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Swiss VET – A Successful Model and its Sacrifices on the Balance of Power Between Company- and School-Based VET in the Political Governance of the Transition to Upper-Secondary Level in Switzerland

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Abstract

Purpose. In the past, Switzerland's VET policy highly fostered the integration of youths at the lower end of the academic performance range. Against the increasing competition for high-achieving youths among general and vocational education at the upper-secondary level, today an important issue is the attraction of high-achieving youths to company-based VET. While the latter has a strong support in Switzerland, school-based VET programmes receive only little attention. This study investigates the role of such school-based VET programmes, which explicitly target high-achieving young people, in the political governance of the transition to upper-secondary education in Switzerland.

Approach. The study relies on the theoretical background of the Economy of Conventions and is based on cantonal case studies. Qualitative document analysis and interviews with actors of the cantonal education administration form the data sources. The data are analysed by a combination of theory-based qualitative content analysis and argumentation-analytical strategies.

Results. In both cantons studied the quantitative development of VMS was purposefully limited as targeted attempts to control the competition among school- and company-based VET regarding high-achieving youths. By doing so, the balance of power between company-based VET and school-based VET can be reproduced and the status of company-based VET as the unquestioned standard protected.

Conclusion. Overarching, the results emphasise that the distribution of youths across different education programmes cannot solely be understood as the result of individual decisions, but also of targeted steering interventions in the context of the political governance of transitions.

Keywords

governance, transitions, educational policy, dual system, vocational education and training



1 Introduction

Since 2011 the Swiss Confederation and the cantons have been pursuing the joint education policy goal of at least 95 per cent of all 25-year-olds obtaining an upper-secondary certificate (Federal Department of Economic Affairs, Education and Research & Swiss Conference of Cantonal Ministers of Education, 2019).¹ At the same time, education policy faces different and partly conflicting issues in Switzerland: skill shortage, saving measures, rising pupil numbers (Babel, 2019). This situation poses a challenge to national and cantonal actors of education policy and administration to provide enough training places for youths with different levels of academic achievement at the upper-secondary level.

In Switzerland upper-secondary level consists of three federally recognised education programmes: baccalaureate schools, specialised middle schools as well as company- and school-based vocational education and training (VET) programmes.² While general education predominates in many European education systems, VET has maintained its dominant position in Switzerland (Kriesi et al., 2022; OECD, 2015): Around two-thirds of youths choose a VET programme at the upper-secondary level, 27 per cent a baccalaureate school and 7 per cent a specialised middle school.³ This relative distribution varies between the cantons and shows regional patterns (a.o. Cortesi, 2017; Geser, 2003). This variation cannot be explained solely by differences in students' academic performance (a.o. Combet, 2019; Meyer, 2009), but it can rather be assumed that these differences are the result of targeted governance mechanisms: regulations and restrictions at the institutional level of the transition to the upper-secondary level (Hafner et al., 2022). Particularly in German-speaking cantons of Switzerland, the paths via general education middle schools (baccalaureate schools and specialised middle schools) are deliberately restricted by means of education policy steering measures in order to strengthen company-based VET (Esposito, 2022; Kriesi et al., 2020; Leemann et al., 2021; Steimann, 2022). This situation is controversial and related education policy positions in Switzerland differ widely (Kriesi et al., 2022).

In the past, one of the main goals of Swiss VET policy was the integration of youths at the lower end of the academic performance range in the formal VET system. In the context of the increasing demand for highly qualified workers, the VET lobby fears that company-based VET might not be attractive enough for high-achieving youths compared to school-based educational programmes at the upper-secondary level (Elsholz & Neu, 2019). Thus, today an additional focus of the Swiss VET policy lies on the question of how to attract high-achieving youths to company-based VET (Kriesi et al., 2022; Leemann et al., 2021).

In fields such as commerce, IT and health, the Swiss VET system provides a specific type of school-based VET targeting high-achieving youths, so-called Vocational Middle Schools (VMS). VMS consist of a full-time school-based setting geared towards tertiary education as well as a longer internship, where apprentices acquire practical skills. Graduates obtain a federal VET Diploma (formal qualification for the entrance in the labour market) and a federal vocational baccalaureate, which provides direct access to universities of applied sciences. For company-based VET the number of training places available and the corresponding selection

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² Youths who do not enter directly one of these types of schools often take advantage of so-called upper-secondary interim solutions (Landert & Eberli, 2015).

³ <https://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/de/home/statistiken/bildung-wissenschaft/bildungsindikatoren/themen/zugang-und-teilnahme/ausbildungswahl-sekii.assetdetail.22024449.html>

criteria and procedures depend fundamentally on the companies. For VMS, in contrast, the supply of training places and the selection of apprentices are directly controlled and steered by the cantons. VMS, as well as school-based VET programmes in general, receive only little attention from education policy and research in German-speaking Switzerland. To French- and Italian-speaking Switzerland this does not apply to the same extent (a.o. Cortesi, 2017; Gonon & Bonoli, 2022; Wettstein & Amos, 2010).

On the other hand, company-based VET has a strong lobby in society and education policy in Switzerland, is regarded as the unquestioned standard (Esposito, 2022; Leemann, 2019) and idolised as model for success far beyond national borders (Kriesi et al., 2022; Lamamra & Moreau, 2016; Steimann, 2022). With its very high proportion of company-based VET (90%) in relation to school-based VET, Switzerland's VET system clearly stands out in an international comparison (OECD, 2015; State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation [SERI], 2022).

2 Objective and research questions

Applying a governance perspective, this study assumes that educational decisions of youths and their distribution among different educational programmes are embedded in institutional conditions such as admission regulations, selection processes, supply, and accessibility. Thus, the paper complements previous studies in the field of transition research which have focused on individual factors of educational decisions, by adding the perspective of a political governance of transitions. Against this background, the aim of the paper is to investigate the role of VMS in the political governance of the transition from lower to upper-secondary level in Switzerland. For this purpose, the following questions are addressed:

- What relevance and 'qualities' are attributed to VMS? How do actors justify their positions?
- How, i.e., by means of what strategies and instruments, do relevant actors steer the supply of training places within VMS and the related selection regulations?
- What tensions and conflicts arise?
- What can be learned from the results regarding the governance of dual VET systems in other national contexts?

3 Theoretical approach

The research questions are examined from the theoretical perspective of the Economy of Conventions (EC) (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006; Diaz-Bone & de Larquier, 2022). The EC assumes that situations of coordination of action are fraught with uncertainty about their course and outcome. To cope with this, actors rely on various socio-historically established principles of action, worth and justice, so-called conventions (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005; Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006): industrial, civic, opinion, market, domestic, inspired, network, green. Each of these conventions refers to a specific common good and thus generates its own quality of education (Derouet, 1989; Imdorf & Leemann, 2023). This is summarised in Table 1.

Table 1
Conventions in education⁴

Convention	Common good, quality, logic of action
<i>Industrial</i>	Efficiency, productivity, expertise, performance, long-term planning, standardisation
<i>Civic</i>	Collective interest, equality, social integration, general education
<i>Opinion</i>	Reputation, fame, visibility, popularity, image
<i>Market</i>	Price, profit, competition, value for money

Source: Derouet 1989; Imdorf & Leemann, 2023.

The political governance of transitions in the education system is understood as a situational practice in which actors rely on these conventions in their actions, evaluations, and decisions. From an EC perspective ‘quality’ is therefore socially ascribed and constructed as well as plural and contradicting in view of different conventions. This means that in the same situation the evaluation of actors can be oriented towards different quality criteria, which leads to disputes and criticism. Conventions can also relate positively to each other and form compromises (Diaz-Bone & de Larquier, 2022). By investing in (im-)material forms, conventions gain stability, reach and power in the coordination of actions (Dodier, 2010; Thévenot, 2014). Standards are a special form with a particularly high scope and are accepted unquestioningly in the coordination situation. They require a closing of the eyes of actors to alternative forms that could have been used for coordination and thus reinforce the trust in the established (Thévenot, 2009). From an EC perspective, power is not inherent to certain actors but distributed in a coordination situation: It goes to those actors who succeed in extending the reach of the convention and the related arguments they rely on (Diaz-Bone, 2017).

4 Design, data and methods

The study is based on a case study design (Yin, 2009) and includes two German-speaking cantons, which differ among theory-driven characteristics regarding the upper-secondary level: (1) proportion of general education in relation to VET; (2) quantitative relevance of school-based in relation to company-based VET; (3) proportion of VMS. To ensure that personal data are protected, the cantons are not named. The data base consists of publicly available documents (a.o. education policy initiatives, statements of the cantonal parliament; political decisions, media releases). Additionally, following the EC’s methodological standpoint, the perspective of the actors were captured by qualitative problem-centered in-person interviews (Meuser & Nagel, 2009) with representatives of the cantonal educational administration. The data were analysed by a theory-based qualitative content analysis (Gläser & Laudel, 2010), in line with EC premises (focus on conventions, form investments, criticisms, and compromises). As conventions cannot directly be asked for in interviews, but must be reconstructed by the researcher based on the arguments put forward by the interviewee, argumentation-analytical strategies were additionally made use of (Toulmin et al., 1979).

5 Main results

Relying on different, partially conflicting conventions, actors controversially discuss, evaluate, and legitimize the relevance of VMS. Referring to the industrial convention, supporters stress the quality of VMS regarding the provision of required skilled workers in areas with skills shortage. By targeting high-achieving youths, VMS help to exploit the domestic talent potential.

⁴ Only the conventions relevant to this paper are shown in Table 1. For a complete overview see (Imdorf & Leemann, 2023)

Further, VMS were supported based on a civic argument: Their selection mechanisms are not susceptible to discriminatory mechanisms, as it is the case for company-based VET (Imdorf, 2005). On the other hand, critics delegitimise the relevance of VMS by arguments of the market convention: VMS cause higher cantonal costs than company-based VET, without having any added value in terms of the qualifications that can be achieved (Steimann, 2022). In view of the political efforts to strengthen the position of company-based VET as an attractive educational pathway for high-achieving youths, VMS are further criticised of being a school-based competition undermining this VET policy goal. This critique relies on rationalities of the convention of opinion.

Based on the contested relevance of VMS, supporters and critics advocated either for an expansion or a limitation regarding the future development of VMS. Although the two cantons studied are very different in terms of the quantitative importance of school-based VET, in both cantons critics have succeeded in pushing through their positions based on a powerful and highly stable dispositive of investments in forms (a.o. newspaper headlines, financial reports and statistical forecasts, discourse of equal opportunities): Consequently, a limiting education policy strategy regarding VMS could be identified for both cantons. To limit the number of training places at VMS, Canton A has placed a ceiling on the number of VMS classes. This ceiling can be interpreted as a steering instrument in the sense of hard governance (Moos, 2009): With reference to the official cantonal admission regulations for VMS, Canton A can actively and directly control the number of training places at VMS, and thereby steer the further development of VMS in the desired way. To limit the expansion of the VMS, Canton B has introduced an additional admission requirement for the access to VMS: Applicants must additionally complete a specially designed online tool regarding the education selection before applying for a VMS. With its introduction, the education policy and administration tried to reduce the number of youths choosing a VMS (instead of company-based VET) by a steering instrument, which seeks to ensure that the youths take an informed, conscious, and considered decision at the transition from lower to upper-secondary level. We can interpret this as a steering instrument of soft governance (Moos, 2009): Canton B passively and indirectly controls the number of training places at VMS and thus steers the development of the VMS in the sense of a tool-based «governance by guidance» (Romito, 2017) through the educational choice of the youths at the transition to upper-secondary level.

From a power-theoretical point of view, the limiting steering strategies pursued, and instruments introduced in both cantons must be understood as targeted attempts to control the competition among school- and company-based VET for high-achieving youths in favor of the latter. By doing so, the balance of power between company-based VET and school-based VET within the Swiss VET system can be stabilised, maintained, and reproduced. Thus, also regarding high-achieving youths who are interested in VET, the status of company-based VET as the unquestioned standard (Esposito, 2022; Leemann, 2019) can be protected. As this paper has shown, the sacrifices for this are made at the expense of other education programmes at the upper-secondary level, that get purposefully limited in their further quantitative development by education policy. Based on this, the question arises as to whether this fully exploits the entire potential of Swiss VET in terms of training high-achieving young people.

Overarching, and looking beyond the borders of the Swiss education system, the results emphasise that the distribution of youths across different education programmes can't solely be understood as the result of individual decisions, but also of targeted steering interventions in the context of the political governance of transitions within a national education system.

Ethics statement

Ethical review and approval were waived for this study because it is an organizational analysis based on official documents and interviews with persons holding public positions giving

information about political and administrative processes. Since no children, minors or individuals under disability have been included in the study, the research project had not to be subjected to the ethics review of the School of Education FHNW. Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study. The author declares no conflict of interest. The funders had no role in the design of the study; in the collection, analyses, or interpretation of data; in the writing of the manuscript, or in the decision to publish the results.

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