

Christian Imdorf, Institute of Sociology, University of Basel

E-mail: Christian.Imdorf@unibas.ch

Regula Leemann, Professorship for Educational Sociology, University of Applied Sciences
Northwestern Switzerland,

E-mail: regula.leemann@fhnw.ch

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Equal employment opportunity in apprenticeship - How training networks enhance fair hiring practices

Social inequalities in employment persist not only in the global labour market, they can already be observed when companies hire apprentices for firm-based vocational education and training (VET). Current research into apprentice selection in Switzerland documents that the main hiring principle is not to choose the most skilled candidate, but the one who best warrants avoiding organisational trouble in the training company (TC). Firms thereby expect to get into trouble by hiring school leavers who are risky in terms of perturbing the production process or the provision of services, being a misfit in the current workforce, being badly manageable, or not appealing to the company's clientele. Disadvantaged school leavers, e.g. with particular immigrant backgrounds, are especially associated with troubling work organisations. Nevertheless, some TCs assume their social responsibility by offering apprenticeships to disadvantaged youth. However, their selection principle of equity is based on voluntariness, and thus remains on weak pillars in a traditional dual VET system, especially in times of financial and economic crisis.

To reduce the lack of apprenticeships at the beginning of this millennium, Swiss VET-policy has promoted Training Networks (TN) as a new organisational form of dual VET. TNs were designed to raise the firms' willingness to train apprentices as they promise reduced training costs and risks. A TN is usually managed by a proper organisation (hereafter Leading Organisation LO) which is responsible for the entire coordination of the TN. TNs are attractive for TCs because the LO releases them from training-related administration. Furthermore, the LO offers counselling and support when firm- or school-related problems occur, and – last but not least – it disburdens the TCs from the time-intensive recruitment of new apprentices. As the LO's services are directly paid by the TCs, the latter become customers of the former. Thus the LO has to account for the needs of TCs in coordinating the training of apprentices who rotate one or more times from one TC to another during the duration of their apprenticeship (3-4 years). Unsatisfied TCs can withdraw from their training obligation with each rotation.

Theoretically, we refer to the French economy of conventions (economies of worth) to understand the forms and requirements of coordination between LO, TCs and apprentices that are decisive and necessary in the recruitment of new apprentices. Especially if co-financed by a public training provider, the LO is positioned as a buffer within a civic world and a market world. Whereas the civic claim of the provider asks for the integration of disadvantaged youth, the market needs on the side of the TCs have to be satisfied equally. The latter requires allocating apprentices who not give reason to trouble, that is who socially fit in the TC and prove to be productive.

This paper highlights the (unintended) effects of training networks on equal opportunities in access to VET. Referring to an exploratory case study of two training networks and based on 8 expert interviews with gatekeepers of both the LOs and the TCs (embedded multiple-case design), we investigate on the one hand how the LO is recruiting and selecting the apprentices and allocating them to the particular TC. On the other hand, we focus on the reactions of the TC when particular apprentices are assigned to them.

The results of our case study show that the LO proceeds its buffer function fairly good. By integrating disadvantaged students, it carries out the selection based on the industrial needs of the collaborative training system (amongst other the flexibility of apprentices to switch training firms and to rotate several times). At the entry selection and with each rotation the LO allocates to all TC one candidate who spends one day in the firm. This short placement enables the company, which has the right to veto, to examine the candidate (amongst other to test his/her social fit). Interestingly, the TCs mostly accept their restricted scope of choice, amongst others because they understand the limited organisational capacity of the LO to allocate the selected candidates to a restricted number of individual firms in the TN.

Indeed, the rotation principle facilitates firms to accept a rather unknown apprentice because it restricts the duration to train a possibly problematic apprentice to a rather short time span. Furthermore, the firm's acceptance is enhanced by the support of the LO which offers coaching in case of trouble. The paper concludes that the transformation of firm-based VET towards training networks provides promising organisational tools not only to offer up to date vocational training, but also to guarantee equal opportunities in access to VET.

Keywords: training networks, apprenticeship, equal employment opportunities, Switzerland