

Resolution by the
38th General Assembly
of the HRK
on 14 May 2024
in Fulda

**Strengthening cooperation
between education sectors –
securing skilled labour**

HRK German Rectors' Conference
The Voice of the Universities

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I. Initial situation

Germany's future viability and competitiveness essentially depends on the quality of its education system. Universities have been making a significant contribution to this for many years by training professionals and leaders for the full spectrum of the economy and society.¹

The universities see themselves as part of and partners in a larger system. In particular, the two major education sectors in Germany, academic and vocational education and training, have been working together in a variety of ways for a long time. The internal relationship has been stable for many decades, and even drastic changes such as the Bologna study reform of 1999 have not changed this. Essential to this stability is the shared conviction that the different areas of education complement each other in their differences and should be regarded as equally important.²

The German Rectors' Conference is firmly committed to the principles of permeability and equivalence between academic and vocational education and training. It believes that the education sectors must not be set against each other, and that both must continue to be valued while recognising their differences and unique features.³

The current and continuing long-term shortage of skilled labour and its consequences represent one of the most pressing challenges in Germany and have far-reaching effects on society and the innovation and competitiveness of entire industries. This situation poses a particular challenge to the interaction between the two areas of education and requires joint responsibility and appropriate policy measures.⁴

¹ In the winter semester 2022/2023, a total of 2,920,263 students were enrolled at universities in Germany. This is an increase of approximately 420,000 students compared to the winter semester 2012/13. See HRK 2023: *Statistische Daten zu Studienangeboten an Hochschulen in Deutschland. Wintersemester 2023/2024. Statistiken zur Hochschulpolitik 1/2023*. p. 22.

² Cf. recommendation of the 134th Senate of the HRK on 13 October 2016: "Universities as organisational centres of the research system and key players in society". p. 10-11.

³ Cf. joint statement by HRK, BDA and Stifterverband 2015: *"Zehn Empfehlungen zur Erhöhung der Durchlässigkeit zwischen beruflicher und akademischer Bildung"*.

⁴ Cf. press release from HRK and Federal Employment Agency, 7 March 2023: Raising the potential of skilled workers for Germany: Federal Employment Agency and German Rectors' Conference emphasise joint responsibility of education sectors.

II. Fields of action

Against the background of this shared responsibility, attention must be focussed on the question of what universities, vocational training providers, general education schools and other stakeholders can do to reduce the shortage of skilled workers. The focus here is on the potential for skilled labour, which can be unlocked by avoiding drop-outs from education and training, which is necessary for many reasons in any case, and by cooperation between the education sectors.

The following fields of action should be considered:

1. Exploiting potential

For years, the drop-out rates in higher education and vocational training have been too high at a comparable level.⁵ However, it must be taken into account that in many individual cases people leave one course in order to take up another. Another start-up phase therefore follows. This phase needs to be optimally supported. Nevertheless, discontinuations should ideally be avoided or at least potentially lead to a suitable continuation of an individual's educational career.⁶ We also need a stronger commitment to helping people who are not in education, employment or training to gain qualifications. Finally, in addition to attracting foreign students⁷, trainees and skilled workers, the structural strengthening of women's employment should be addressed more strongly – also with regard to equal opportunity.

There is already a wide range of measures at universities throughout the student life cycle which are designed to increase

⁵ The drop-out rate is currently 28% for bachelor's degrees and 21% for master's degrees (Heublein et al. 2022: *Die Entwicklung der Studienabbruchquoten in Deutschland*. DZHW Brief 05/2022. p. 5-9). However, the figures can vary greatly depending on degree programme, subject culture and location and must be considered in view of the specific circumstances in each case. The so-called termination rate for training contracts was 29.5% in 2022 and between 25.8% and 26.9% between 2016 and 2021 (Uhly; Neises 2023: Early contract cancellations in dual vocational training. Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training. Bonn. p. 10).

⁶ The situation regarding students who discontinue their university courses can be assessed as overall positive: they usually reorient themselves quickly and take up further studies or vocational training or move into employment (BMBF 2018: The attractiveness of vocational training for students who discontinue their university studies. Berlin. p. 30 f.)

⁷ Cf. resolution of the 38th General Assembly of the German Rectors' Conference (HRK) on 14 May 2024: Successful study and career paths for international students in Germany – basic principles and framework conditions.

student success. The models and measures are aimed at informing, advising and selecting prospective students as well as providing subject-related and general support for students and prospective students and supporting student integration and identification. Flexible programmes also enable individual speeds. Since academic success is not only influenced by academic challenges, but also by the students' living conditions and social environment, universities also offer numerous programmes in this area.

2. Enhancing reciprocal permeability

Transitions between the two education sectors must still be made easier while maintaining the same high quality standards⁸ in order to open up more flexible educational pathways. This applies to those with vocational qualifications as well as those who have previously studied in higher education and can be achieved, for example, through greater transparency, skills-based recognition⁹, open-ended counselling and guidance for young people.

As a result of the opening of access to higher education for people without a school-leaving qualification, and with customised and flexible opportunities both in undergraduate studies and in academic continuing education, universities are already putting the model of the "open university" into practice. This is supported by specific counselling services for various target groups and the recognition of skills already acquired outside of higher education. This shows that significant progress has already been made at universities towards greater permeability in the education system.

3. Promoting cooperation

Productive collaboration in the field of education can only be achieved through cooperation. This includes systematic connections of the education sectors at strategically important points to promote the dialogue between the sectors and provide support for specific educational and employment biographies. Accompanying measures from employers are required to help individuals enter the labour market.

With a variety of forms of cooperation, especially between vocational training and universities, which operate at different levels and involve partners from other education sectors in different ways, universities are already extensively active in this area. The focus here is on hybrid educational formats, such as the dual (work-study) programme, and joint programmes, for example

⁸ See also the resolution of the 33rd General Assembly of the German Rectors' Conference on 10 May 2022: Recognition at universities.

⁹ Ibid. p. 13.

with associations and organisations from the vocational training sector in orientation phases or for transitions between education sectors.

4. Opening up career and educational counselling

Open-ended career and educational counselling at schools¹⁰ and universities is designed to help young people make the best possible use of their personal potential. It must therefore be designed and available to accompany the entire training and study phase and is intended to give young people prospects and choices and show them alternatives. This orientation should always be the basis for cooperation with other stakeholders.

The universities are involved here in a variety of ways in the school sector and with regard to students as part of the student life cycle¹¹ and rely on cooperation with local partners in the higher education system and outside of the universities, especially when it comes to communication with other education sectors (see also 3.).

III. Outlook

Universities are heavily involved in securing skilled labour, are committed to their responsibility in this respect and will continue to intensify their efforts in all four fields of action. The HRK will compile and publish exemplary models, with the involvement of non-university partners.

Despite many positive developments, there is still a need for change, which, however, means considerable additional financial expenditure for universities and requires additional basic funding, "without which it will hardly be possible for universities to make a lasting strategic commitment".¹² The German Science and Humanities Council pointed this out in its basic recommendations

¹⁰ See *Rahmenvereinbarung über die Zusammenarbeit von Schule und Berufsberatung* between the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs and the Federal Employment Agency (Resolution of the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of 15 October 2004 as amended on 1 June 2017).

¹¹ Cf. resolution of the 32nd General Assembly of the German Rectors' Conference (HRK) on 16 November 2021: Advisory services in the student life cycle provided by universities.

¹² German Science and Humanities Council 2014: *Empfehlungen zur Gestaltung des Verhältnisses von beruflicher und akademischer Bildung – Erster Teil der Empfehlungen zur Qualifizierung von Fachkräften vor dem Hintergrund des demographischen Wandels* (Drs. 3818-14), Darmstadt 11.4.2014. S. 89, Darmstadt 11 April 2014. p. 89.

on the relationship between vocational and academic education back in 2014.¹³

The German Rectors' Conference recommends that universities, vocational education and training providers, schools, businesses and other stakeholders take measures in the four fields of action in order to reduce the shortage of skilled labour in Germany. The HRK calls on the federal and state governments to create a suitable legal and financial framework for this.

¹³ Ibid. p. 85-97. See also German Science and Humanities Council 2015: *Empfehlungen zum Verhältnis von Hochschulbildung und Arbeitsmarkt – Zweiter Teil der Empfehlungen zur Qualifizierung von Fachkräften vor dem Hintergrund des demographischen Wandels* (Drs. 4925-15), Bielefeld 16 October 2015. p. 112f.