

## 1.8. Stakeholders in the German and the Swiss VET system and their role in innovating apprenticeships

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**Summary:** This contribution compares stakeholders' roles in Germany and Switzerland when it comes to promoting innovation in the dual apprenticeship system. In both countries the relevant stakeholders who represent the various occupations and, in a more narrow sense, the social partners actively shape apprenticeship reforms. They represent the area of public educational policy, besides governments, political parties and the public, who, in both countries, appreciate the decisive role of apprenticeships for youth education, employment and social stability. Thus, the justification of reform measures and broad consensus of different stakeholders is decisive in order to keep apprenticeship systems alive.

**Keywords:** Apprenticeships, dual system, VET comparison, higher VET, the changing institutional context of VET, VET policy

### Introduction

#### **VET reforms in Europe**

Most countries in Europe are nowadays reforming their VET systems. Especially German-style VET is seen as a "good practice" (cf. Deissinger 2015, Gonon 2014). However, most projects aiming at implementing such an apprenticeship underestimate the decisive role and interplay between the different stakeholders as system variables. Even in Germany and Switzerland, the reform agenda for VET and motivations to maintain the quantitative and qualitative importance of the traditional apprenticeship system are under permanent scrutiny. The coordination of different reform interests require compromises, which are bound to a culture of mutual agreements. At the same time, the environment of the dual system, i.e. the apprenticeship system, has changed, as demographic change and academisation exert pressure on traditional pathways into employment (Deissinger & Breuing 2014).

#### **Reform agenda and actors in Germany and Switzerland**

In Germany, chambers, employer organisations and trade unions represent these major actors, which are responsible for various functions in the apprenticeship system beyond the narrow sphere of governmental regulation, above all when it comes to modernisation of training courses. Recently apprenticeship offers declined and youngsters and their parents prefer more and more academic tracks, and some authors call this "academic madness" (Nida-Rümelin 2014).

In Switzerland, the "organizations of the world of work" (including branch organisations, social partners), alongside the federal and cantonal authorities, play an important part in the

VET system as the relevant actors in transforming vocational education. Especially trade associations and occupational interest groups have a strong impact on reforming the VET system. In Switzerland, too, the public quest and commitment for apprenticeships is decisive to keep the system running.

The most important reform in both countries is to encourage firms offering apprenticeships. Besides it is also important to convince parents and youngsters that apprenticeships are still and will remain career openers. That is why, in Switzerland, hybrid qualifications, in contrast with Germany, are seen as an important way to keep firm-based training and apprenticeship attractive.

## The justification approach to VET

In the following we sketch the value background of the stakeholders or actors in both countries. These actors come up with certain values and claims, which have to be integrated in the field of VET learning and teaching. The stakeholders, i.e. actors, rely on values, which have to be justified in the phase of reforming the system. That is why they promote certain aspects of vocational learning. The following table is inspired by the work of Boltanski & Thevenot (2006) and has been applied to the field of VET policy.

**Table 1: Justification-related concepts concerning the issue of quality in the context of vocational education – as vocational education presents itself (see Gonon 2015 forthcoming)**

Values	Justification	Translation into curricula and vocational learning	Actors
Political world	Equal rights and chances, social autonomy	Citizenship and economic education	National educational policy Teachers' associations
World of industry and trade	Occupational efficiency, "Employability", Efficiency	On-the-job learning, Occupational subjects	Professional associations, Employers, Employees
World of inspiration and personality development	Individual development, creativity & innovation	Mother tongue and society, languages (arts)	Parents Teachers' associations

## Methodology

The methodology is built upon the justification approach and theoretical assumptions which lead our content analysis. Our comparative paper looks at the topical reform discourse and the specific culture of apprenticeships in the two countries by focussing on those stakeholders that "bear" the system. The paper draws its insights from the VET policy debate and from both national policy documents and national and international expert publications in the field of VET. The approach is a content analysis. A strong focus is given to the new environment of the VET system nowadays.

## Results

### ***The value of VET, progression to higher education and the function of higher VET qualifications – a comparative view on Germany and Switzerland***

In both countries endeavours exist to strengthen dual VET models, but on different levels. Whereas in Switzerland the initial training has been strengthened by offering hybrid pathways for completers leading into higher education, the German reforms aim at hybridising the higher vocational and professional education system. Dual higher VET, e.g. “vocational academies” (Deissinger 2000) and universities of applied sciences, now offer dual tracks (partly based on company-training and partly involving studies), which are being pushed also benefiting from the “Bologna reform”. German and Swiss reformers justify their measures through stressing the values of economic growth, citizenship and personal development.

The problem that has arisen in Germany is that this is not really a way of strengthening traditional apprenticeships. There are four areas of “tertiarisation” which have the potential to jeopardise the dual system in the long run: (1) new Bachelor courses at universities with a strong employability character; (2) vocational schools which are attended by students not for employment qualification purposes but in order to obtain a higher school qualification; (3) the above-mentioned “vocational academies”, now called “dual universities”; and (4) overarching the whole problem, the general academisation of school education, focussing on easier transition to upper secondary education and on comprehensive models of school education on the level of lower secondary education (years 5-10).

At the same time, employers and trade unions do not become tired to underline their interest in stabilising the dual system in the face of a growing demand for skilled employees in the German economy.

In contrast to Germany, firms and associations of employers, but also statist actors and political parties in Switzerland, have aimed at strengthening the initial training by providing more academic options. This policy is based on a broad consensus of all stakeholders, with the conviction underlying that the apprenticeship system is a “success story”. Nevertheless it has some practical implications for firms and apprentices: the hybrid programs are too overloaded and firms and apprentices have to cope with practical problems of coordination.

Although Germany and Switzerland stand for the training model called the “dual system”, they differ in some interesting facets of their initial training systems, including mechanisms helping people to progress from VET to higher education, since, in both countries, new options in the field of higher VET and progress to higher education are being offered and established although their structural realisation is remarkably different (Deissinger et al. 2013; Gonon 2013).

In both countries the importance and value of VET is based on consensus by all relevant stakeholders. The main argument hereby is that apprenticeships have so far successfully opened and should continue to open career paths in industry but should also have some kind of link with higher education. Against what could be called “academic fallacy” and increasing “meritocratic thinking” (for Switzerland cf. Strahm 2014, for Germany Nida-Rümelin 2014; see also Goldthorpe 1996), the importance of a highly qualified workforce, trained in non-academic fields, and the future of this kind of skill formation have become major topics and concerns in both societies.

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