built up solidly and clients can be accompanied effectively.

The case studies from the EU-project DigiTrans reveal that qualified counseling with network partners can play a key role in the successful development of professional (re)orientation for employees, job seekers and the unemployed and can promote partial qualifications and thus the possibility of developing professional prospects. The guidance approach illustrates how building up career guidance could work for low-skilled workers in the context of partial qualifications.

DECLARATIONS

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Author contributions

Siecke B: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis of the qualitative data. The author has read and approved the final version of the manuscript. The author's contribution is part of the results of a larger EU-Project (see Weber, P., & Schulz, J. (2023). CGC-DigiTrans Report. CGC-Roundabouts for Digital Transformation. Professional Guidance & Counseling (CGC) in Multi-Actor-Networks. <https://digitransformation.net/report/>).

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Ethical approval

Not applicable.

Informed consent

The interviews were carried out by project partner (see above). All standards of data protection were complied with.

Conflict of interest

The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

Use of large language models, AI and machine learning tools

None.

Data availability statement

Data used to support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon request.

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