

# Stakeholders in the German and Swiss vocational educational and training system

## Their role in innovating apprenticeships against the background of academisation

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### Abstract

**Purpose** The purpose of this paper is to compare stakeholders' roles in Germany and Switzerland when it comes to promoting innovation in the dual apprenticeship model. In both countries, the relevant stakeholders who represent the various occupations and, in a more narrow sense, the social partners, actively shape vocational education and training (VET) 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 broad consensus of the relevant stakeholders is crucial in order to keep apprenticeship systems alive. Both countries face challenges related to academisation, which means, that the Gymnasium (high school) and higher education now are even more the first option for parents than in former times. On several levels German and Swiss policy makers try to strengthen VET paying tribute to and trying to cope with these developments.

**Design/methodology/approach** The paper is situated in the field of comparative VET research. Based on policy documents and findings from research the paper analyses the discourse and perspectives related to VET reforms. The authors deliberately focus on two countries, Germany and Switzerland, which share a great deal of common features in relation to VET, nevertheless developed different measures in order to cope with the pressure of increasing the ratio of students in higher education. The comparative paper looks at the topical reform discourse and taken measures and the specific culture of apprenticeships in the two countries by focusing on those stakeholders, which, besides governments, are crucially involved in 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. A strong focus is given to the emerging new environment of the VET system. Methodologically, the paper draws from an institutional view on VET, which is being discussed broadly in comparative research, since VET systems with a "dual system", such as the two discussed here, may be categorized as "state steered market models", "occupation based qualifications styles", "collective skill formation systems" or specific realizations of "transition systems". All these categories refer to the observation that in these societies it is not the state alone, who defines the structure of the respective VET system, but non state stakeholders are capable of influencing VET policy and VET reform in a substantial and visible way.

**Findings** In both countries, Germany and Switzerland, the importance and value of VET is based on an overall consensus, shared by all relevant actors. The basis of this consensus is that the dual system so far successfully opened and should continue to open career paths in industry. Apprenticeships undoubtedly are cornerstones of economic welfare in these countries and can be associated with low youth unemployment rates. A supplementary aspect in the last years however is the political will that VET should also have some kind of link with higher education. Despite some interesting reform measures ambivalences cannot be ignored: against what could be called "academic fallacy" 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.

**Originality/value** This paper is comparing two similar cases, Switzerland and Germany, in VET in order to profile reform alternatives. Furthermore the actors beyond state are highlighted as important element for reform in VET education.

**Keywords** Apprenticeships, Stakeholders, Academisation, Dual system, VET reform

**Paper type** Research paper

### **Introduction: vocational education and training (VET) under pressure**

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Most countries in Europe are nowadays reforming their VET systems. Especially German-style VET is seen as “good practice” and still gains international attraction (Deissinger, 2015a; Gonon 2014a). However, despite its attractiveness, its established role and international reputation as against obvious shortcomings in other countries (Fürstenau *et al.*, 2014), the traditional apprenticeship system, even in the homelands of the “dual system”, is now facing increased pressure. Thus reforming and improving VET have become issues for governments as well as stakeholders even in German-speaking countries such as Germany and (parts of) Switzerland.

### **Scope and methodology**

Our paper is situated in the field of comparative VET research. Based on policy documents and findings from research the paper analyses the discourse and perspectives related to VET reforms. We deliberately focus on two countries, Germany and Switzerland, which share a great deal of common features in relation to VET, although they have developed diverging strategies in order to cope with the pressure of “academic drift” – which mainly means that there is an increasing share of young people leaving school who now want to enter higher education. The paper draws its insights from the respective VET policy debate and from both national policy documents and national and international expert publications in the field of VET. A strong focus is given to the emerging new environment of the VET system.

Methodologically, the paper draws from an institutional view on VET, which is being discussed broadly in comparative research, since VET systems, such as the two discussed here, may be categorized as “state-steered market models” (Greinert, 1988), “occupation-based qualifications styles” (Deissinger, 1995), “collective skill formation systems” (Busemeyer and Trampusch, 2012) or specific realizations of “transition systems” (Raffe, 2008). All these categories refer to the observation that in these societies it is not the state alone, which defines the structure of the respective VET system, but stakeholders beyond the state are capable of influencing VET policy and VET reform in a substantial and visible way. Raffe (2008), e.g. mentions the “societal approach” with an emphasis on “the holistic interrelationships among different social and economic institutions, including education and training, the labour market and industrial relations systems [...]” (p. 278). It is in this light that the following arguments will be developed.

### **The current reform agenda for VET in Germany and Switzerland: keeping apprenticeships attractive and opening access to higher education**

Germany and Switzerland may still be called “apprenticeship countries”. The German-speaking part of Switzerland and Germany, however have quite a number of similarities, above all strong employer commitment and involvement of non-state stakeholders within the VET system.

In Germany, the apprenticeship system (known as the “dual system”) still represents the major direct pathway in the field of post-compulsory education for school leavers. The majority of apprentices now come from the intermediate secondary schools. The system consists of two learning venues, i.e. the vocational part-time school and the company, which is – as in Switzerland – the “triggering element” of the apprenticeship since the training contract is an essential prerequisite for entering the dual system. Besides the German state, both on the federal and the federal state level, who is responsible for training regulations and school curricula, chambers, employer organizations and trade unions represent major actors, which shape the VET system beyond government regulation (such as the training law, the school law and the mandatory dual principle due to the role vocational part-time schools play in the system). The role of chambers reaches back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and since the early twentieth century employer organizations have been responsible for various functions in the apprenticeship system beyond the narrow sphere of governmental regulation, above all when it comes to the establishment and on-going modernization of training courses.

In Switzerland, the “organizations of the world of work” (including branch organizations, social partners), alongside the federal and cantonal authorities, play an important part in the VET system as relevant actors in shaping and influencing VET. Especially trade associations and occupational interest groups have a strong impact when it comes to reforming the VET system. Also, like in Germany, the issue of attractiveness of the apprenticeship system has emerged as a crucial public and political issue. Although the reputation of apprenticeships is still high (even more than in Germany) the academic pathway through the general education system is now becoming more important. Nevertheless, in Switzerland the quota of academic high school leavers (traditionally from the Gymnasium) among the school-leaving population is clearly lower than in Germany and most other European countries, and the quota of VET graduates is still the highest worldwide (Wettstein *et al.*, 2015).

The most important political issue in both countries however is still to encourage firms to offer apprenticeships, in particular for lower achievers among the school-leaving population. In Germany, some sectors report serious problems for companies who want to recruit new apprentices and employees in the long run, even in regions where one would normally expect an over-demand on the side of young people. This matching problem is due to imbalances in the training market between regions and occupational sectors and is also associated with training preferences of young people (Matthes and Ulrich, 2014). Against this background, from the perspective of a well-functioning VET system, it seems even more important to convince parents and youngsters alike that apprenticeships are still and will remain a solid basis for employment and also career openers. That is why, in both countries, new pathways which open up access to higher education have been created in order to keep firm-based training and apprenticeships attractive (see Graf, 2016).

### **The role of employers in the German and Swiss VET system**

In both countries, employers have a decisive role in VET. They provide the learning opportunities and the practical field of experiences needed to build up portable occupational competences. Employer associations are committed to developing and revising training regulations together with other stakeholders, although in Germany, since the 1970s the Federal Institute of Vocational Training (*Bundesinstitut für Berufsbildung*) has emerged as a supporting institution. However, some facets of this

coordination are different between Germany and Switzerland. In Germany, the chambers (as examination bodies) are the most important non-governmental organizations in the VET system. In Switzerland, the trade associations are the corresponding dominant elements in the VET system when it comes to creating and revising occupational profiles. These structural differences are the result of specific historical developments in the context of the creation of a national education system. Historically, in Switzerland, the trade associations traditionally played a central role in the VET system (Gonon and Maurer, 2012). Their first aim was to protect small local businesses. A different role was taken by “big industry”, which was much more export-oriented and relied on more or less unqualified workers. Only in the 1930s, industry was also included within the framework of the first nationwide VET legislation. This federal act, which covers nowadays all non-academic occupations, was renewed and enacted again in 1965, 1980 and 2004.

The 1969, the German Vocational Training Act, renewed in 2005, became the first federal act which comprehensively governed the structure and quality of training in the workplace (Deissinger, 1996). For constitutional reasons – unlike in Switzerland – it does not interfere with the federal states’ responsibility for vocational education in schools. More than its public function suggests, this law focuses much more on the principle of self-administration and the responsibilities of chambers, which culturally represent this model, than on the function of the state to govern the system directly. The principle of self-administration goes back to the Craft Act of 1897 (Winkler, 1976), which contributed to the foundations of the corporatist framework still typical of the VET system and stipulated chambers as self-governing organizations for the craft sector. Like in Switzerland, industry became formally involved within this framework as late as in the 1920s (Schütte, 1992). Today, the major functions of chambers (being employer organizations at the same time) include the supervision of training in companies, the registration of training contracts and examinations for initial training and continuing training (such as, e.g. the “Meister” courses). Chambers exist in various sectors of the economy. In the training system, the chambers of industry and commerce, and the craft chambers represent the two major institutions: In sum, their member companies train some 86 per cent of all apprentices within the VET system.

### **The role of trade unions in the German and Swiss VET system**

The position of social partners and chambers is particularly strong in the German VET system and has to be seen as one of the essential parameters for its “success story”, but also for its inherent conservatism. It is especially the unions which in post-war Germany never became tired to emphasize that vocational training should be a public issue and seen as “education” rather than “employment”. Their view of the state’s role protecting young people from “being exploited” (which turned up as a political issue in the 1960s) underlies a number of their political beliefs and objectives with respect to the VET system. This also explains why they look at competence orientation detached from the holistic notion of an occupation as an un-pedagogical didactical concept including a critical stance towards European Qualifications Framework and modularisation (Drexel, 2005). It is interesting that the craft sector and its associations, in line with the major trade unions, such as the metal workers’ union (“IG Metall”), have a similar understanding when it comes to making training occupations flexible. The fact that nearly all craft occupations in Germany are “mono occupations” underlines this trust in the vocational principle. Moreover, German VET may be seen as a model where “collective skill formation” is one of the crucial

mechanisms. This kind of non-market coordination “allows firms to solve problems of market failure in the joint production of human capital [...], which leads to a higher willingness of employers to provide training. Employment and social protection in turn enhance the willingness of workers to invest in vocational skills [...]” (Busemeyer and Schlicht-Schmälzle, 2014, p. 61). The German production model as it re-developed after Second World War certainly has one of its most stable pillars in the availability of these high-quality vocational skills contributing “to the long-term political sustainability of collective skill systems” (Busemeyer and Schlicht-Schmälzle, 2014). Therefore, trade unions play a historically important role. They try to inject their interests and beliefs into the debate and are motivated, also in a European context of VET policy, to safeguard the existing German VET system (Klenk, 2013).

In Switzerland, the trade unions stressed the importance of high qualifications of the workforce and the protection of young workers in the process of developing the first legislation dealing with these issues in 1930. However, this federal law did not explicitly focus on labour protection. Nevertheless mandatory schooling and the regulation of apprenticeship contracts were measures pushed forward by the unions. The Swiss trade unions are not as visible in negotiating VET reforms as those in Germany. In the 1970s, and again in the 1990s, this became obvious when they urged to strengthen the state’s role in enhancing the quantity and quality of apprenticeships. The 1998 initiative, launched by unions and youth organizations, argued with the introduction of federal measures to increase the supply of apprenticeships. It was then even argued with a new mode of financing which should reward and penalize firms depending on their commitment to provide enough training opportunities for apprentices. This initiative was defeated but led to a renewed Federal Vocational Act in 2004, including some of these claims (Gonon, 2016a). All in all, the Swiss unions are also strong supporters of the topical VET reforms. Recently, they also came out with giving their consent to initiatives aiming at open access to higher education.

### **The debate on VET reforms**

In both countries, the VET reform debate is fostered by the stagnant or even shrinking numbers of apprenticeships and the rise of school-based and academic programmes.

The chambers in Germany and the trade associations in Switzerland as well as big companies and their associations in both countries stress the necessity of adequate recruitment for vocational training and suitable qualifications for the workplace. At the same time, there is now an emerging debate on the adequacy of an accelerated academisation in both societies (Strahm, 2014; Nida-Rümelin, 2014). Instead of choosing “overcrowded” academic pathways, vocationally oriented schemes still offer – according to these critical authors – a reasonable career option in industry and trade. In a similar way, the unions and other interest groups representing employees cheer the qualitatively high standard of VET. Their plea is to encourage employers to offer more apprenticeships in order to maintain social and economic stability. These shared values and interests from different perspectives, articulated by chambers, trade associations on the one side and unions on the other side, normally lead to compromises when it comes to organizing and reforming VET. The overall aim of these reforms, generally, is to stabilize the existing VET system. Academisation as a growing phenomenon of an expanding higher education is so to say the contrast to a well-established and broadly accepted VET system.

Besides, it is also the teacher associations and nearly all political parties who share these concerns and argue for a strong VET system. It is quite unique and astonishing

to observe that this pattern of an overall “consensus community” (Weber, 1985, p. 417), similar to the social mechanisms typical of the corporations in the ancient guild system, still can be seen as a dominant VET policy pattern which functions well in both countries up to the present day.

### **The impact of academisation and VET reforms in Germany and Switzerland**

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In Germany, the number of young people taking up higher education courses is now higher than the number of beginners in the VET system (Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung, 2014, p. 6). This trend in the education system has a more or less direct impact on subsequent educational streams leading away from VET. At the same time, employers have been reducing their commitment to offering apprenticeship training during the last couple of years. It may be asserted, too, that the VET system itself – with its full-time VET schools – indirectly fosters the expansion of higher education. Interestingly, the insight that educational expansion and the underlying meritocratic aspirations are bound to affect VET was already discussed in the late 1950s (Herrlitz *et al.*, 1986, p. 155). Today, however, we are challenged to look at this phenomenon in a more differentiated way.

Four areas of academisation in the German context can be distinguished (Deissinger, 2015b):

- (1) German vocational full-time schools outside the apprenticeship model relate to the general educational programme by imparting the same qualifications (lower secondary, intermediate secondary, upper secondary), which means they open up the so-called “vocational education career pathway”. In this context, specific schools such as vocational high schools and *Berufsoberschulen*, leading to a general university entrance qualification, and *Fachoberschulen* and *Berufskollegs*, advanced vocational schools leading to admission to universities of applied science, have to be considered. These schools link directly to the higher education system (Schindler, 2014).
- (2) There is a (small) segment within the vocational full-time school system, which delivers “hybrid qualifications”. This scheme offers “combinations of accredited general (academic) and vocational learning and attainment that formally qualify for entrance to Higher Education and the labour market” (Deissinger *et al.*, 2013, p. 8). Hybrid qualifications, especially in Germany, may be considered as a tool leading to a kind of generalization of vocational education. Compared to Switzerland, however, they are not linked to apprenticeships and their overall relevance is rather low.
- (3) “Cooperative universities” or “dual universities” (*Duale Hochschulen*), whose institutional realization as “vocational academies” (*Berufsakademien*) dates back to the 1980s in Baden-Württemberg (Deissinger, 2000), meanwhile show structural similarities with conventional tertiary education institutions. However, they are based on an apprenticeship type model since they copy the structure of learning sites and specific, though differing, structural features of cooperation between industry and tertiary institutions (taking the role of part-time vocational schools).
- (4) A wider form of extension of vocational education into the tertiary sector has emerged as a result of the Bologna Process concerning study programmes (Brändle, 2010), as most German universities and faculties are now designing new or revising bachelor and even master programmes and qualifications with an increasing vocational specification or at least orientation (Euler, 2014, p. 322).

Academisation tendencies in Germany therefore have to be seen in a specific light. They have to be mirrored against the context of Germany's strong vocational tradition, both in the education system and in educational theory (Winch, 2006). At the same time, academic drift shows that in the future there could be a kind of convergence between different European countries, in the sense that apprenticeships run the danger of becoming an ancillary system in comparison with universities.

The dominant part in the VET system in Switzerland has for a long time been reluctant to including schemes which open up a pathway to higher education and especially to universities (Kiener and Gonon, 1998). As late as in the 1990s, the initiative to found polytechnical colleges, and the debate on European integration culminated in the successful establishment of the Federal Vocational Baccalaureate (*Berufsmatura*). This hybrid qualification offers, besides a labour entry certificate, also an entitlement for the universities of applied sciences (Gonon, 2013).

Swiss VET policy can be characterized as having developed two attitudes towards the issue of academisation. The first one is to upgrade existing further and professional education courses and locate these programmes on a higher level. Former vocational colleges and Meister courses now belong to the category of higher vocational education. Higher vocational education is now recognized at the same level as academic education. The labour market estimates vocationally based higher education quite manifestly compared to graduates with a purely traditional academic achievement (Swiss Coordination Center for Research in Education, 2014).

The second and quite successful reform step has been to hybridize the apprenticeship qualifications. With the introduction of the Federal Vocational Baccalaureate apprentices are now enabled to continue, after completion of a normal VET programme, with academic studies which give them the right to study at a so-called university of applied sciences (former technical and polytechnical colleges), which are nowadays located on the same level as traditional universities. Today nearly one out of three apprentices obtain this entitlement for the academic pathway besides a vocational certificate for the labour market (Gonon, 2013).

### **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 the VET system, although the instruments and measures are different. Whereas in Switzerland initial training and the apprenticeship model has been strengthened through offering hybrid pathways for completers leading into higher education, the German reforms aim at hybridizing the higher education system in a specific way. Dual higher VET institutions, formerly called "vocational academies" and universities of applied sciences now offer dual tracks (partly based on company-training and partly involving academic studies), which have received considerable thrust from the "Bologna reform". German and Swiss reformers justify their measures through stressing the function of VET for economic growth and social stability and the necessity to ensure a well-trained and educated workforce. Hybrid qualifications are nowadays seen as more efficient for coping with future demands in industry and services. The way into higher education, based on the VET system, nowadays helps individuals to find highly skilled and decently remunerated jobs, and also allows the realization of personal aspirations to progress on the educational ladder. VET system and higher education are not seen as completely disconnected worlds but as complementary sub-systems.

In the present social and political context, however, the success story of the VET systems in both countries could become unsettled as academic aspirations and the take-up of academic pathways are becoming stronger and more visible. In contrast to Germany, firms and associations of employers, but also governments and political parties in Switzerland, have underlined the importance of strengthening initial training by providing academic options with it whereas Germany has come up with new academic variants that copy the benefits of the apprenticeship model and therefore the vocational principle in a specific way. At the same time, full-time vocational schools have retreated to the important function to deliver higher school qualifications. Nevertheless the Swiss way of hybridization of the VET system poses some practical challenges for firms and apprentices as hybrid programmes have proved to be overloaded and firms and apprentices have to cope with practical problems of coordination.

In both countries, the importance and value of VET is based on an overall consensus, shared by all relevant stakeholders. The basis of this consensus is that the VET system so far successfully has opened and should continue to open career paths in industry. Apprenticeships undoubtedly are cornerstones of economic welfare in these countries and can be associated with low youth unemployment rates. A supplementary aspect in the last years however is the political will that VET should also have a stronger link with higher education. Despite some interesting reform measures ambivalences cannot be ignored: Against what could be called “academic fallacy” and the (new) rise of “meritocratic thinking” (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.

As a result of our comparative perspective, it may be stated that both countries still cling to their dual apprenticeship systems, though Switzerland markedly more strongly in terms of statistics and pathway choices. When it comes to modernization, Switzerland appears to be more “modern” in terms of hybrid qualifications than Germany, which, on the other hand, has developed hybrid structures in higher education. Here, the vocational principle, though not necessarily the model of stakeholder involvement in its traditional shape, has been transposed to the tertiary system. The Swiss strategy to hybridize apprenticeships, is clearly supported by nearly all stakeholders, whereas in Germany, historically and politically, there has been more reluctance to digress into a kind of “bi-functionality” of VET, i.e. to think of initial training beyond its traditional “occupational” function of apprenticeships. It is neither impossible to understand all the facets of these differences without digging more deeply into the history of VET in the two countries, nor to value the social status of VET without looking in a more detailed manner at the different institutions and their involvement within the VET system. The latter certainly remains a pivotal topic of education policy in both countries, although there is no guarantee, in particular in the German case, that the apprenticeship-based VET system will maintain its overall importance as “the” pathway into skilled employment in the future.

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