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The Greater Region: A cross-border vocational education and training area?

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THE GREATER REGION: A CROSS-BORDER VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING AREA?

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Abstract

In recent years cross-border vocational education and training has become increasingly significant due to the intensification of European integration and increased cross-border relations, as well as demographic and economic disparities between neighbouring border regions. This paper reviews past and present forms of cross-border cooperation in vocational education and training in the Greater Region. The most recent framework agreements on vocational education and training form the focus of discussion. The question of whether the Greater Region can be described as a cross-border vocational education and training area is also addressed.

Keywords

Cross-border vocational education and training – cross-border labour market – knowledge society – Europeanisation – learning regions – Greater Region

1 Introduction

With more than 220,000 daily cross-border commuters (Statistical Offices of the Greater Region 2013: 19), the Greater Region comprising Saarland, Lorraine, Luxembourg, Rhineland-Palatinate, the Walloon Region (*Région Wallonne*), the French Community of Belgium (*Communauté Française de Belgique*) and the German-speaking Community of Belgium (*Deutschsprachige Gemeinschaft Belgiens*) (hereinafter: the Greater Region) is one of the most interlinked labour market regions in the world (cf. Dörrenbächer 2015: 34). The Greater Region accounts for one-quarter of all cross-border workers in the EU27. Only Switzerland has more commuters, mainly from the neighbouring countries of France, Germany and Italy (*IBA* [Interregional Labour Market Observatory] 2012: 81). Thanks to the regular reports of the Interregional Labour Market Observatory (*IBA*) submitted to the Summit of the Greater Region, the labour market in the Greater Region is probably the best documented and researched cross-border labour market in the world.

In recent years, cross-border vocational education and training have played an increasingly important role in the reports submitted by the *IBA* to the Summit of the Greater Region and to the Economic and Social Committee of the Greater Region (*Wirtschafts- und Sozialausschuss der Großregion, WSAGR*). It is now a key issue in cross-border cooperation not only in the Greater Region, but in all European cross-border cooperation areas. The main reasons for this are firstly the increasing significance of education and knowledge in the knowledge and information society and secondly the social (particularly demographic) and economic disparities between the sub-regions of the Greater Region. In recent years, several (framework) agreements on cross-border vocational education and training have been entered into in the Greater Region (*RVGR* [Framework Agreement on Cooperation in Cross-border Vocational Education and Training] 2014; *AGBSL* [Agreement on Cross-border Vocational Training in Saarland–Lorraine] 2014), raising the question of whether the Greater Region can already be described as a cross-border vocational education and training area.

2 The increased significance of cross-border vocational education and training

2.1 Europeanisation and the knowledge society

Knowledge and education play an increasingly important role in the economy, which is characterised by increasing liberalisation and internationalisation. This was taken into account by the European Union's Lisbon Strategy (European Council 2000; cf. Bartsch 2013b) and the Europe 2020 Strategy (European Commission 2015; cf. Becker 2013) by seeking to increase competitiveness within the global economy through economic, social and environmental renewal, and by promoting innovation as a driver of economic growth and the development of the knowledge society. Wholly in line with the Lisbon Strategy, the Belgian Presidency of the European Council launched the so-called Bruges-Copenhagen process in 2001. The aim was to 'Europeanise' vocational education and training, comparable to the Bologna process for university

education, and to increase mobility in vocational education and training. The process was adopted by 31 European education ministers of the EU and EEA countries in 2002 (Bartsch 2013b).

The amendment to the German Vocational Education and Training Act (*Berufsbildungsgesetz, BBiG*) of 2005 must be viewed in this light. Pursuant to section 2(3) of the amended German Vocational Education and Training Act, trainees in Germany can complete up to a quarter of their training abroad (Vocational Education and Training Act of 23 March 2005), and in France, trainees can even complete up to half of their in-company training abroad since February 2009 (*Netzwerk der Fachinstitute der Interregionalen Arbeitsmarktbeobachtungsstelle* [Network of Specialised Institutes of the Interregional Labour Market Observatory] 2014: 106). With regard to cross-border vocational education and training, the Innovation Circle on Vocational Education and Training of the German Federal Ministry for Education and Research [*Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung, BMBF*] (2007) formulated ten guidelines. The main principles and objectives were to strengthen the principle of regulated professions (*Berufsprinzip*), to make vocational education and training more flexible, improve mobility and the recognition of training qualifications, strengthen the duality of education and training and safeguard the potential of the international education and training market. However, these principles and objectives were contingent on more transparent national training systems, which had been very diverse up to that point. Accordingly, in 2009, the European Parliament and the Council adopted a European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (Recommendation of the European Parliament and the Council of 18 June 2009; cf. also Frommberger 2011; Frommberger/Milolaza 2010; Fietz/Reglin/Schöpf 2008; BMBF 2017a), which is similar to that of the Bologna process in higher education. This European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET) was designed to facilitate training mobility and the recognition of training qualifications. However, this was only possible if vocational education and training was documented as skills-based rather than qualification-based. Accordingly, the *Deutsches Institut für Erwachsenenbildung – Leibniz-Zentrum für Lebenslanges Lernen e.V.* [German Institute for Adult Education – Leibniz Centre for Lifelong Learning] developed a skills-oriented profile pass (<http://www.profilpass-online.de>). The visibility of skills was seen as an essential component in assessing the importance of education and training and the recognition of qualifications for a successful placement process (*IBA* 2010: XXVI). With regard to the recognition of qualifications and the approaches subsequently developed to create a cross-border cooperation area for vocational education, the most important assessment criterion should no longer be the formal development of vocational education and training in neighbouring countries, but the skills taught. ‘In the everyday life of the cross-border labour market, employers counter the [...] problems [of the comparability of occupations and qualifications – author’s note] by focusing increasingly on the applicants’ actual skills and less on certificates and diplomas. The question of whether these skills have been formally acquired, for example as part of training or studies, or informally, e.g. as the product of many years of professional experience or personal interest, is increasingly of secondary importance’ (*IBA* 2010: 148).

This paradigm shift in the recognition of qualifications from more formal to skills-related criteria, which until recently has taken place mainly in cross-border placements, played an important role in the subsequent development of cross-border vocational education and training programmes. This is because only the recognition of the cultural and historical differences and the diversity of vocational training systems will eventually enable flexible and pragmatic cooperation in cross-border vocational education and training.

2.2 Economic and demographic disparities

The trends presented thus far do not primarily relate to the neighbourly, cross-border level, i.e. the *interregional* level, but rather to the interstate or international recognition of vocational qualifications, and sometimes to cooperation in vocational education and training. They were a response to the challenges presented by increasing globalisation, international competition and the demands of the knowledge and information society. These challenges naturally also affected cross-border regions such as the Greater Region. In the case of the Greater Region, however, interregional economic and demographic disparities have become an increasingly powerful motivation for the development of integrated cross-border vocational education and training activities. For example, the age structure of the population varies widely from one sub-region of the Greater Region to another. While the population in Luxembourg is comparatively young due to the influx of the labour force, the old-age dependency ratio is higher in the two German sub-regions than in the other regions (cf. *IBA 2006*: VII f; *IBA 2012*: 17 et seq.). Unlike in the neighbouring regions, the populous age groups of those born in the 1950s and 1960s, who will leave the labour force in the next few years, cannot be completely replaced due to the lower birth rates. This means that massive recruitment bottlenecks will occur, especially in the crafts sector, in technical occupations and in healthcare and nursing services, which can be automated only to a limited extent.

The sub-regions of the Greater Region differed (and still differ today) very clearly in parts in relation to the extent of youth unemployment and its likely future development; for example, between 2008 and 2011, the rate was significantly lower in the two German sub-regions (cf. Fig. 1).

These interregional demographic and economic disparities, together with the growing importance of cross-border relations and cross-border regional associations (e.g. Euroregions, EGTCs) in the context of the European integration process and the previously addressed challenges of the knowledge and information society (keywords: 'Europe 2020' and 'lifelong learning') were strong drivers for the development of integrated, comprehensive strategies for cross-border vocational education and training.

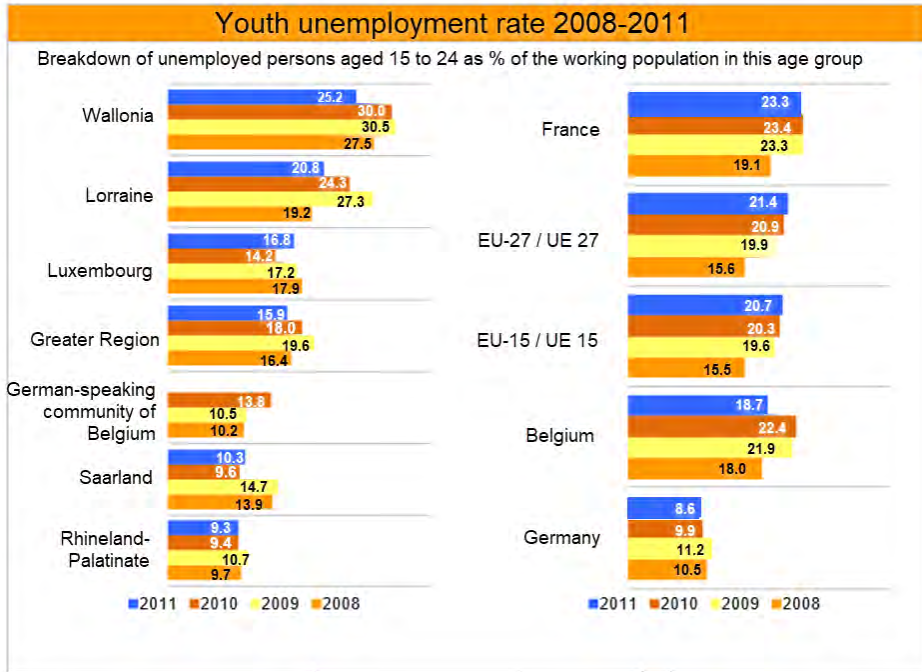


Fig. 1: Youth unemployment rate in the sub-regions of the Greater Region and in der EU / Source: IBA 2012: 40

3 Towards a cross-border cooperation area for vocational education and training

As part of this increased significance of vocational education and training in general and cross-border vocational education and training in particular, activities in this area have intensified in the Greater Region. Milestones towards an integrated cross-border vocational education and training area include the following agreements, which were signed in 2014:

- 1 Framework Agreement on Cooperation in Cross-border Vocational Education and Training in Saarland–Lorraine (*Rahmenvereinbarung für die Kooperation in der grenzüberschreitenden beruflichen Aus- und Weiterbildung Saarland – Lothringen, RVSL 2014*)
- 2 Framework Agreement on Cross-border Vocational Education and Training in the Greater Region (*Rahmenvereinbarung für die Kooperation in der grenzüberschreitenden beruflichen Aus- und Weiterbildung, RVGR 2014*)

While the Saarland-Lorraine framework agreement can be seen as a prototype for the agreements concluded subsequently and for those which are yet to be concluded between other sub-regions of the Greater Region, the Greater Region framework agreement is intended to ‘structure the many activities of different stakeholders at the

local, regional, national and bilateral level, to increase their public visibility and acceptance among the population and to develop the Greater Region into a common living, working and economic area' (RVGR 2014: 5).

Before the negotiation and content of both framework agreements are described in more detail, previous forms of cross-border cooperation in the Greater Region in vocational education and training should first be typologised and summarised.

3.1 Cross-border cooperation in vocational education and training to date

Given the long-standing, intense economic interactions and cross-border commuter relations (cf. Dörrenbächer 2015), it is hardly surprising that there were already several different forms of cross-border cooperation in vocational education and training before the two framework agreements for the Greater Region were negotiated and signed. The report on the economic and social situation in the Greater Region of 2013/2014 for the Economic and Social Committee of the Greater Region provides an overview in this regard (Network of Specialised Institutes of the Interregional Labour Market Observatory 2014: 173 et seq.), as does the 'Task Force on Cross-border Workers' (*Task Force Grenzgänger*) survey (2012). Without claiming to be exhaustive, the report on the economic and social situation in the Greater Region lists more than 50 different measures and projects. Of these, around 20 relate to 'education and training', 18 to 'placements/consulting/recruitment', seven to 'continuing education/exchange programmes' and three to the 'recognition of foreign vocational qualifications'.

It should be stressed that most cross-border cooperation and projects in regard to education and training do not amount to regular basic and/or integrated vocational education and training programmes leading to a national, let alone a joint bi-national, qualification.

In one case (automotive sector, German-speaking Community of Belgium), from 2005 to 2011, all of the practical and theoretical training took place in Germany, while the final exam was taken before a trinational exams board, which allowed the candidates to obtain a trinational qualification. However, this programme no longer exists in this format. In another programme, supported by the professional chambers in Luxembourg, Rhineland-Palatinate and Saarland, Luxembourgers can qualify as professional bookbinders. They attend school in their home country, while practical, in-company training is provided in Rhineland-Palatinate or Saarland.

Yet most of the programmes and projects are short-term offers, such as vocational traineeships at German companies provided by *Formation SaarLor FSL*. FSL is the French subsidiary of *TÜV Nord Bildung Saar*, which evolved from the Service Centre for Vocational Training of *Deutsche Steinkohle AG*. FSL cooperates with the French vocational training institutions *Greta de Sarreguemines – Education Nationale*, the *Association nationale pour la formation professionnelle des adultes (AFPA)* as well as with companies in the region; it also arranges placements for vocational traineeships in companies and offers bilingual programmes for initial vocational education and training in the Völklingen training centre of *TÜV Nord Bildung Saar* (FSL 2017).

The creation of a cross-border cooperation area for vocational education and training crucially depended, as mentioned above, on German and French legislation creating the necessary structures, which happened in 2005 and 2009 respectively; this allowed students to serve part of their vocational education and training abroad, for example in the form of vocational traineeships.

The most important player in this field is the joint training centre *Verbundausbildung Untere Saar e.V. (VAUS)*. This institution, which is supported by the IHK Saarland (Chamber of Industry and Commerce) and Industry and the Saarland Association of the Metal and Electrical Industry, provides vocational students from Saarland and Lorraine with vocational traineeships at companies in the neighbouring country. Vocational traineeships play a major role in the French vocational education and training system (Fig. 2) in particular, where the dual vocational training, which is typical of Germany, is not very common. As part of their three-year senior (vocational) high school diploma (*Baccalauréat professionnel*), students at the vocational high school (*Lycée professionnel*) have to complete several in-company traineeships for a total of 22 weeks (VAUS 2012: 8).

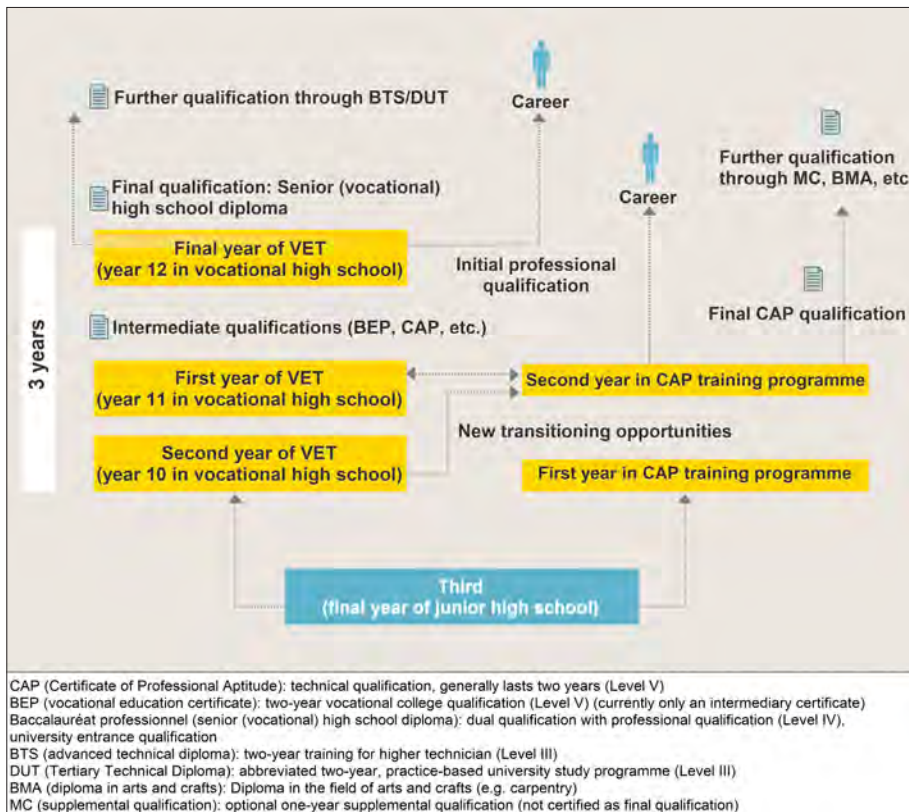


Fig. 2: Various training pathways in the French vocational education and training system after school year 9/Source: Robert Bosch Stiftung 2010: 15, expanded by the author

From 2009 to 2012, VAUS placed more than 150 French and four German trainees as part of the JOB-STARTER programme of the German Federal Ministry for Education and Research (cf. *BMBF* 2017b; *VAUS* 2013) and the European Social Fund's PontSaarLor project (Robichon/Schwarz 2011; *VAUS* 2012) with the help of the cross-border training department established in January 2013 (Saarland 2013; interview with Alexandra Schwarz (*VAUS*), 26 July 2015). The training department was financed by the federal state government of Saarland, the *IHK Saarland*, the Saarland Association of the Metal and Electrical Industry and (since July 2014) by the Employment Agency by means of an 18-month pilot phase.

Thanks to the high number of trainees placed, the PontSaarLor project and the training department have made an important contribution to supporting many young people in neighbouring Lorraine to take advantage of the opportunities offered by cross-border vocational education and training and to public awareness of those opportunities. This also applies to the cross-border vocational education and training made possible by the Saarland–Lorraine Framework Agreement, as explained in the following section, as well as the employment of French trainees by the Saarland company Möbel Martin since 2010 and their training for management assistant positions in the retail trade [*Kaufmann/Kauffrau im Einzelhandel*] (*IHK*, internal: interior design consultant) (*Demografie Netzwerk Saar* [Saar Demography Network] 2014).

Companies such as Möbel Martin, which have been employing French trainees for a number of years thanks to their high proportion of French customers, and *VAUS*, with its department for cross-border training, have established important contacts with French vocational schools along the border and have acquired comprehensive knowledge of the organisation and culture of the French vocational training system and the needs of French trainees. This is essential for the implementation of integrated cross-border vocational education and training programmes.

3.2 Framework Agreement on Cooperation in Cross-border Vocational Education and Training in Saarland-Lorraine

A milestone for the development of the Greater Region as a cross-border cooperation area for vocational education and training is the Framework Agreement on Cooperation in Cross-border Vocational Education and Training in Saarland-Lorraine signed in 2014 (*RVSL* 2014), including the Agreement on Cross-border Vocational Education and Training in Saarland-Lorraine (*AGBSL* 2014) which is based on it.

History of the Framework Agreement

Referring to a declaration already adopted by the education ministers of the Greater Region at a Conference of the Ministers on 6 May 2010, the 12th Summit of the Greater Region on 24 January 2011 recommended 'further intensive cooperation in vocational education and training as an important competitive factor for the regions close to the border, with a particular view to improving language skills' (Joint Declaration, 12th Summit of the Greater Region:13).

The same Summit of the Greater Region had also decided at the time to set up a ‘Task Force on Cross-border Workers’. The task force set up in September 2011 was composed of lawyers from both countries familiar with French and German labour law, who examined in particular the legal hurdles and obstacles that cross-border commuters face on a daily basis, from the recognition of vocational qualifications to labour and social security issues. The task force submitted legal proposals to the ministries and administrative bodies responsible for the labour market and vocational education and training to resolve or remove these obstacles. A separate area of the task force’s work concerned the legal and administrative problems of cross-border vocational education and training in the Greater Region. In a survey on ‘Cross-border vocational education and training in the Greater Region’ (Task Force 2012), published in November 2012, the Task Force summarised the measures already adopted in the Greater Region for cross-border vocational education and training between the various sub-regions, including their potential for development and shortcomings. In this respect, it was of no small relevance to the development of the Framework Agreement.

Of even greater significance for the elaboration of the framework agreement were the already advanced negotiations for the Framework Agreement on Cross-border Vocational Education and Training in the Upper Rhine (*Rahmenvereinbarung über die grenzüberschreitende Berufsausbildung am Oberrhein*, RVOR 2013), which France, the federal states of Baden-Württemberg and Rhineland-Palatinate and the German and French vocational education and training stakeholders in the Upper Rhine region had undertaken at the initiative of the Upper Rhine Conference. This agreement, which was based on many years of experience of cross-border cooperation in vocational education and training in the Upper Rhine region (cf. the paper by Patrice Harster and Frédéric Siebenhaar in this volume), was signed on 12 September 2013. It served as a model for the framework agreement negotiated between Saarland and the Lorraine region.

However, the fact that the Saarland–Lorraine framework agreement was negotiated at an accelerated pace must also be seen in the context of the 2013 celebrations which marked the 50th anniversary of the Elysée Treaty. For example, the 15th German-French Council of Ministers, which was held on 22 January 2013 in Berlin on the occasion of this anniversary, had ‘given full importance to cross-border cooperation and regional integration’ in a joint declaration, stressing that the two countries, ‘coordinated by the representatives for German-French cooperation [...] would strive to bring the German-French border regions closer together, in particular in the fields of the economy, labour market, healthcare, education, training and security’ (Saarbrücken Declaration on German-French cooperation in the border regions of 15 July 2013, 2013: 1). In this respect, the German-French Council of Ministers also proposed a meeting of the government representatives responsible for German-French cooperation, which took place in Saarbrücken in July 2013 at the invitation of the Minister-President of Saarland and the Representative of the Federal Republic of Germany for German-French cultural relations, Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer. In the Saarbrücken Declaration of 15 July 2013 which was adopted on that occasion, the responsible authorities in other border regions were encouraged to ‘follow the example of the Strasbourg/Ortenau Eurodistrict and to develop similar dual vocational

education and training programmes by the end of 2014' (Saarbrücken Declaration on German-French cooperation in the border regions of 15 July 2013: 2 et seq.).

Shortly thereafter, on 25 September 2013, the President of the Lorraine Regional Council, Jean-Pierre Masseret, and the Minister-President of Saarland, Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, signed a political memorandum of understanding on the development of cross-border cooperation in vocational education and training at a strategy meeting on cross-border vocational training organised by the federal state government of Saarland. At this conference, which was marked by the 50th anniversary of the Elysée Treaty, German and French companies discussed their experiences of cross-border education and training. At the same time, on 15 November 2013, the Employment Agency of Saarland and Kaiserslautern-Pirmasens signed a local agreement to set up a German-French placement service to improve recruitment for cross-border employment and training (*Bundesagentur für Arbeit* [German Federal Employment Agency] 2014). In the meantime, the negotiations for a Framework Agreement on Cross-border Vocational Education and Training (*RVOR*) conducted within the area of the Upper Rhine Conference were finalised and the framework agreement was signed on 12 September 2013.

In accordance with the call formulated in the Saarbrücken Declaration of July 2013, the Saarland and the Lorraine region negotiated the strategic objectives for the Framework Agreement on Cooperation in Cross-border Vocational Education and Training in Saarland-Lorraine, following the model for negotiating the framework agreement established by the Upper Rhine (*RVSL* 2014). This agreement was eventually signed on 2 June 2014.

Object of the Framework Agreement and the Agreement on Cross-border Vocational Education and Training in Saarland-Lorraine

The central objective of the framework agreement was the launch of a cross-border training and labour market as of the new 2014/2015 school and training year 'by promoting vocational exchanges between the two areas' and 'strengthening cross-border vocational training between Saarland and Lorraine' (*RVSL* 2014: 3). The agreement was intended to give young German and French people the opportunity to 'complete the practical part of their training on the basis of a training contract in a company in the neighbouring country' (*RVSL* 2014). An essential objective was to contribute to the interlinking of the different training systems, with a special role for the principle of dual vocational education and training practised in Germany, in the form of giving trainees the opportunity to complete their theoretical training in their home country and practical (in-company) training in the neighbouring country. This was intended to address both the problem of the incompatibility of the German and French training systems and the problem of the trainees' insufficient language skills for completing their theoretical training in the neighbouring country.

As indicated by the fact that the document is specifically a framework agreement embodying strategic objectives, the agreement is a flexible framework in which long-term objectives are formulated, leaving room for different forms of cooperation: for example, the partners concurred in the agreement that 'a diverse range of cooperation formats is desirable and worthwhile' (*RVSL* 2014: 4). The framework agreement

thus pursued a diversity-driven approach to the Europeanisation of vocational education and training, which is more focused on gaining skills than on having equal vocational qualifications. It accordingly opened up an area of experimentation for different forms of cross-border cooperation in vocational education and training.

The agreement does not focus solely on Saarland-Lorraine cooperation: the initiatives made possible by the agreement are to be developed ‘in close coordination with the partner regions of the Greater Region, Luxembourg, the Walloon region and Rhineland-Palatinate’ (RVSL 2014; cf. also sections 3.3 and 3.4).

Parallel to the framework agreement, the Agreement on Cross-border Vocational Education and Training in Saarland–Lorraine according to Article 5 of the Framework Agreement on Cooperation in Cross-border Vocational Education and Training (AGBSL 2014) was signed on the same day. The signatories were the French state, the Lorraine Region, the *Académie de Metz-Nancy, the Direction régionale de l'alimentation, de l'agriculture et de la forêt*, the Lorraine Chamber of Trades, the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of the Lorraine Region, the Saarland Chamber of Industry and Commerce, the Saarland Chamber of Trades, the Saarland Chamber of Agriculture and the Regional Directorate for Rhineland-Palatinate of the German Federal Employment Agency.

‘The agreements will enable young people from Lorraine and Saarland to enter into a training contract with a company in the neighbouring country and complete the practical part of their training there. The theoretical component takes place at the vocational school in the home country. At the end of the training, the young people then take the final exam and acquire their vocational qualification in their home country, where they have completed their vocational schooling. In addition, provided that the conditions are met, they have the option of additionally taking the final exam in the partner country. Vocational education and training for a total of 15 occupations can be provided across borders’ (Network of Specialised Institutes of the Interregional Labour Market Observatory 2014: 102).

Implementation of the Framework Agreement and the Agreement on Cross-border Vocational Education and Training in Saarland-Lorraine to date

The training provided for by the Framework Agreement and the Agreement on Cross-border Vocational Education and Training is particularly important for those Saarland companies which, because of their high proportion of French customers, have great interest in attracting French employees and are already retaining them through the company’s own vocational education and training programmes. As the example of Möbel Martin shows, these companies have had recruitment problems hitherto because most trainees have not been able to complete the theoretical part of their training in Germany due to a lack of language skills. The framework agreement was able to remedy this impediment.

Immediately after the framework agreement and the agreement based on it were signed, the two Saarland companies Möbel Martin and Globus (operators of consumer and DIY markets) together with the *Lycée professionnel Henri-Nominé* in Sarreguemines (Lorraine) launched an alternating academic and in-house company train-

ing programme [*formation en alternance*], which ends with the qualification of Advanced Technical Diploma in Client negotiations and relations (*Brevet de technicien supérieur – Négociation et relation client*' - *BTS-NRC*). The certificate is similar to that of the German 'Management Assistant in the Retail Trade' qualification. The trainees enter into a training contract with the German companies Möbel Martin and Globus and complete their practical training there. The theoretical training and the final exam take place at the vocational training centres of the CFA (*Centre de formation d'apprentis*) in Sarreguemines (*Lycée professionnel Henri-Nominé*) in their own 'alternating' Advanced Technical Diploma (BTS en alternance) project class. The trainees obtain the French vocational qualification of an Advanced Technical Diploma in Client Negotiations and Relations (*BTS-NRC*). Optionally, if they have the appropriate language skills, they can also obtain the German *IHK* qualification after completing the two-year training programme.

In addition to this Möbel Martin / Globus project for commercial training, the Michelin model for commercial training was launched in the 2015/16 academic year: currently, two French trainees attend vocational school in Sarreguemines and are completing the required vocational traineeships at Michelin in Homburg in order to obtain a French electrician's qualification. The *IHK* and the corresponding French authorities align the content of the programme with the regulated occupation of energy electronics technicians. The three-year training course in France is followed by a six-month vocational traineeship with the option of taking the practical exam for the German certification system for this occupation (Nagel 2015: 18). In addition, Michelin Homburg has concluded an agreement with the industry training institution CFAI (*Centre de formation d'apprentis de l'industrie*) in Yutz (Lorraine) for other skilled occupations.

In contrast to these two models, where employment is based in Germany under German law and the (theoretical) training is under French law (in France), the car manufacturer SMART is training an apprentice in Hambach (Lorraine) under German law.

A total of 13 trainees started a cross-border '*formation en alternance*' in the 2015/16 academic year based on the Framework Agreement and the Agreement on Cross-border Vocational Education and Training in Saarland-Lorraine, of whom 11 are currently (March 2016) still in training (cf. Schneider/Otto/Dauenhauer 2016); Dorka/Frisch 2015).

3.3 Framework Agreement on Cross-border Vocational Training in the Greater Region

While the framework agreement between Saarland and Lorraine and the agreement based on it provide a basis for the operational implementation of cross-border vocational training courses, the Greater Region Framework Agreement, which entered into force on 5 November 2014, serves to structure the different cross-border vocational education and training activities, defining common objectives for cross-border vocational training policy and identifying suitable approaches to action

to achieve these objectives. ‘It also describes information and communication measures aimed at raising awareness among citizens and businesses in the Greater Region about the existing opportunities for cross-border vocational education and training and increasing their public visibility and acceptance. In order to document the progress in implementing the framework agreement and to derive recommendations for further steps [...] a structured reporting procedure is provided for, which institutionalises a new quality of cooperation in the Greater Region’ (RVGR: 5).

In accordance with Article 2 of the Framework Agreement, the partners support and strengthen different forms of cross-border vocational education and training, such as practical training in the neighbouring country and theoretical training in their home country or in several countries or domestic training in their home country and several traineeships in the neighbouring country. Accordingly, various models of cross-border continuing vocational training are listed.

In line with the legal, cultural and organisational diversity of national vocational education and training systems referred to in a previous section and the associated need to transparently document vocational training courses and to recognise achievements in a skills-based, flexible manner, Article 3 cites, among other things, ‘bi- and multilateral agreements and experimental clauses [...] [and] the use and improvement of the possibilities for determining equivalence or recognising vocational qualifications and vocational and continuing training degrees acquired abroad’ (RVGR: 9) as important approaches to action to realise the joint objectives. The significance of the fact that the Framework Agreement explicitly addresses and communicates this open, flexible approach to cross-border cooperation in continuing vocational training as a pragmatic possibility should not be underestimated.

3.4 Other agreements concluded in preparation for the implementation of the Framework Agreement

Based on the example of the Framework Agreement for the Greater Region (and in line with the Saarland-Lorraine Framework Agreement), Lorraine and the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg declared their intention to cooperate on vocational education and training in May 2015 (Hasser, C. 2015: Slide 1). Similar to the Saarland-Lorraine examples of cross-border cooperation, the IUT (*Institut Universitaire de Technologie*) Henri Poincaré in Longwy and the Chamber of Labour of Luxembourg (*Chambre des Salariés Luxembourg, CSL*) have, among other things, launched a training programme for accounting and financial management, which is offered as an alternating education and training programme. The trainees are employed in a Luxembourg company and pursue their studies in evening and weekend courses. They complete their training with a ‘*Licence professionnelle de gestion comptable*’, an accountancy qualification similar to a bachelor’s degree (Kubler 2015). The programme offers very good employment prospects in the region for Lorraine professionals, who already have a relationship with a company. In addition, the recruitment problems of Luxembourg companies affected by staff shortages and ageing can be reduced.

For their part, the Lorraine region and the Federal State of Rhineland-Palatinate have carried out a survey in order to formulate common objectives for a framework agreement planned between the two regions. An exchange of information and experience is currently underway with the Walloon region in preparation for negotiations for an agreement to be defined (Hasser, C. 2015: Slide 1). Finally, on 29 February 2016, the German-speaking Community of Belgium and the Federal State of Rhineland-Palatinate, as well as key players in vocational education and training in both regions, signed an agreement to implement the Framework Agreement on Cross-border Vocational Education and Training in the Greater Region (*Verinbarung zur Umsetzung der Rahmenvereinbarung über grenzüberschreitende Berufsbildung in der Großregion, VDGBRLP*).

4 Challenges and outlook

Cross-border vocational education and training have gained substantial importance given the intensification of the European integration process, the resulting increase in cross-border relations and the enhanced importance of education, training and know-how in today's knowledge society, as well as in the light of socio-demographic and economic disparities between neighbouring border regions. The number of measures and programmes has increased sharply over the last 10 to 15 years. A paradigm shift in cross-border cooperation in vocational education and training is also noticeable; this is characterised by a pragmatic, flexible approach based on skills. In the context of the exchange of experience and the common learning processes of the regional stakeholders involved, a wide variety of forms of cross-border vocational education and training, which had not previously been considered possible, are being tested. The framework agreement negotiated between Saarland and Lorraine and the Framework Agreement on Vocational Training in the Greater Region, as well as the other agreements signed in preparation in the Greater Region, support these new pragmatic forms of cooperation. At the same time, they themselves are also an expression of this process of transformation towards an integrated cross-border vocational education and training market.

Yet this market is still hampered by various obstacles and hurdles; the lack of language skills is still one of the biggest challenges. A lack of interest in cross-border vocational education and training, coupled with a lack of knowledge, and sometimes even prejudices and unrealistic expectations on the part of both companies and potential/prospective trainees, continue to present significant hurdles. It is to be hoped that the process (e.g. framework agreements) described in this paper will help to reduce them.

In addition to mental reservations, there are a number of 'hard' (legal, financial, infrastructural) hurdles and challenges for cross-border vocational education and training: the financing of vocational education and training for German training companies is a problem in that the theoretical training in France is usually subject to academic fees and thus an additional burden for companies that already pay their trainees a salary in Germany, unless compensation is provided through complicated political agreements. Furthermore, the framework agreements ultimately do not

provide a solution for the issue of direct dual diplomas in cross-border training programmes. Another problem for the young trainees, who usually do not have their own car, is the poor accessibility of the training companies by cross-border public transport (cf. the paper by Caesar/Heilmann/Saalbach/Schreiner in this volume).

In view of the remaining enormous hurdles to cross-border vocational education and training and the very small number of cross-border trainees, the Greater Region can only be described to a limited extent as an integrated vocational training market and a training education and region, as posited in the title of this paper.

And for very different reasons, it is doubtful that the Greater Region can ever become one. As has been pointed out above, the framework agreements that have been entered into and which are yet to be entered into in this regard, as well as the individual measures and programmes for cross-border vocational education and training, reflect and are at the same time the result of contingent intersectoral and interregional learning and adaptation processes, which must navigate between the institutional framework conditions (top-down) and situational conditions using local/regional and person-to-person knowledge ('tacit knowledge'). In other words, a cross-border vocational education and training region will, by its very nature, remain at best an open-ended process.

The recent territorial reform in France, which has combined the regions of Alsace, Lorraine and Champagne-Ardenne into the 'Grand Est' region (cf. the paper by Patrice Harster/Kristine Clev in this volume), creates a regional setting in which processes, which have previously been running more or less independently of each other, can potentially be linked more quickly and brought together into joint regional learning processes. This may open up new potentials and opportunities for cross-border vocational education and training in today's Greater Region. As a result, the Greater Region in its current format will receive a further important developmental boost as a cross-border vocational education and training region.

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