© Herbert Joos | DHBW

Prof. Dr.-Ing. Konrad Reif
Head of the Department of
Vehicle Electronics and
Mechatronic Systems, Baden-
Württemberg Cooperative State
University (DHBW), Ravensburg
(Germany)

Taking Responsibility

Talented, well-educated and motivated young individuals are necessary when it comes to enabling societal progress in general and securing the continued success of our economy in particular. Indeed, young people are our most valuable resource.

Institutions of higher education play an important role when it comes to providing opportunities to young people and guiding them in the right direction. One aspect of this responsibility involves preparing graduates for professional careers, a task that has unfortunately become somewhat more difficult in recent years. Following the one-year reduction in the number of years German students spend preparing for university study and the abolishment of mandatory conscription for young men, high school graduates now begin their university education 18 to 24 months earlier. In the lives of young people who are expected to begin making career decisions, these months may be crucial. My colleagues and I have noticed a difference. Many students may simply not yet be mature enough to manage their studies. Decisions to drop out are often made not only for academic reasons, but also for personal reasons.

Business leaders have signaled similar concerns. While many companies used to complain that college graduates were too old, they now question whether their entry-level employees have had a sufficient opportunity for the kind of personal development they will need to take on the demands of a committed professional career.

For these reasons, I regard it as essential to make sure that young, aspiring professionals in their late twenties and early thirties continue to have an opportunity to attend college! Lawmakers, business leaders and college representatives face the common challenge of enabling and promoting such opportunities. Lawmakers can ensure the availability of sufficient funding for institutions of higher education. Business leaders can establish conditions to facilitate work-study programs. After all, the application of theoretical and applied science in real-world settings is vital to the future of our country.

Industry is called upon to get more involved in education, financially and in a promotional capacity. While much is already being done, it is still not enough to secure a sufficiently competitive workforce well into the future. Educational institutions are called upon to identify key professional roles in the economy and to orient their curricula accordingly. It will also be important in this connection to work together closely with the automobile industry as it too adapts to new market conditions.

Some may seek to play down the urgency by pointing to the relatively high standards maintained at German colleges compared to other educational institutions around the world. This would be misguided. Education and applied science have always been among our biggest strengths. Let us all join forces and secure this important tradition.