

Editorial

What's in a name?

THE GERMAN Association of Engineers (or is it Federation of Engineers?), the VDI, appointed a committee to establish the English—or American—equivalents of German professional degree designations, and conversely, the German translations of English and/or American degrees and titles in engineering. The committee concluded that a direct word-for-word translation between the two languages can be misleading and could invoke 'a negative impression and competitive position of graduates from the German education system'. The report, which was circulated to all engineering faculties, goes on to say that the term 'engineer' in the English language stems from the word engine, which in German is a 'Maschine' (or is it machine in English, i.e. an 'engineer' is really a 'machinist'!?). Consequently, all those dealing with technology can call themselves 'engineers'. For example, the chap (or is it guy?) who sets the signals for British Rail trains calls himself an engineer. Even though he should not be proud of it because his title is not protected—as it is in Germany. The report also says that the title is not protected in the USA (what about the PE in the US?). Then it explains that a 'professional engineering' title in the British system corresponds to the 'structure' of the German 'dual system', which is the vocational technical education track. It also says that the British system of 'Professional Engineer' has three levels: 'Engineering Technician', 'Incorporated Engineer' and 'Chartered Engineer'. This last title is then described as requiring a bachelor's degree, two years of training and two years of professional experience—and is to be compared to a German 'Diplom-Ingenieur' title. If you aren't confused by now, you should be. Although one can assume that the committee knows what it is talking about, the written document hardly reflects this. First, the dual system in Germany does not produce 'professional' let alone chartered engineers but produces vocational professionals. Even the structure of this professional education is dissimilar to British higher education. Second, the claim that a German 'Diplom-Ingenieur', with a nominal four years of higher education including a year of internships is comparable to a chartered engineer with a nominal three years of university training and four years of training including monitored industrial experience is sheer megalomania. The German and English equivalent terms arrived at are the final coup. In order not to confuse the systems, the verdict is: do not translate the terms at all. As a result a German 'Ingenieur' has a straightforward translation of 'Ingenieur' into English; a German 'Universität' is a (or is it an?) 'Universität' in English; and a German 'Fachhochschule' is a 'Fachhochschule' in English—and so on. While avoiding translations may be commendable, many statements in the report are inconsistent, confusing and inaccurate, and can lead to greater misunderstanding than those invoked by naked ignorance alone. A sensitive area such as degree and qualification comparisons requires more careful documentation. If you come across this report put it in the 'active file' and forget it.

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