

Short Statement Paper for the International Conference on Vocational Education and Training Reform – University of Oxford, September 27th – 28th 2005.

Hans Seitz & Christoph Kobler, University of St. Gallen, Switzerland

1 Structure of the Swiss educational system (see Figure 1)

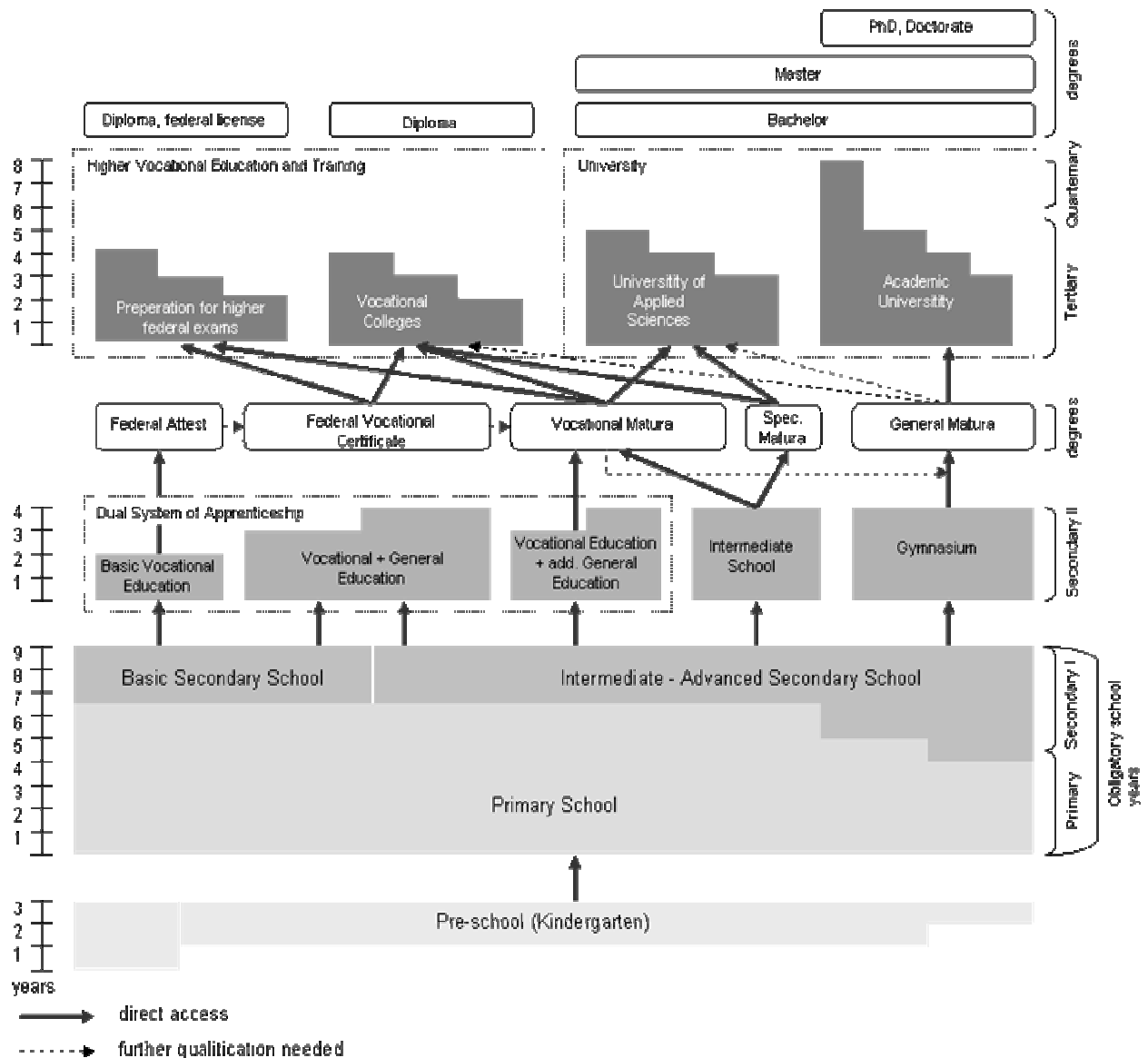


Figure 1: Overview of the Swiss educational system

The educational system in Switzerland is highly differentiated and not fully permeable. It shows very different enrolments and is mainly public. Secondary Level II is mainly divided into full-time schools (intermediate schools and gymnasium) and a dual system of apprenticeship.

The Vocational Education and Training (VET) of Switzerland includes the dual system of apprenticeship, part of the Intermediate Schools and the tertiary, Higher Vocational Education and Training. The dual system of apprenticeship is of outstanding significance. About 65% of Swiss young people start an apprenticeship after Secondary Level I. The apprenticeship system combines general education and vocational training/education and is mostly run through a cooperation of enterprises and vocational schools.

2 Drivers of VET reforms

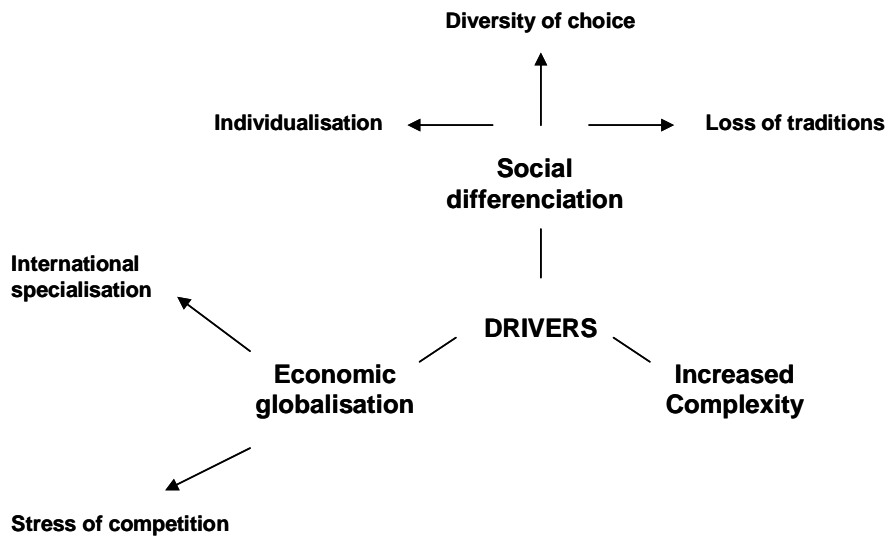


Figure 2: Drivers of reforms

3 VET Reforms

Important recent reforms

- Introduction of the Vocational Matura (1994)
- Establishment of new Universities of Applied Sciences and upgrading some Vocational Colleges into Universities of Applied Sciences (1996-2003)
- Fusion of several federal units into the Federal Office for Professional Education and Technology (OPET) as a federal competence centre for VET, Universities of Applied Sciences and innovation policy (1998)
- Reform of the Commercial Apprenticeship (area-wide introduction 2003)
- Enactment of a new federal act on vocational training and education as a general framework (2004).

Important current reforms

The current reforms revolve mainly around the new federal act on vocational education and training. This includes among others:

- Reform of the training and education in around 300 different professions
- Integration of the formerly cantonal governed professional training in the fields of arts, health and social work into Swiss Federal Jurisdiction
- Determination of the curriculum guidelines for education instructors in companies and teachers
- Determination of the academic curriculum guidelines in vocational education
- Implementation of the new basic vocational education for less academic students
- Replacement of cost oriented federal subsidies to cantons through performance oriented payments
- Measures for international diploma recognition.

4 Perceptions

In general, vocational education has a reputation for creating good prerequisites for a successful transition into professional life and is therefore widely appreciated as a central pillar of the Swiss educational system.

Despite the general positive attitude towards vocational education, some equilibrium problems of the market for apprenticeships receive public attention. There is a serious shortage of apprenticeships, especially in service oriented occupation fields and in agglomerations. This means that many youngsters interested in a service oriented apprenticeship are not able to succeed and may have to be content with a second or third best choice.

This shortcoming of the Swiss apprenticeship market has several reasons. First of all, the relatively low wages for apprentices are fixed. In case of shifts in demand or supply, they do not coordinate the market in the short run. Furthermore we expect the following factors to have an impact:

Supply side

- There is a demographically determined rise in the number of school leavers that will continue up to 2006 but then decline.
- For the majority of the Swiss youngsters, a completed apprenticeship is an important condition for a successful working life. The supply side of the apprenticeship market is therefore strengthened by a certain "institutional pressure".
- It seems reasonable that apprentices anticipate further transition of the economy from production to service industries. In the future, they expect better career opportunities in the service sector and seek therefore a service oriented apprenticeship.

Demand side

- The still ongoing transition from production industries to service industries harms the demand for apprentices since the proportion between employees and apprentices in the service industries is traditionally lower.
- The companies cost/benefit ratio of training apprentices could be influenced negatively by high adaption costs in the case of institutional reforms (for example the reform of the commercial apprenticeship) or by economic fluctuations of the goods market. These cost/benefit considerations gain additional weight in the face of increased stress of competition caused by economic globalisation.
- Foreign owned companies operating in Switzerland offer less apprenticeships because they are less conscious about the tradition of training apprentices.

The following measures among others are taken or discussed to adjust the imbalances of the apprenticeship market:

- to establish practical training possibilities to gain work experience or facilities for practice simulation
- to lower the entrance barrier by implementing the new basic vocational training
- compensation payments for companies offering apprenticeships paid by companies without apprentice training programs
- to install a hotline for open apprenticeship positions
- to reinforce caring, mentoring and coaching during the transition process (senior job coaches)
- to label firms offering apprentices training programs
- to reinforce marketing and image building for vocational education
- to take into account economic and cultural integration measures for immigrants.