

Can ‘vocationalisation’ of education go too far? The case of Switzerland

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SUMMARY

While countries with predominantly academic school-based upper secondary education have been ‘discovering’ vocational education and training (VET) for some time, countries with ‘vocationalised’ education systems such as Austria, Germany or Switzerland are critically reviewing their own situations. This paper takes up the case of Switzerland, which can be considered, in several respects, as a sort of life-size VET laboratory. This contribution aims at critically highlighting particularities, recent developments, advantages and shortcomings of a post-compulsory education system geared as heavily to ‘vocationalisation’ as Switzerland’s.

Introduction

'Vocational education and training enables young adults to make the transition into the working environment and ensures that there are enough qualified people in the future. It is geared to the labour market and is part of the education system' (OPET 2006, p. 3).

This 'official' definition of the purpose of VET in Switzerland – put forth by its main regulating agency, the Federal Office of Professional Education and Technology (OPET) – illustrates how strongly VET is geared to labour market needs. The fact that VET is part of the country's system of education is mentioned at the very end, almost apologetically.

If we try to determine the relevant actors in Swiss VET according to the 'taxonomy' proposed by Wollschläger and Reuter-Kumpmann (2004, referring to Greinert, 2004) (1), a first quick glance at the Swiss VET system will reveal that market economy driven 'vocationalisation' is at its maximum here. As will be further elaborated below, private enterprise has its essential say in regard to all five of the listed points or dimensions, thus exercising a far-ranging power of definition and action in practically all areas concerned.

Key facts and figures

Switzerland has close to 7.5 million residents, living in three distinct linguistic regions: the large majority, about three quarters of them, in the German speaking part, a bit over one fifth in the French speaking part (west/south-west), and about 5 % in the Italian speaking part (central south, mainly Ticino). About one in five residents have a nationality other than Swiss, mostly due to both substantial immigration, and very restrictive naturalisation procedures.

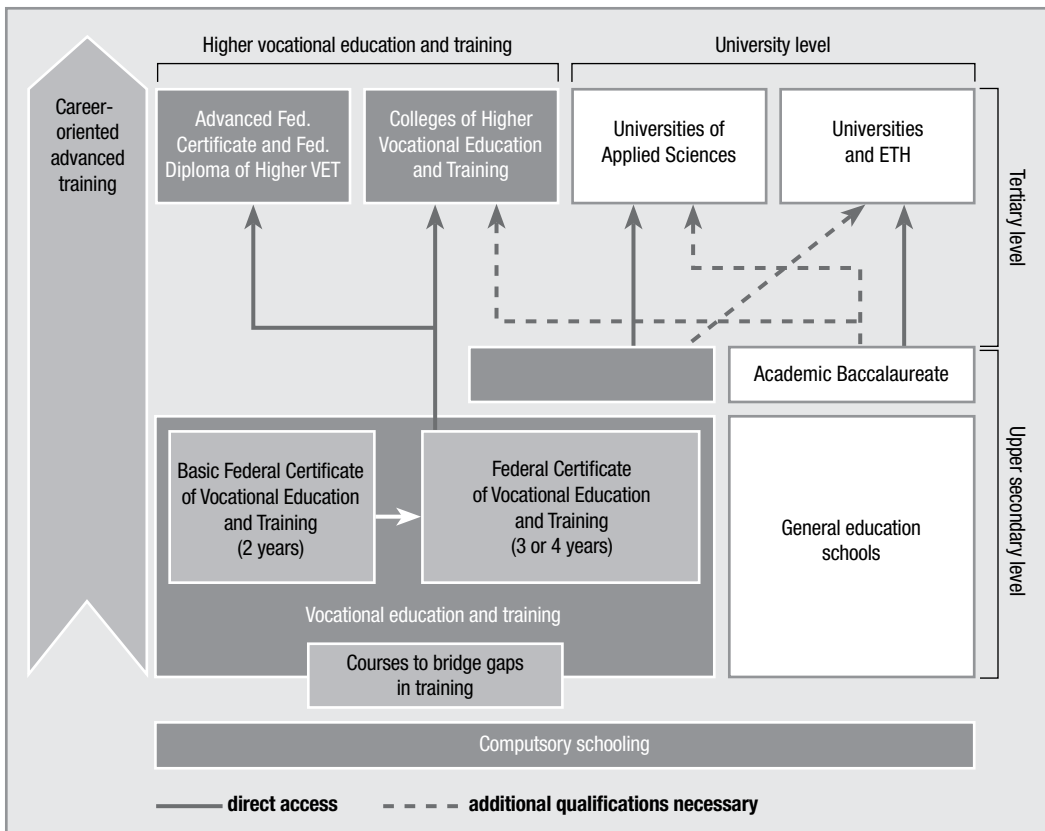
Switzerland is a confederation of 26 cantons. Pre-school and compulsory education is essentially under cantonal jurisdiction. Post-compulsory education and training is regulated, financed and controlled jointly at federal and cantonal levels. The Swiss educational system – or rather systems – accommodate roughly one million students at pre-school and compulsory levels (up to ninth grade), something

(1) 1. Who determines how VET is organised? 2. Where does VET take place? 3. Who determines the content of VET? 4. Who pays for VET? 5. Which gain of VET qualification for which opportunities?

over 300 000 at upper secondary and about 200 000 at tertiary level. Thus, one of the essential features of the Swiss educational system is its relatively small overall size, combined with a high degree of organisational decentralisation.

Switzerland’s educational system is highly selective and seg-regative, characterised by very early tracking. Starting in sixth or seventh grade, lower secondary education is divided in up to four different tracks within one and the same canton – and usually very little permeability between the tracks. As in most selection processes within the lower part of the educational system, the influence of socioeconomic status and family background on the type of tracking is substantial. About one third of all students are enrolled in a lower secondary track or programme summarised

Figure 1. Schematic overview of the Swiss educational system

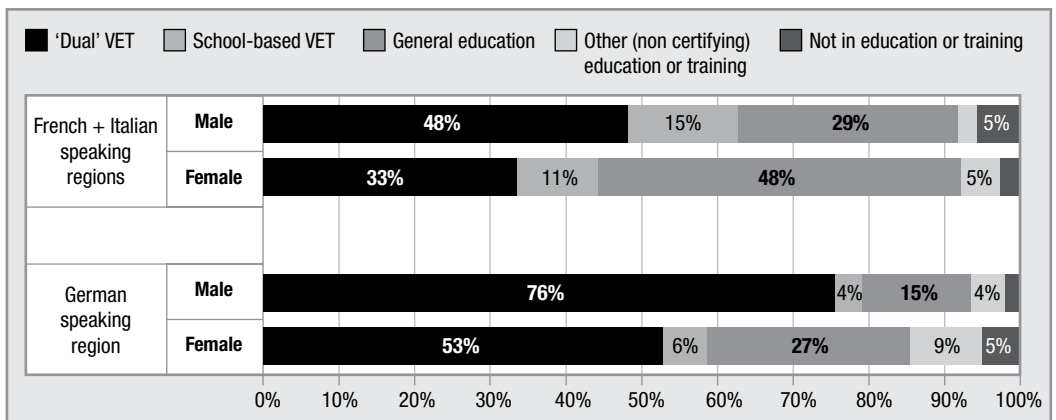


somewhat euphemistically as 'fulfilling basic requirements'. Not very surprisingly, students with a migrant background, low socioeconomic status and/or other family backgrounds unfavourable to learning are heavily over-represented in those tracks. PISA has shown that in early and heavily tracked educational systems such as Germany's or Switzerland's the influence of social background on educational achievement and success tends to be stronger than in 'integrative' systems. Therefore, critical voices have come to label this practice as factual social rationing of education. As point out, the heavy and early tracking on lower secondary level strongly affects the post-compulsory educational options open to students.

Upper secondary completion rate is relatively high in Switzerland, having reached a peak of roughly 90 % at the beginning of the 2000s, but slightly decreasing since. Female and male rates have reached parity, closing a gender gap that was substantial until relatively recently: until the early 1980s, the female upper secondary completion rate did not exceed two thirds, while the rate of young men had already risen above 85 %. Vocational education and training plays a central role in the post-compulsory part of the Swiss educational system. The proportion of vocational versus general education is about 3:1 overall, with strong gender and regional disparities (see Figure 2).

Tertiary level enrolment is relatively weak in Switzerland. Due to substantial expansion of Universities of Applied Sciences (UAS), entry

Figure 2. **Upper secondary pathways by gender and region**
School leavers cohort 1999/2000, situation in second year



Source: TREE.

rates are approaching 40 % today (from under 30 % in the 1990s), but are still considerably below OECD or EU levels (>50 %). Still, only little over 20 % of an age cohort in Switzerland will graduate from education at ISCED level 5A, compared to about one third on average in the OECD ⁽²⁾.

The most common form of Swiss VET at upper secondary level is the company-based or 'dual' form, also known as apprenticeship. As can be seen in Figure 2, enrolment patterns by region and gender suggest a highly segmented and segregated upper secondary sector. If we look at the two contrast categories, young men in German speaking Switzerland and young women in the French and Italian speaking parts of the country, it appears that they face an altogether different reality of numbers and proportions regarding post-compulsory education or training. While Swiss German young men will be found, in three out of four cases, in 'dual' VET, this will be the case for only one third of young women in French/Italian speaking Switzerland. Contrarily, almost half of the latter will be found enrolled in predominantly academically oriented general education, while this is the case for only 15 % of young Swiss German young men.

The border line between the French/Italian part of Switzerland and the German part is not only linguistic, but also marks fundamental system differences. Under the political and cultural influence of its western neighbour, France, general, academically oriented education is given a much higher preference in Romandy, the French speaking part of Switzerland, while VET is perceived more pointedly as a 'second choice'. In the German speaking part of the country, VET has (in public opinion) a more self-confident and 'equal' place within the hierarchy of the educational system (see Geser 2003) .

Gender segregation, which is superposed with these regional differences, can be observed not only between general education and VET, but also within VET, on the level of particular professional orientations. With a few exceptions, gender proportions within a particular profession are strongly biased: towards males in 'crafts', industrial and technical professions, towards females in professions in the social or health sectors.

⁽²⁾ For general statistical information on the Swiss educational system, see system indicators collection on the website of the Swiss Federal Statistical Office SFSO (www.statistik.admin.ch).

Company-based VET is 'dual' in several respects: the term dual first refers to the two learning places, the training company and the professional college. Second, it refers to the duality between practical training and 'academic' learning. Third, it refers to the two collectivities largely responsible for company-based VET: private enterprise and the public sector (which is largely responsible for regulatory aspects and vocational colleges, the 'school' part of dual VET).

'Dual' apprentices' status and situation are closer to those of employees than students: they will usually go through a recruitment process, sign a contract with the training company, and spend at least three days per week on average with practical work and training in the company (for which they receive a modest monthly salary of several hundred euros). The rest of the week is spent at vocational college, 'in school', where the 'general' part of the training takes place. The 'working' perspective is also important for apprentices themselves: if they are satisfied with their apprenticeship (which they are in a large majority), they will consider themselves essentially as 'working' rather than as 'studying', and they will show identification patterns in regard to their training company much like those observed among regular employees.

The dual VET configuration has a fundamental impact on the nature of the school-to-work transition in Switzerland (and other countries with a strong dual VET system). It basically means that for the majority of youth in the country, this transition is already in full development at the interface between lower and upper secondary levels.

Few VET trainees (about one in seven overall) will enrol in school-based VET. As the term says, they will essentially do their training at (professional) school and acquire their practical experience during phases of work placement in private or public enterprises.

At the end of VET, graduates obtain a federal certificate which formally entitles holders to exercise the profession in which they have been trained, and which basically gives direct access to qualified labour in this profession. If a Professional Baccalaureate is acquired in addition to the federal VET certificate, this gives access to further education and training at tertiary level, mostly in universities of applied sciences.

Recent changes and developments

Until the beginning of the 1990s, the Swiss discourse – both political and scientific – about transition to the labour market was virtually non-existent. Transition was not something one worried or argued about, it was something that just happened. Europe envied Switzerland for its low unemployment rate in general, and for its low youth unemployment in particular. The system was generally considered to:

- ensure a high proportion of youth completing upper secondary education and training;
- secure adequate qualification profiles for the future labour force;
- keep youth unemployment low;
- keep transition to the labour market smooth.

Then problems started. First, the country started tumbling through its longest post-war recession. In the process, it became painfully visible how tightly the essentially private enterprise-based VET ‘market’ in the dual system was linked to the labour market as a whole. While demand for VET was rising (for demographic and other reasons), supply, the number of company-based VET places, decreased dramatically.

And as, at the beginning of the present decade, the Swiss economy was slowly recovering from the long crisis of the 1990s, it became evident that the proportion of companies offering VET places had substantially declined. To make things worse, it also became evident that it tended to be the ‘wrong’ type of companies that still did offer VET places: statistics show a strong bias in favour of handicraft and industrial professions, while important segments of the tertiary sector such as ICT are clearly under-represented as far as their share of VET places is concerned.

Despite important reforms of the VET system’s legal basis during the same period, designed to strengthen its position within the educational and economic system as a whole, the shortage of supply of VET places has worsened over time, leaving an ever-growing proportion of youth without an (immediate) educational perspective at the end of compulsory school. This gives rise to dramatic competition among applicants for VET places. Nowadays, almost one in three VET applicants leaving compulsory school have to wait at least one year until they find a suitable training place.

The effects of this displacement process start to show even at macro level. Upper secondary completion rates have been slightly

declining lately (from > 90 % to 87 % in 2004), clearly falling short of the ambitious benchmark of 95 % that Swiss education policy formulated recently (*Leitlinien zur Optimierung der Nahtstelle obligatorische Schule – Sekundarstufe II*, 2006).

Lack of adequate supply of VET places has led to a virtual explosion of all kinds of intermediate training years between lower and upper secondary levels. As can be seen in Figure 1, the government agency responsible for VET, the Federal Office for Professional Education and Technology (OPET), labels these offers somewhat tendentially as 'courses to bridge gaps in training', suggesting that failing to enter VET directly is essentially a matter of insufficient student achievement. The Swiss youth cohort study TREE (transitions from education to employment), however, has shown that achievement is a relatively marginal factor when it comes to explain why youths do or do not directly enter basic VET (Meyer, 2003).

Despite intense and costly promotional efforts – both at federal and cantonal levels – to increase supply during the past decade, private enterprise has largely failed to follow the government's wake-up call. VET supply has at best stopped declining. A substantial increase in full-time school-based VET to 'fill the gap' seems to be out of the question for political reasons. In the debate, the opinion prevails that VET has to be essentially company-based to be fully functional for labour market needs. This stalemate presently does considerable damage to the adequate functioning of post-compulsory education and training in Switzerland, as it seriously hampers the chances of a smooth transition from lower to upper secondary education and training, particularly for less well resourced candidates. As Hupka, Sacchi et al. (2006) point out, the Swiss VET system not only has a capacity problem, but also a substantial equity problem. Their findings suggest that the structural shortage of VET supply, along with the harsh selection processes it entails throughout transition to post-compulsory education and training, considerably reinforces intergenerational transfer of educational inequality, particularly for the socially 'weak'. They also show that the risk of dropping out is significantly increased by the mere fact (when controlling for all other relevant factors) that youths are unable to gain access to upper secondary education or training within a reasonable time span (within one year after completing compulsory school).

VET and labour market entry

Recent results of the TREE survey (Bertschy et al., 2007) show that transition from basic VET to the labour market still runs rather smoothly in Switzerland. Six years after the surveyed cohort completed compulsory school, seven of eight among those having left education or training have found gainful employment. Youth with a VET certificate have a significantly higher chance to be employed than those without any post-compulsory certification. About half of the cohort had been actively searching for employment prior to the job they held. The average duration of their job search had been approximately three months.

Youths without any upper secondary diploma earn significantly less than those having obtained a VET certificate. TREE results also show substantial income disparities by gender. Under comparable conditions and qualifications, young women earn over 10 % less than men.

Labour market data based on the Swiss census show that among VET graduates in the whole labour force, almost 60 % do not exercise the profession they initially learned during their apprenticeship. As mentioned above, the direction of professional mobility is going from the (secondary) production sector to the (tertiary) services sector, leading to the paradox that a substantial percentage of a strongly 'tertiarised' labour market is initially trained in the industrial production sector. One does not need to go as far as the 'end of the profession', as in the German debate about 'deprofessionalisation' (*Entberuflichung*, see for instance Baethge and Baethge-Kinsky, 1998). Nevertheless, this situation gives rise to the question whether it makes sense to train as many mechanics, bakers or carpenters, if probabilities are high that they will leave their trade or never take it up at all.

Certification versus skills

Owing to its well evolved and widespread VET system, Switzerland has traditionally been among the countries with the highest upper secondary completion rates. When it comes to gauging the substance of VET certificates, the system, however, has but a faint idea of the skills its clients acquire in the process. Basically, obtaining a VET certificate and gaining access to the labour market is considered as sufficient 'proof' of successful training. However, results of IALS/ALL⁽³⁾ suggest that literacy level in Switzerland is weak to moderate for up to 30 % of young adults having completed upper secondary

⁽³⁾ IALS: International adult literacy survey; ALL: Adult literacy and life skills survey.

education (OECD and StatCan, 2000, 2005). Given clear evidence that lifelong learning activities correlate positively with reading literacy (*ibid*), one has to assume that an important part of Swiss VET graduates are seriously handicapped when it comes to maintaining, adapting or improving their skills throughout their careers.

For the weaker contenders in the tough competition for VET places in Switzerland, reform agents put much hope in the new 'Basic Federal VET Certificate' (see Figure 1), a reduced, less demanding form of the full VET certificate, requiring only two years training (instead of three or four). However, adequate supply has yet to be put in place, and again, private enterprise is principally called to see to this. As private enterprises have been generally reducing involvement in VET during the past two decades, development of this new type of VET might fall somewhat short of the high expectations. The need for alternatives is urgent, though, because the consequences of insufficient further qualification, education and training are particularly dramatic for this population, not only for labour market participation, but also for mastery of the complex requirements of (post-)modern life generally.

VET and tertiary education

Until the mid-1990s, access from basic VET to tertiary level programmes (ISCED level 5A or higher) was next to non-existent in Switzerland. In the 1990s, Switzerland's VET system was reformed to strengthen and upgrade VET programmes at tertiary level. To this end, universities of applied sciences (UAS) were set up for holders of a professional baccalaureate (PB). The PB is based on the Federal Certificate by which basic VET is usually completed after three or four years training.

These two reforms have proven to be particularly successful. Today, about one eighth of an age cohort obtain a PB, and UAS participation has considerably contributed to boosting enrolment in tertiary education and training, which was previously extremely low by international standards.

Despite this improvement, tertiarisation of the Swiss system of education is still rather weak compared to most EU or OECD countries. The chances to gain access to tertiary education by way of basic VET are still only a fraction compared to those of graduates from general education programmes. However, labour market indicators suggest that demand for highly qualified labour considerably exceeds (home) supply. In recent years, more than half of labour immigrants to Switzerland held a degree at tertiary level.

Some concluding remarks and questions

Despite several structural and performance problems, the VET system remains the backbone of school-to-work transition in Switzerland. Some structural reforms, particularly the professional baccalaureate and the universities of applied sciences (UAS) have contributed to strengthen the system. However, the system has reached some limits during the past two decades.

One lies in the 'market' conception underlying VET at upper secondary level in Switzerland. Today, upper secondary completion has become the standard of basic education in post-industrial economies. In Switzerland, the percentage of youth envisaging to enter the labour market directly after compulsory school is closing in on zero, while the country's structural shortage of supply of VET places remains substantial. In view of this, the Swiss educational system is confronted with the question: should the solution to this problem be left – as urged by private enterprise and federal VET agencies – mainly or even exclusively to the invisible hand of the market? If not, who else could/should fill the gap? It would be worth reflecting on the adequacy (or rather: necessity) of opening the range of actors offering VET beyond private enterprise. This might not only contribute to solving the problem of 'volume' (substantial increase of the largely insufficient VET supply), but possibly also contribute to attenuate the strong gender and social segregation both at upper secondary level in general and in (dual) VET in particular.

This leads us to the general difficulty of negotiating, defining, and measuring complex skills portfolios such as those found in VET. Little do we know in Switzerland about how exactly they are acquired, why and under which circumstances their acquisition works (well) or not, and what the particular effects of the 'duality' of VET are. Given the large variety of VET organisation in Switzerland, the country could serve as a life-size research lab where these questions could be further investigated.

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