



Assisted Vocational Training in Germany: Individual Support for Disadvantaged Young People in their Transition to Vocational Training

POLICY ARTICLE

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the development and implementation of Assisted Training (Assistierte Ausbildung, AsA) in Germany. The instrument was developed to offer disadvantaged young people positive experiences in training, the transition from school to vocational training and support them on successfully completing their training. The AsA offers a comprehensive, holistic approach. It contains elements of individual vocational and educational counselling, classic tutoring during vocational school lessons, life counselling for psychosocial problems and mediation in conflicts between the training partners (school, company, chamber) and the young people. In particular, young people with specific learning and social difficulties are addressed. The goal is the successful completion of the training and, thereafter a transition to an appropriate occupation, to long-term decent employment. This article shows that young people, as well as vocational counsellors, guidance counsellors and companies consider the AsA as an effective instrument in providing support on the way to a completed apprenticeship. Nevertheless, the article reveals areas that need to be improved so that more young people could benefit from AsA. Thus, young people with learning problems could receive support for vocational school, and those with weak German language skills could receive tuition.

ABSTRAKT

Denna artikel beskriver utvecklingen och genomförandet av assisterad utbildning (Assistierte Ausbildung, AsA) i Tyskland. AsA har utvecklats för att möjliggöra positiva erfarenheter för missgynnade ungdomar – under utbildningens gång, vid övergången från skola till yrkesutbildning, och/eller vid utbildningens slut. AsA erbjuder ett omfattande och holistiskt tillvägagångssätt: det innehåller inslag av individuell studie- och yrkesvägledning, handledning under yrkesutbildningens lektioner, rådgivning vid psykosociala problem och medling i konflikter mellan utbildningsparterna (skola, företag) och ungdomarna. Åtgärden riktas i första hand mot unga människor med särskilda inlärningssvårigheter och sociala svårigheter. Målet är att utbildningen ska slutföras och att en övergång till ett lämpligt yrke och en långsiktig sysselsättning ska bli möjlig. Som framgår i artikeln har flera utvärderingsstudier visat att såväl ungdomar

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som vägledare och företag anser att AsA är en viktig åtgärd, som på ett effektivt sätt kan stödja en avslutad lärlingsutbildning. Artikeln uppmärksammar även hur AsA kan förbättras, så att fler ungdomar kan dra nytta av denna åtgärd. Ungdomar med inlärnings svårigheter får stöd inför yrkesskolan, och ungdomar med svaga kunskaper i tyska får stöd i undervisningen.

For young adults, the transition procedures from general schooling to employment are a challenging change of course which does not take place without friction (Nota & Rossier, 2015). In some cases, the requirements do not match the individually acquired competences. In other cases, supply and demand on the vocational training market do not match (Weiß, 2015). Compared to other European countries, youth unemployment in Germany has been relatively low for a long time (in July 2022: EU: 14%, Germany: 5,6%, Eurostat, 2022). This could also be observed in countries with a similar training system, such as Switzerland and Austria. However, this has not been as evident in recent years as in previous decades (Bundesinstitut für Berufsbildung, 2022). Youth unemployment is often accompanied by educational problems or dropout, which is a major problem. Almost 15% of all people in Germany have no formal vocational qualification, and this means that they have never completed vocational training or university studies (Bundesinstitut für Berufsbildung, 2022). In terms of the personal life course, this poses a high risk of unemployment and poverty. It is also a problem for the economy as a whole, as there is an increasing demand for well-trained skilled workers in various sectors, e.g. crafts or care professions.

With the Corona crisis, the number of young people without jobs has also increased in Germany. After years of declining youth unemployment across Europe, it rose throughout Europe during the pandemic. In Germany, the number of young long-term unemployed, in particular, has increased (+12,6% in 2021, Konle-Seidl, 2022). These are those young people who have already been unemployed for longer than a year. The pandemic appears to be exacerbating a problem that existed before the pandemic. Young people who are unable to complete their education in Germany need professional support.

The dual system with its theory-practice transfer has been considered proven for many years. However, the fact that trainees have to apply to companies is a hurdle, especially for disadvantaged young people (Achatz et al., 2022). The successful application does not guarantee a successful and problem-free vocational training. According to the Vocational Training Report of the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung, 2020), 151 655 training contracts were terminated prematurely in 2018 (26.5%). Relevant studies in Germany show clear signs of an 'imbalance' on the vocational training market (Bundesinstitut für Berufsbildung, 2022, Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung, 2020): in addition to a simultaneously high number of unplaced applicants and unoccupied training places, the number of young people entering the so-called 'transitional sector' between school and training also remains high. In the German school-to-work transition system, young people who find it difficult to find a training place without the support of the employment agency or social workers are considered to be disadvantaged. These are mainly young people with disabilities, difficult social situations or low language skills. Disadvantaged young people who do not find a training place after leaving school often complete a vocational preparation measure in the so-called 'transitional sector' (Autorengruppe Bildungsberichterstattung, 2020). The aim of this transition system is to enhance the competencies of young people to increase their training opportunities and integrate them into regular vocational training. This includes catching up on general school-leaving qualifications (Baethge, 2008). This area generally suggests a 'bridging function' targeted for young adults who were unable to take up regular training for various reasons (e.g., school performance, lack of a training place, lack of training maturity) (Christe, 2020). Various support projects try to support young people. These support projects do not provide an accredited vocational qualification, but under certain circumstances, a crediting of individual contents to a later vocational training (Spöttl, 2016). As a result, in 2020, 369 141 persons began school-based vocational training (Destatis, 2021), and 275 790 young people chose a measure in the 'transitional sector' rather than seek a place in the dual system (Destatis, 2021). Because of the high number of young people in this sector, since 2010, discussions have intensified over the extent to which regional disparities in the German training market and bottlenecks for companies in attracting skilled workers in certain regions and occupations could be remedied (Nowak, 2017).

In hardly any other OECD country is children's educational success as dependent on the parental home as it is in Germany (Buchmann & Steinhoff, 2017; Stojanov, 2011;). The children of academics are far more likely to attend the upper secondary schools that lead directly to a general higher education entrance qualification than are those of non-academics (79% to 43%). Children of non-academics are much more likely to take a vocational education path in upper secondary school than their classmates from an academic home (57% to 23%) and are much less likely to decide to go to university afterwards (Stojanov, 2011). This has long-term effects: while more than three quarters of the children of parents with a university degree go on to higher education, not even a quarter of the children of parents without a university degree go on to university. However, vocational education and training in Germany ensures the qualification of employees at an intermediate qualification level (Stojanov, 2011).

This situation provided the opportunity to create a support instrument to offer disadvantaged young people and companies individual, needs-based and intensive support and assistance (Conrads & Freiling, 2020). In 2014, the decision was made, and legislation was initiated to introduce Assisted Training (Assistierte Ausbildung, AsA) as a support measure of the Federal Employment Agency (Bundesagentur für Arbeit, BA) from May 2015 until September 2021 in an initial trial phase (Bundesagentur für Arbeit, 2015). AsA is not the first and not the only instrument created with the intention of promoting the transition to training and later also to employment. It is considerably individualised and more expensive than some other. This article describes the concept of the AsA measure and provides a brief overview of qualitative evaluation studies on the effectiveness of AsA, which were conducted in 2017/2018 and 2019/2020 (Conrads et al., 2019, 2020; Conrads & Freiling, 2020). It is shown that the adaptations that AsA has undergone were evoked by findings from the trial phase.

THE EDUCATION AND TRAINING SYSTEM IN GERMANY

In Germany, schooling is compulsory until the age of 18. All children attend primary schools (ages six to ten) (Eckhardt, 2019). Lower secondary education ('Sekundarstufe I') starting with grade five (different in some federal states) is organized in different educational tracks ('Hauptschule', 'Realschule', 'Gymnasium'). Students attend these schools until grade ten. After that, students can proceed to upper secondary education ('Sekundarstufe II') and gain either a vocational qualification or the right to access higher education ('gymnasiale Oberstufe') (Eckhardt, 2019).

While 'gymnasiale Oberstufe' (i.e., upper secondary education) has become increasingly popular with students, vocational training predominates at the upper secondary level (Eckhardt, 2019). About 60 percent start vocational training after leaving school, 465 672 in 2020 (Destatis, 2022). In Germany, most vocational training takes place in the practice-oriented and workplace-oriented form of apprenticeship. In dual training, young people receive vocational training at two learning venues. The competence objectives specified in the training regulations are acquired at the 'Berufsschule' (vocational school) learning venue in cooperation with the 'training company'. During the apprenticeship, young people are employed by the company and receive a training allowance. Dual training lasts between two and three and a half years, depending on the occupation. The courses lead to a vocational qualification for skilled work as qualified staff, e.g., in an 'anerkannter Ausbildungsberuf' (recognized occupation requiring formal training) (Eckhardt, 2019). Depending on the model, vocational school is held either one or two days a week. The block model is also widespread, according to which the entire teaching is held for one month within one week. On the other days, young people work close to the business process in the training company. However, school always has priority, i.e. if class days are postponed at school or exams are scheduled, the company must comply with the required attendance times. The places of learning complement each other in the task of acquiring the vocational competence for a training occupation.

THE FEDERAL EMPLOYMENT AGENCY

The Federal Employment Agency is the largest German authority with approximately 95.000 employees (Spohr, 2019). Related to the labor market, it performs tasks for both citizens and companies. It has the task of bringing companies and employees together. The services are free of charge. Unemployed persons can apply for unemployment benefits from the agency in order

to be able to continue to cover their living expenses. Young people in particular, are supported through career counselling. In some places, youth vocational agencies (Jugendberufsagenturen) have been formed as competence centers for this purpose. In order to place young people who do not want to study in an apprenticeship program, the career counsellors themselves work with the young people in a counselling process. In order to facilitate this, they made intensive networking with schools and companies. The support provided to young people by the employment agency's career counselling service begins in schools about two years before they graduate from high school. If it becomes apparent that a young person will not be able to start or complete an apprenticeship without further support, he or she can be admitted to one of the various more intensive support programs. Among these programs is the AsA presented here. Service providers are also contracted to implement socio-educational programs when dealing with youth with special difficulties in the transition system addressed in the introduction.

INDIVIDUAL SUPPORT AND GUIDANCE – ASSISTED TRAINING

Assisted Training (Assistierte Ausbildung, AsA) pursuant formerly § 130 Social Code III (SGB III) was introduced in May 2015 (Bundesagentur für Arbeit, 2015) as a temporary measure (test phase). The adaptation and renewal of the now open-ended measure took place in May 2020 as 'AsA flex', an additionally expanded and developed version, and it started in spring 2021. After a tentative starting phase with an initial annual average of 1 000 participants, take-up rose rapidly to 9 118 in 2017. Between 2018 and 2019, the number of participants levelled off between 10 000 and 11 000 (Statistik der Bundesagentur für Arbeit, 2019, 2020). In 2020 'AsA flex' was permanently anchored in book III of the Social Code (modification in §§74, 75 of Social Code III). Legal and technical regulations were made for an indefinite continuation of the programme.

INTERVIEW STUDIES FOR EVALUATION

The University of Applied Labour Studies of the Federal Employment Agency (HdBA) has been providing scientific support for Assisted Training (AsA) in several research phases since 2017 to test the AsA as a support instrument of the Federal Employment Agency in training preparation and support. The prior evaluation was performed in 2017, the subsequent evaluation study began in 2018. Further interviews on assisted training in the digital setting will be completed at the end of 2022. The primary objective of the interview studies was to examine experiences with the AsA instrument as well as opinions, positions and suggestions for further development from the perspective of practitioners. All research steps were conducted as guided interviews (Conrads et al., 2019, 2020). In total 231 interviews were conducted from 2017 until 2020 (106 interviews within the prior study in 2017). The interviewed were 70 training guides of training service providers, 38 promoted trainees, 43 training companies, 80 activity supervisors of Federal Employment Agency. The determination of the sample on the basis of agency districts was targeted on the basis of regional-structural factors: nationwide distribution, urbanity or rurality of regions and economic strength or weakness of regions. Based on the electronic recordings of each interview, the interview material was written down in the form of transcripts. Qualitative content analysis was used as a method for reduction. The evaluation of the interviews was category-based using MAXQDA software. The evaluation categories were derived from the operationalised questions. Based on the category system, the software was used to filter out text sections and content from the interview material in a theory-based manner. This type of structuring and reduction of complexity of the material was carried out in relation to the classification system (Mayring, 2016). The results of evaluation studies (2017–2020) show that in the transition from school to work, AsA is a well-accepted instrument that meets with broad approval from all stakeholder groups. Due to its intensive and individual support options, it enables a large number of trainees to achieve their training objectives. Assisted training has proven itself as an individual and flexible support instrument in the training sector and companies are enabled to offer regular apprenticeships for disadvantaged young people (Conrads & Freiling, 2020). The test phase 2015–2020 has shown the advantages of this approach in the transition system, especially if the imbalance of the training place markets and the heterogeneity of the participants continue to be as pronounced or to increase, as has been observed in recent years (Conrads et al., 2019).

The old AsA of 2015–2020 and the new ‘AsA flex’ running since 2021 are generally divided into two phases:

1. The ‘preliminary phase of Assisted Training’ is an optional instrument of training preparation. This includes content on career orientation, application training or individually shaped active training measures and as well as support for participants in finding a training place (Bundesagentur für Arbeit, 2016). By consciously reflecting on their own strengths or weaknesses and their own life situation, and by discovering different vocational options, young people should be able to make a well-founded choice of occupation (e.g., by identifying potentials, resources and competencies).
2. The ‘accompanying phase’ of Assisted Training is defined by the legislator as using synergy effects and avoiding former similar overlapping measures (as the new core instrument of training support). In the phase, particular emphasis will be placed on the services offered to companies to address the questions mentioned in the introduction. During the ‘accompanying phase’, which addresses the training measures, the aim is to stabilise the training relationship, avoid dropouts and ensure successful completion of the training (Bundesagentur für Arbeit, 2015). At the beginning of the training, for example, the company is instructed comprehensively by the service provider, and during the training, there are periodic contacts such as reflection meetings between the training service provider, the vocational school and the company in order to identify any obstacles that may arise, to address them and to arrange any individually necessary support. This also includes socio-educational support to help the young people cope with everyday challenges (e.g., finding accommodation, financial emergencies or conflict situations). The need for support can also arise later in the course of training and, depending on the specific type of support, does not necessarily have to remain constant until the end of training (Conrads & Freiling, 2020).

As early as August 2016, Germany’s Integration Act (Integrationsgesetz) opened up AsA to refugees (Bundesagentur für Arbeit, 2016). According to BA statistics, AsA participants with a refugee and migration background accounted for approximately one third of the average total number of participants in 2018 (Statistik der Bundesagentur für Arbeit, 2019).

THE PARTICIPANTS IN ASA

Employment agencies, service providers and companies are involved in the implementation of AsA. The employment agency counsellor assesses a youth’s need for AsA, determines if they are eligible, and then refers them to a service training provider. Service training providers work socio-educationally in small settings with trainees. They are paid by the Federal Agency for intensively looking after the needs of the young people. The responsibility to establish contact with the company lies with them. They work in own responsibility according to the specifications of the FEA. AsA is ‘deliberately not an alternative to training on the primary labour market’ (Korten & Nuglisch, 2015, p. 15). The responsibility for training and contract remains with the companies, and implementation generally takes place in the recognised dual training occupations. The responsibility for vocational education training remains with the companies and implementation generally takes place in the recognised dual training occupations. The model is based on the dualism of professional support (service principle) on the one hand and the sovereignty of young people and training companies on the other. Both in terms of content and social pedagogy, the young person receives highly individualised support (Neises, 2017). The indispensable prerequisites for this are a reliable support person and a constant support structure, as these form the foundation of this service concept to guarantee flexible and customised services from a single source. This overall constellation results in individual learning and support arrangements that tend to be characterised less as group offerings and more as a variable participant-related, highly individualised spectrum of support (Laba, 2017).

YOUNG PEOPLE ENTITLED TO ASA

The AsA is intended for young people whose vocational education training is at risk due to school and language deficits or also problems in their social environment. Support is provided for trainees whose course or completion of training is at risk or who are in danger of dropping

out of training or do not take up further vocational training following the premature termination of an in-company vocational training relationship. Young people who are unable to establish or consolidate an employment relationship after completing a vocational training program supported by assisted training. Any regulated training of at least three years is eligible for funding. There is no age restriction.

All those who have already taken part in the preliminary phase of AsA and have found a training position through this, will automatically also receive support during their training. AsA can be used over the entire training period. A written declaration of consent is required from the training company, which does not incur any costs.

DIFFERENT ELEMENTS OF ASA

AsA aims to support young people and the professional actors involved in training in both technical, socio-pedagogical and person-centred terms AsA offers various forms of support. First and foremost, the professional support is in the foreground. Employers expect trainees to receive support and remedial teaching and to participate in this on a regular basis (Conrads & Freiling, 2020). In addition, AsA also has an integrating function. Many suggestions from the evaluation studies led to improvement steps in the AsA. This includes: The abolition of the original age limit of 24 years. Today, there is now no age limit for AsA. The flexibilization of participation hours and locations including the online-training option. The extension of the participation possibility for all vocational training directions and merging with other programmes in the transition from school to work.

SUPPORT FUNCTION

Support is available both for technical-administrative matters, psychological-social pedagogical counselling needs or concrete tutoring. The services are aimed at all those involved in training (companies, schools), with the focus on the trainee with the aim of obtaining a training qualification.

Support in matters of training organisation, such as the preparation of the report book (a kind of portfolio kept by the trainee during the training period), taking care of administrative matters, but also psychosocial support (e.g. in family problems) are also contents where the young people and companies find support.

In addition, the AsA offers an extensive socio-pedagogical support for the trainees (Conrads et al., 2019). In terms of content, this should be particularly about promoting employee virtues such as punctuality, reliability or timely reporting of incapacity for work. AsA offers socio-educational and administrative support (e.g., extension of the residence permits for refugees). At the beginning of AsA, there is usually an increased need for socio-educational support to stabilise the trainees' personal situation. However, especially difficult problem situations in the life of a trainee can also require individual support. Thanks to the socio-pedagogical support they receive, many companies, even smaller ones, are now in a position to give disadvantaged young people a training opportunity (Conrads et al., 2020). This enables them to better cover their demand for skilled workers in the future.

Closely linked to this is the high importance of support in private matters, because employers need competent contact persons for the trainees. This enables both sides to concentrate on the vocational training. In particular employer representatives who have taken on trainees with a refugee and migration background find it very important to support the trainees with regard to official matters (e.g., extension of the residence permit) (Conrads et al., 2020).

For groups in need of special support, AsA can provide particularly comprehensive care:

Psychological support: for AsA-participants with corresponding needs, e.g. with a refugee and migration background. In addition to targeted individual discussions, it is important for participants to be able to talk openly about their fears and problems. The focus is on coming to terms with and overcoming (severe) trauma, bullying and other problems of violence and hatred. Psychological support can help to counteract potential overload by working specifically on personal resilience skills.

German language support plays a central role in AsA. A sufficient knowledge of German is necessary in order to be able to follow the vocational school lessons, to understand the examination questions correctly and to be able to communicate

appropriately in a work context. In addition to general German language support, there is a concrete need for subject-specific language support, not least to be able to understand and appropriately follow elementary instructions and instructions in the company.

Socio-pedagogical support needs: The relevance of intercultural training is important for the target group. For example, information about cultural aspects (e.g., manners) in Germany is important, but so is information about the German (vocational) education system, not least because of a frequent lack of understanding of the importance of theoretical subject teaching in training. Some further support services are also although offered by AsA, e.g., by accompanying participants to view flats.

INTEGRATION FUNCTION OF ASA

In the 2019 and 2020 evaluation surveys, 70 per cent of the companies surveyed responded positively to the question about their willingness to generate additional or renewed training places for disadvantaged youth in the future (Conrads & Freiling, 2020). Thus, on the one hand, many companies are in a position to support the integration of disadvantaged people joining and using AsA. On the other hand, many companies testified that without the support of the AsA, they would not be able to offer regular training places for disadvantaged people.

Here, flexible support is a basic prerequisite for successful training (Conrads & Freiling, 2020). Companies with a shortage of skilled workers in particular actively seek support such as AsA to have the possibility of giving this young people a training opportunity. From their perspective, they hope that disadvantaged young people will stay in the company longer than others who often strive for further education or studies.

An obstacle to integration is the low willingness of companies to regularly release participants for AsA activities during regular working hours. Companies that allow time off for AsA activities remain the exception. This makes it more difficult for young people to participate in the AsA measure, as it has to be attended besides their attendance at work and vocational school. Thus, the young people have a higher time requirement.

FRAMEWORK CONDITIONS

Socio-pedagogical scope of care of the AsA is very flexible (Conrads et al., 2019). The AsA has a weekly time frame of four to nine teaching units. The minimum of four lessons provides a basis for bringing continuity. This is also an important basis in view of the fact that the requirements increase with each training year. The maximum of nine lessons per week is seen as the limit for the trainees. It depends on the situation at the respective location whether AsA can be offered directly in the company or school. Often the young people have to come to the providers. They try to find such premises that make it easier for the young people to come. For this purpose, e.g. premises with good local transport connections are rented or online variants are also tried.

A main objective for an improved acceptance of AsA is the realisation of tolerable ratios of travel time. In rural areas, implementation problems usually lie in the lack of accessibility of learning venues. Especially in certain sectors or due to the lack of exemption of work duties during regular work schedule the trainees must travel far and at inconvenient times.

Young people in rural areas consequently have to put up with long journeys if public transport is difficult. This severely limits the accessibility of places of learning and makes the feasibility of AsA difficult. Overcoming the travel distances between the locations of the company, the vocational school, the service provider and the place of residence of a young person is a problem (Conrads et al., 2019).

DISCUSSION

In addition to the good approach and involvement of companies, the socio-pedagogical support coupled with individually adapted teaching units is one of the strengths of AsA. It is therefore understandable that the German legislative branch strengthens this instrument and introduced it as the core standard instrument in training support. It went also one step

further by merging AsA with the measures of other aids in the transition system which will mean a large increase of recipients in the future from about 10.000 participants in January 2018 to approximately 35.000 in May 2022 with further increases expected in the coming years (Statistik der Bundesagentur für Arbeit, 2022). The access requirements to receive such funding are simplified by the fact that through such a merge there are fewer specific requirements to be able to take advantage of it. It will also be easier for the staff in the agencies, who until now have not always had an overview of the appropriate option for the individual young person due to the large number of individual specific support options. With the current legislation, the German legislator has created more flexibility and adaptability on the one hand, but also more clarity of the funding instruments and the avoidance of double structures on the other.

By merging the funding opportunities, it is also easier for those responsible in the firms to keep track with responsibilities. Basically, all they have to do is signal to their advisor at the employment agency, whom they usually already know, that they would like to hire or already have a trainee with whom they fear a problem. Which instrument is then used is no longer relevant for most companies, this is then the responsibility of the employment agency.

Even if AsA presumably makes vocational education possible for many young people who would not have made it on their own, there are still numerous cases for which even this support is not enough. Severe cognitive or mental health problems, language or serious social problems may lead to dropouts. Also, as AsA only supports full training, it does not support helper training. Therefore, it is important to have instruments for this group of people to stabilise them and to develop individual life perspectives before they start vocational education training.

The challenges remain great and are intensified by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. The companies have to accept and get to know a new training supporting measure. They require a career transition tool in one of the most important phases of working life of employees, at the transition between school and work, in order to make a successful and sustainable start to a professional career possible.

The results and descriptions presented here are limited for Germany. It remains to be seen to what extent the AsA flex changes will further optimize the former AsA instrument. Nevertheless, aspects could also work in other training systems in other countries. For the future, the achievement of objectives and the control of the implementation of the new AsA flex have to be closely examined and, if necessary, further adjusted.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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