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## **A Time for Transformation of Governance Structures in VET? A German/Swiss Comparison**

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### **Abstract**

Digitalisation is affecting vocational education and training (VET) in a multitude of ways and at various levels. In both Switzerland and Germany, stakeholders in VET are responding to the serious technological changes with numerous initiatives and programmes. In this paper, we identify the major differences in policy strategies on state/public policy level, compare some major recommendations and actions of the core stakeholders and identify signs of a changing understanding of their roles in VET. The project basis on a qualitative method approach. There is a large thematic overlap in the topics that actors in Switzerland and Germany address in the context of digitalisation. Nevertheless, it becomes clear that the organisation of the legal governance of the system opens up different scope for action. The similarity of the two VET systems due to their cooperative approach is mitigated by this difference. Within the scope of the project on the role of stakeholders in times of digitalisation, it was possible in particular to identify an intensification of cooperation between the stakeholders combined with a discussion centring on a readjustment of the role of some actors.

### **Keywords**

governance, digitalisation, stakeholder in VET, international comparison

### **1 Context**

We note that digitalisation has arrived at all levels of vocational training. It is having an impact on virtually all initial and advanced training occupations. Digitalisation is changing tasks and requiring new qualifications and competencies. Its influence on teaching and learning materials cannot be ignored.... (BIBB, press release of 30.09.2019. [https://www.bibb.de/de/pressemitteilung\\_109087.php](https://www.bibb.de/de/pressemitteilung_109087.php))

Digitalisation is affecting vocational education and training in a multitude of ways and at various levels. The aim of the project is to identify signs for changes of the governance systems of VET in Germany and Switzerland by analysing recommendations and strategies of the different stakeholders. The bi-national approach of the comparative research project should lead to an analysis whether Germany and Switzerland are moving in a similar direction or learning why they do not; two systems that are categorized as company-related with a collectivist organisation.



Indeed, the constellation of stakeholders are in a constant state of flux, it is a dynamic system in which stakeholders try to enlarge their influence or modify their role. But digitalisation operates like an accelerator, like under a magnifying glass, almost hidden but, already existing approaches and strategies for changing the VET system become clearer, more urgent and essential, or even new strategies are being created.

## 2 Approach

Role and relevance of stakeholders in VET and their interaction have been variously investigated and analysed in comparative policy research in order to explain variations of the shape and governance of VET systems.

It has been investigated how, why and to which extent government, political parties and socio economic stakeholders pursue disparate educational strategies (Heidenheimer et al., 1990). Several studies are focussing on the educational systems in Germany, Switzerland and Austria, stating that the constellation and cooperation between employers and public „elites“ are significant for reforms and changes (Culpepper, 2007; Trampusch, 2010; Trampusch & Busemeyer, 2010). In the context of VET systems in Austria, Germany and Switzerland Ebner and Nikolai (2010) show that it isn't only the role of companies or socio economic factors that determine and explain country specific forms of VET, it is rather the dynamic of coalitions among the stakeholders involved.

The project examines, if in times of digitalisation there are signs that indicate a change of the established systems of stakeholder cooperation and their roles that could lead to a different categorisation of the Swiss and German systems. In this context, the term „stakeholder constellation“ includes the stakeholders, their strategy options as well as their preferences according to the goals of their activities (Scharpf, 2000).

The project contributes to a better understanding of governance mechanisms as well as the relevance of the stakeholders' constellation or a specific shape of VET systems. The following research questions are investigated and are addressed in this paper:

- What are the major differences in policy strategies in the context of digitalisation on state/public policy level?
- What are the core recommendations for action of the involved non-state stakeholders?
- Are there signs of a changing understanding of the role in VET and of self-conception which might have impact on the established stakeholder constellation?

In the context of the project, we distinguish between four categories of stakeholders. The federal and regional governments form the first group (1), the second group comprises the non-state stakeholders which are formally authorized by legal regulations (i.e. employers' associations, trade unions, organizations of the world of work (OdA)) to play a direct shaping role in the VET system (2). The third and fourth groups contain organisations and associations that represent groups, which are not legally authorized to act in the formalized VET governance processes but are nevertheless core actors as they are involved in the provision of IVET e.g. VET providers/schools (3) and VET teachers (4), see Table 1.

The project has a qualitative method approach and initially examines and analyses proposals made by the different stakeholders in Germany and Switzerland in the time from 2016 to 2019 in respect of how the vocational education and training systems should in their view react to the challenge at hand. Its primary objective and focus is, however, the extent to which suggestions and recommendations may have ramifications for the established stakeholder structures that characterise VET governance processes.

**Table 1**  
Categories of stakeholders in the context of the project

	Direct actors	Indirect actors
State actors	Federal and regional actors (1)	Public VET schools, Public research institutes (3)
Non-state actors	Employers' associations, trade unions, organizations of the world of work (OdA) (2)	VET teacher associations, Private VET schools, Private research institutions, Private initiatives in VET (4)

The material for the project was obtained from two sources. One is an extensive desk research and evaluation of existing secondary literature and online-research for initiatives, political demands and recommendations from the members of the four stakeholder groups in Switzerland and Germany relating to the topic of digitalisation and its consequences for education systems. The main emphasis of the assessment was on the question of the extent to which the role of the stakeholders or interplay between stakeholders in established VET governance processes is changing or could change.

In addition to this, 16 semi-standardised expert interviews were conducted with representatives of the organisations/institutions of the stakeholder groups in Germany and Switzerland. They should have worked as experts at the interface between VET and digitalisation.

### 3 Findings

In both countries, there is a multitude of initiatives and activities in the context of digitalisation in the VET area.

Although the fields of governmental action announced and addressed by the actors show a great deal of overlap, differences between Switzerland and Germany become apparent with regard to the approach and conception of the activities.

Educational policy governance in Switzerland has its foundations in a collaborative partnership between the Confederation, the cantons, and the professional organisations (Organisationen der Arbeitswelt, OdA). Their significance is underlined by the prominent way in which they are mentioned at the very start of the Vocational Training Act (BBG). This collaborative partnership becomes particularly visible in the 2030 Vocational and Professional Education and Training Strategy. As well as serving as a platform for the monitoring of governance mechanisms, this strategy also enables a diverse range of topics relating to VPET to be addressed and discussed. It forms the basis for numerous projects and expands the group of stakeholders beyond the collaborative partners to embrace academic research, educational and training establishments and the general public. This is also a striking peculiarity of the Swiss system. The participatory approach of involving the public as much as possible in important political processes is reflected here. VET in Switzerland is a major political area and it is an integral part of the education system as a whole. Furthermore, on the organisational side there is the coherent approach of the so-called "BFI Strategy" (BFI: Education, Research, Innovation). It encompasses education, research and innovation, and allows nationally coordinated consideration and analysis to take place beyond the limits of the education sectors. The correlations between the education sectors and the interfaces and links these have with the fields of research and innovation make it easier to deal with mega trends such as digitalisation and its impacts in a focused way.

In contrast to Germany, there is a uniform and comprehensive regulation of vocational training without a division between the legal responsibility for company-related and school-related part of VET. This provides an ideal basis for joint strategic development and for the adaptation of VPET to societal and technological changes.

In Germany, large numbers of activities are conducted within the context of the thematic association between vocational education and training and digitalisation. A National Skills Strategy was developed, and numerous funding programmes were launched. The aim was that these would strengthen vocational education and training directly or indirectly, e.g. by providing support for SMEs and the craft trades sector. Nevertheless, harmonisation or coordination of activities is only possible to a limited extent at the national level and needs to have its basis in a willingness to cooperate on the part of the federal states and the Federal Government. A strategy paper produced by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) in 2016 formulates cross-cutting approaches and announces initiatives which extend across VET sectors, such as the expansion of a general programme entitled “Digital media in education”. At the same time, it makes clear that the federal states need to act within the scope of the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs to draw up their own strategy for “Education in the digital world” which focuses on the school and higher education sectors (Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung (BMBF), 2016). To a certain extent a cross-cutting approach exists within the framework of the Digital Pact for Schools because financing is provided for all school establishments, including vocational schools. However, the process of adopting the Digital Pact for Schools was very rocky. Among other things, the Basic Law had to be amended for this.

The thematic areas addressed by the stakeholders in Switzerland in connection with technological development and its consequences for VPET display a high degree of conformance. The issue of matching VET ordinances to the changing demands of the labour market and the question as to whether processes exhibit sufficient flexibility are both posed. Other topics addressed are equipment at vocational schools, digital teaching and learning tools, dealing with these resources in an appropriate and useful way, and the new didactic approaches thus facilitated. The future role of teaching and training staff is mentioned. The continuing vocational education and training for employees in general and for teaching staff in particular also plays a major role in the spectrum of themes covered. Topics are related in differing degrees to the question of relevant financing.

A critical view is taken of the situation regarding support for the continuing training activities of employees. The trade unions in particular are calling for greater endeavours on the part of the companies. The same applies to teaching and training staff. The teachers’ union also addresses the issue of the financing of continuing education and training. Because of the increasing need for continuing vocational training, the various perspectives of the social partners will come to the fore and a greater focus will be placed on the interests of potential continuing training participants.

In Germany the recommendations and demands particularly relate to the expansion of continuing training, advanced training for teaching staff, the equipment at education and training establishments, digital teaching and learning methods, and new didactic approaches. The issue of future occupational competencies is also addressed. The question posed is whether and the extent to which the set of competencies acquired within VET will need to be changed and adapted. With regard to the structure and organisation of initial vocational education and training, the main points raised concern the flexibility of training regulations and of the regulatory instruments in overall terms and the role that additional qualifications might play as a possible instrument for flexibilisation.

There are two areas of contrary positions between the stakeholders. The first of these relates to the field of educational federalism. Sensitive controversies between the Federal Government and the federal states are emerging both with regard to the topic of the National Education Council and in respect of the debate surrounding the Digital Pact for Schools. Differing positions of the social partners are discernible in relation to the strengthening and expansion of

company-based continuing training. These lead to the conclusion that there is potential for future conflict as regards the distribution of the financial burden. Both the companies on one side and the employees on the other are directly affected by this.

Somewhat controversial issues are the role and representation of the vocational schools in these processes as well as the role of large companies in Switzerland.

On the one hand, calls are being made for vocational schools and teaching staff to enjoy a greater right of co-determination in future, also with regard to strategic decisions. On the other hand, the advice is that further stakeholders should not be included in governance committees. Nevertheless, there is a clear awareness of the significance of education and training providers, and proposals are being made for the establishment of dialogue forums or expert commissions at the technical operational level. Within the context of the integration of stakeholders into the process of drawing up VET ordinances, the employers are warning that reticence should be exercised in respect of the involvement of more actors. They take the view that too many stakeholders are already taking part and that this is leading to delays in the update process.

The role of the companies is considered from an academic research perspective, and it is proposed that companies particularly oriented to research and innovation should be more closely involved in the development of VET ordinances so that they are able to bring their expertise to bear (Renold et al., 2019). Emmenegger and Seitzl (2019) support the idea that companies should have a stronger voice in the governance of vocational and professional education and training and also suggest that this should be facilitated within the scope of an extra-parliamentary expert commission.

Initiatives undertaken by the employer association *Swissmem*, creating precisely tailored training pathways or the professional organisation ICT-Berufsbildung, introducing modularisation in their VET ordinances are worthy of note as this represents an instance where a stakeholder is expanding its traditional field of activity.

The role that should be played in the training sector by large companies with considerable amounts of resources is also a question which arises in Germany, but from a different perspective. Vehicles such as additional qualifications afford such firms an opportunity to extend the scope which they already enjoy thanks to the technologically neutral wording of the training regulations. In contrast to small companies providing training, they have the capacities to adjust their company-based training more closely to the changing competence requirements and the ability to ensure continuous further training for their staff (for information on the influence of company size on the nature of vocational education and training systems, see Ebner and Nikolai (2010). The innovative approaches which are created may deliver impetuses for the future structuring of training regulations. For the role of the automobile sector, see Zinke et al. (2017). The role of the vocational schools in the wake of digitalisation is a further issue being addressed in Germany as well. Both in connection with the reform of the BBiG in 2019 and within the context of the debate on a National Education Council in the same year, the teachers' associations in particular are calling for stronger direct involvement by education staff in educational policy decisions.

The social partners in the metal working and electrical industries have demonstrated their central role in the development and updating of training regulations in a unique manner. In a departure from the previously established process, they adopted a so-called "agile procedure" to investigate the adaptability of VET contents in the relevant training occupations.

For the first time ever, the legislature has also considered an educational topic within the scope of a committee of enquiry. The Committee of Enquiry on "Vocational education and training in the digital world of work", which was constituted by the Deutsche Bundestag in June 2018, reflects the societal relevance of both vocational education and training and digitalisation. Although its recommendations are not binding on the executive and are in particular not mandatory for the federal states and the social partners, they are significant in terms of being the

official voice of parliament within the scope of public discourse on fundamental policy decisions.

#### 4 Discussion

There is a large thematic overlap in the topics that actors in Switzerland and Germany address in the context of digitalisation. Nevertheless, it becomes clear that the organisation of the legal governance of the system opens up different scope for action. The similarity of the two VET systems due to their cooperative approach is mitigated by this difference. This becomes visible in the context of their policy strategies to cope with the challenges of digitalisation. At the same time, both in Switzerland and Germany, the common denominator of numerous VET governance activities and initiatives within the context of digitalisation is increased networking between the stakeholders. The size of the challenges has led to numerous initiatives on the part of the individual stakeholders but has also produced the realisation that these challenges can only be overcome together. Strengthening the co-determination rights and therefore also the role of teaching and training staff, of the vocational schools and of individual innovative large companies is an issue being addressed in both countries. One of the key questions for the future, however, could be the representation of vocational learners and apprentices. The individualisation of responsibility for remaining employable and coping with changing learning conditions must lead to greater attention to the learner perspective. The question is how this will be organized in the future and who will be the driving force.

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