

The development of the upper-secondary specialised school between general education and vocational education and training in Switzerland

Legitimacy by economic utility of a controversial educational pathway

In order to secure the growing demand for highly skilled nursing staff Switzerland's health care system faces major challenges. Amongst others, a respective education policy is required.

Since 2002 on the part of vocational education and training (VET), a new VET programme in health care (VET health care) on the upper-secondary level opens up access to tertiary-level study programmes in health (especially nursing) at the colleges of professional education and training (PET colleges). Conditional on the acquisition of a vocational baccalaureate, the vocational pathway allows access to health-related studies at universities of applied sciences. On the part of the school system, in 2004 the upper-secondary specialised school has introduced a new professional profile in health. Since then, the specialised school in health profiles itself as an alternative access pathway into tertiary-level health studies.

When it comes to the evaluation of the two parallel education programs, VET stakeholders often refer to graduate's employability. Education programs are supposed to qualify individuals as skilled workers and to enable them to enter the labour market directly. Against the background of this evaluation logic, the economic utility of the specialised school in health, which is basically open to multiple interpretations, is questioned given its exclusive character of vocational *preparation* compared to the *qualifying* VET diploma in health care. Over the last few years, this repeated criticism of the specialised school in health contested its legitimacy as a post-compulsory education program in the field of health. The contribution examines *how the dispute about the understanding of economic utility has changed the specialised school as an educational institution*.

In the perspective of the *Économie des conventions* (EC) (Diaz-Bone 2015), criticism evolves in situations of social coordination where actors refer to different evaluation and justification logics (conventions). Changes in educational institutions (here: the specialised school) are understood as the result of coordination and negotiation processes between different educational policy-makers and stakeholders. Actors can overcome conflicting situations (at least temporary) by agreeing on compromises.

We empirically reconstruct the dispute between VET actors and those of the specialised school, which arose from their different understandings of economic utility. We analyse how this dispute has influenced the institutionalisation process of the new professional profile in health in the specialised school between 1990 and 2004. At this time the new Federal Vocational and Professional Education and Training Act has been established in Switzerland and a reform of the specialised school was implemented. Core documents of former policy makers serve as data sources, together with retrospective expert interviews with relevant actors of that time (e.g. representatives of the Confederation and the Cantons). In line with the EC methodology, the

focus is on the analysis of situations and processes of negotiation and criticism, and in the reconstruction of compromises in the transformation of education structures.

Our findings show how the legitimacy of the specialised school (preparing for health professions) and its institutional affiliation to the general education path of the upper-secondary level have been criticized and questioned with regard to the non-employability of its graduates. A core criticism has referred to the lack of practical work experience during the education. Over the years, the specialised school made various efforts to respond to this criticism. In addition to the school's traditional education mission that consisted of the provision of in-depth general education and the formation of self-competence and social skills, several new curricular components were implemented. The school curriculum was diversified towards a number of specific professional fields (e.g. health); students had to attend an internship to clarify their vocational orientation; and the specialized baccalaureate year, that mainly consists of practical experience, was introduced. These responses to the claim of economic utility lead to a change of the school's traditional character.