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## The Apprentice Perspective: A blind Spot in the Governance of VET Systems? A German-Danish-Swiss Comparison

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### Abstract

The apprentice's perspective is of central importance for the educational policy design and further development of VET systems. The success of all education policy measures that keep VET attractive or make it more attractive ultimately depends on the educational decisions of learners. It is therefore crucial for a potentially successful VET policy to know the perspective of those who have decided to enter VET. Their assessments and experiences must be systematically incorporated into education policy decisions at the governance level. The paper presents and discusses whether, how and with what content-related focus this takes place. The focus is on the approaches in Germany, Switzerland and Denmark.

### Keywords

governance, apprentices, stakeholders, international governance of VET

### 1 Introduction

The quality and efficiency of VET systems are analysed in numerous data collections and studies. These studies are of particular importance in times of seriously changing framework conditions such as digitalisation or the COVID-19 pandemic. The results of the analyses can trigger or help to underpin VET policy decisions. In the best-case scenario, they flow into government initiatives as an evidence base, the aim of which is to adapt and strengthen vocational education and training.

Within the framework of a project of the BIBB (Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training), the extent to which the perspective of vocational learners is taken into account was investigated. Which instruments are used to systematically capture the perspective of vocational learners and thus make it visible for the steering of VET systems?

Apprentices in particular are affected by the impact of digitalisation in their everyday training and work. Strengthened and accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, they are confronted with new forms of learning in which the focus is on self-organised learning. Technical tools and digital platforms are changing communication in the training company and in the vocational school, as well as didactics and ultimately the role of teaching staff.

Taking their level of satisfaction, their points of criticism and suggestions for change into account in VET policy decisions is crucial for the future attractiveness of VET, especially in



view of the high competitive pressure from the higher education sector. Furthermore, it is also a signal of the extent to which learners are perceived as a group of actors in a VET system and thus indirectly have the possibility of social participation in shaping it.

## **2 Theoretical and methodological approach**

The project underlying this article is based on the theoretical background of actor-centred institutionalism (Scharpf, 2000) and actor-network theory (Latour, 2007). The group of learners, here especially the apprentices, have so far not or hardly been perceived as actors in the design of educational systems (Hippach-Schneider & Rieder, 2021, 2022). However, since education policy measures also represent socio-political decisions, it would be obvious to provide the group of learners with an indirect form of participation.

Through a literature and document analysis, a comparative overview of different forms and approaches of apprentice surveys has been developed. The results are indicative of the extent to which their perspective is relevant for policy-making in the field of VET. One of the decisive factors in the selection of the countries for comparison was that they are characterised by a strong in-company training component with regard to the design of their VET systems.

The constellation of actors in education policy governance shows similarities but also clear differences. In all three countries, the social partners are important actors, albeit in different ways. Educational federalism in Germany, where responsibility for schools lies with the federal states, has its counterpart to a certain extent in the cantonal responsibility for the school side in Switzerland, whereas in Denmark there is no such regional division of responsibility. At the same time, all three countries have been experiencing a decline in apprenticeship numbers for years, albeit to varying degrees.

## **3 Research results**

In the course of the research, a total of five types of surveys could be distinguished:

- Nationwide, regularly conducted, government-funded surveys (1)
- Nationwide, regularly conducted, non-government financed surveys (2)
- Regional and sectoral surveys (3)
- Youth surveys (4)
- Research projects and singular studies (period 2014-2022) (5)

The differentiation between government-funded surveys and non-government-funded surveys is relevant because it can be assumed that government-funded activities are more likely to be systematically included in education policy decisions. The fact that government funding is used for a survey is an indication of the relevance attributed to these questions and the likelihood that the results will be noticed at the education policy level. The project also provided an overview of research projects and individual studies in which apprentice surveys were conducted. The overview covers a period from 2014 to 2022, but is only very briefly discussed in this publication.

**Table 1**

Overview of apprentice/vocational learner surveys

	D	CH	DK
1	National Education Panel (NEPS) BA/BIBB-Applicant Survey	Standardised Final Year Survey (SAB) The Transition Barometer [Das Nahtstellenbarometer] Multi-Cohort-Study TREE	Annual survey on "Strengthening confidence and well-being in vocational schools".
2	DGB-Survey of Apprentices	Learner Survey	
3	Studies in particular by chambers and trade unions; hotel/gastronomy, IT	Studies and evaluations, especially by cantons and professional organisations (OdA); IT, hotel/gastronomy, commercial occupations	Trade unions, e.g. Dansk Metal; Surveys conducted by the Danish Interest Group of Vocational Learners (EEO)
4	Growing up in Germany [Aufwachsen in Deutschland] (AID:A) Shell Youth Studies The School Survey [Das Schulbarometer] (D, CH, AT)	Young Adult Survey Switzerland (YASS); JAMES-Studie	Research by the Centre for Youth Research (CeFU); Democracy Day survey; Danish National Youth Study 2019/2014; Surveys by the Danish Youth Council.
5	Focus areas: Digitalisation, quality/competence acquisition, COVID-19 pandemic, less on satisfaction in general (2 studies from 2016).	Focus areas: Quality, learning site cooperation/border-crossing, digitalisation, willingness to make an effort/motivation; life-worlds of apprentices, COVID-19 pandemic.	Focus areas: Border-crossing; Well-being; dropout/retention/pride in VET, VET preparation; COVID-19 pandemic.

Source: own compilation

Both in Switzerland and in Germany, surveys are conducted at the transition to VET. However, the methodological approaches differ significantly. The transition barometer in Switzerland starts with pupils at the transition to secondary level 2, i.e. with 14-16 year-olds. The survey is carried out at two points in the year in order to be able to determine developments, before and after the transition to upper secondary level. At the same time, the companies are also surveyed, which provides a data basis for assessing the fit between supply and demand.

In Germany, applicants who have registered with the Federal Employment Agency (Bundesagentur für Arbeit, BA) in their search for a training place are surveyed, i.e. the survey does not include interested parties who have found a training company themselves, but does include interested parties who have not come directly from school (BA/BIBB applicant survey).

In Switzerland, a nationwide survey is also conducted at VET schools before the completion of training, i.e. before the transition to the labour market or a higher qualification (Standardised Final Class Survey, SAB). This is possible because the cantons, which are responsible for the quality of the schools, have committed themselves to this. This has the advantage that the transition data obtained can be evaluated individually per school or canton. The focus here is on the question of the quality of VET schools from the perspective of VET students.

The TREE multi-cohort study also starts at this so-called 2nd threshold. It is a longitudinal study that observes educational and employment histories after leaving compulsory school. This data is the basis for numerous evaluations in the field of VET research. A longitudinal study is also being conducted in Germany. Within the framework of the National Educational

Panel (NEPS), data is collected on both transitions, among others. However, an intensive and targeted survey of the concrete situation during training is not associated with this.

However, this is the case with the annual survey of apprentices by the DGB trade union. This is an important contribution by a non-governmental body or a non-governmentally financed survey. It specifically sheds light on the training situation from the perspective of apprentices in the dual system. Usually, the results are linked to education policy assessments by the trade union and corresponding proposals for action or demands.

In summary, it is clear that in Germany detailed information on satisfaction with training from the learner's point of view can primarily be obtained from the trade union's training report. Although the NEPS and the BA/BIBB Applicant Survey also collect questions on satisfaction, they refer to assessments that remain quite general and focus on the choice or decision to undergo training. In contrast, the available data sets from SAB and TREE in Switzerland enable a continuous detailed satisfaction analysis of vocational learners.

The group of regional and sectoral surveys make an important contribution by differentiating more between different groups of apprentices and complementing the nationwide view. Such studies are conducted in both countries. In Germany, the chambers in particular conduct surveys of apprentices in their region. The focus is on aspects such as satisfaction and quality assessment. Sector-specific surveys are carried out by trade unions, for example. In Switzerland, the labour organisations play an important role in the field of sector-specific surveys, the cantons focus on the respective cantonal situation.

In addition, there are different youth studies in both countries, which focus more broadly on social aspects, attitudes and assessments of young people as a whole. The specific aspect of vocational education and training plays a rather subordinate role.

Research projects and individual studies in both countries also deal with questions that apprentices are asked to answer. Thematically, there are similarities, such as digitalisation or the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, but different emphases are recognisable. While in Switzerland the quality issues are more in the foreground in connection with the challenges posed by the different places of learning, and the associated role of the apprentice as a "border-crosser", in Germany quality is primarily examined in the context of competence acquisition. The topics of willingness to make an effort/motivation and the living environments of apprentices are also the subject of research projects in Switzerland with direct apprentice surveys.

In this context, the different organisation of the VET research landscape in the two countries must also be briefly mentioned. In Germany it is very heterogeneous. The Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training has the statutory mandate to conduct VET research, while numerous universities also deal with issues in the context of VET, e.g. with labour market-oriented, economic, educational-economic, educational science, sociological or psychological focal points. In the loose association of the *Arbeitsgemeinschaft Berufsbildungsforschungsnetz* (AGBFN), interested actors in VET research can exchange information. In Switzerland, research activities are thematically bundled through the funding concept of the so-called *Leading Houses*. Each *Leading House* is a competence network with one or more chairs at Swiss universities and a specific research field in the area of VET. The Swiss Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training (SFIVET) can also be part of a *Leading House*. This enables coordinated, concerted and targeted VET research involving all research stakeholders.

Compared to the other two countries, Denmark has an explicit education policy approach in which learner well-being plays an important role. The corresponding strategy is embedded in the reform of VET from 2015. The reform was intended to increase the number of apprentices, reduce drop-out rates and improve the overall well-being of apprentices.

As a result, vocational schools in Denmark have been conducting annual surveys on the satisfaction and well-being of VET learners since 2015. This measurement of well-being has been laid down in law (cf. § 6 para. 4) (RETSINFORMATION 2019). The results of the surveys are to be used both for the local quality work of the school and for the follow-up of the reform by the Ministry of Children and Education. Teaching companies are also obliged to conduct satisfaction surveys among their apprentices who are in an active training contract at the measurement period set by the Ministry. The data makes it possible to obtain information at national, regional or school level, as well as broken down by type of training, occupation or age group of learners.

In the aftermath of the COVID 19 pandemic, the government, with the support of the political parties, provided targeted funding for professional development and community well-being for local learners. Since 2017, the Danish Youth Council and the Confederation of Trade Unions have asked learners at vocational schools about their relationship with representative democracy and politicians, but also about their perception of their own abilities on Democracy Day. The trade union Dansk Metal as well conducts surveys among apprentices, so does the Danish representation of the interests of vocational learners (ElevOrganisation, EEO). The EEO, among other student organisations, is furthermore represented on the Regulatory Council of the National Evaluation Institute for Education (EVA), which is a strong indication of the relevance of the learner voice in government administration. The EVA is responsible, among other things, for the analyses of the annual surveys of vocational learners.

Research projects with apprentice surveys cover a wide range of topics, including the challenges of apprentices in the face of two places of learning, key words: border-crossing; well-being; drop-out/retention; VET preparation, transitions, impact of the COVID-19 pandemic etc. Several state or university institutes deal with research questions in the context of VET, as does a private sector think tank. The questions often consider VET learners as young people in society and not only in their role as VET learners.

#### **4 Discussion and conclusion**

In Germany, the annual representative survey of apprentices is carried out by a trade union. The well-being or satisfaction of apprentices or students is not an explicit educational policy objective. This is also not the case in Switzerland. However, within the framework of the SAB, surveys are systematically conducted annually at vocational schools, similar to Denmark. In addition, numerous projects are financed by the departmental research, which aim at the learning situation and the satisfaction of the apprentices. The organisation and funding of VET research through the system of "Leading Houses" also suggest a high degree of reception of the research results by education policy decision-makers. This may not be expected to the same extent due to the very heterogeneous research landscape in Germany. The research focus in Germany, at least of the projects that include a trainee survey and thus survey the people involved themselves, is also aimed more at quality in the context of skills acquisition, dealing with digitalisation, and less specifically at satisfaction and well-being. In Denmark, there is an explicit educational policy goal to improve the well-being of apprentices and forms the basis for annual surveys of vocational learners at vocational schools. The relevance of this aspect is reflected in numerous thematic designs of research questions. It is very clear that VET policy in Denmark places a high value on learner well-being.

The results of the paper provide an insight into how and to what intensity systematic monitoring of the apprentices' perspective takes place in the three comparison systems and thus the possibility of participation and indirect design options for vocational learners. Remarkable differences between the countries can be seen here.

It is worthwhile to systematically make the apprentice's voice heard. They are the key multipliers for VET. Seeing them as an important actor in shaping the VET system can only

have positive effects. It can strengthen their identity, the awareness of relevance and brings an additional and different perspective into educational policy decisions. Both is necessary for a sustainable attractiveness of the VET system.

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