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Title:

Social Integration and Individualisation in VET under market-conditions – The example of training networks in Switzerland

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Abstract

Vocational education and training (VET) is crucial for the integration of adolescents into the labour market and society as well as for the future stability and competitiveness of Europe. In Switzerland, two thirds of all school leavers pursue a vocational training.

Since the late 1990s, training networks (TNs) - a new form of vocational training - have become increasingly widespread in Switzerland, Germany and Austria. TNs have been initiated to increase the number of apprenticeship positions, to improve the quality of professional education and to further the integration of youth into the labour market. A TN is a coalition of several companies that together train apprentices who rotate from one training company to another. The responsibility for recruitment, selection, employment, and formal qualification lies with a professionalised lead organization. Two types of TNs can be distinguished: *commercial TNs* whose primary focus lies on creating a professional workforce for a specific line, and *(para-)governmental TNs* that additionally push the integration of adolescents into the employment market and into society.

The proposed paper analyses the more market-driven, commercial TNs and asks the following question: How can vocational education enable both labour market orientated individualisation and social cohesion (by integrating socially disadvantaged youth) simultaneously? Conceptually, the paper refers to the French sociology of convention which proposes different (market, civic, industrial, reputation-driven etc.) principles of labour market coordination and social cohesion, and enables to theorise complex educational organisations such as TNs. I use a case study design to compare two commercial TNs that differ with respect to their size. The empirical data is based on eight expert interviews with representatives of the two Swiss TNs.

Although both TNs are market-driven and homogeneous regarding their line, interpretative analysis shows that they significantly differ in their education philosophy as a matter of their size. In order to guarantee sufficient qualified trainees for the line the smaller TN is obliged to also train socially disadvantaged teenagers, because the line doesn't attract enough the academically successful school leavers, while the bigger and more popular TN can choose amongst "the best" candidates. In other words, the two TNs deal differently with the enabling of heterogeneity, individualisation and equity under market conditions.

The sociology of conventions enables to understand under which organisational conditions and grounds social groups of adolescents are being privileged or excluded. Regarding individualisation, the flexibility and individual responsibility required from new apprentices might lead to a new form of social injustice in TN because they might exclude the less sociable and flexible adolescents from vocational training.