

Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 44 (2017)
Heft: 1

Artikel: How Switzerland exports its pride in craftsmanship
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-906876>

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How Switzerland exports its pride in craftsmanship

It combines application and theory uniquely well, ensures incredibly low unemployment and is deemed a successful export. The Swiss dual track vocational education and professional training system is being used as a template by many countries for their own education systems. However, exporting it is not that straightforward.



MARC LETTAU

It must be tangible – that was the principle adopted in the early 1960s when Switzerland began providing government development aid. “Tangible” meant ridding the world of hunger and poverty but through substantive projects that conveyed typically Swiss application-oriented knowledge and skills as well as Swiss values. As a nation of mountains, cows and skilled cheese-makers, Switzerland did the

obvious thing. Swiss development aid workers spread out across the Peruvian Andes and trained impoverished hill farmers in purpose-built cheese dairies. Non-governmental development aid workers from Switzerland had previously done the same thing in the mountains of Nepal. Peru and Nepal represent the idea of driving forward broad development by conveying professional expertise, helping those in need to find employment and

The dual-track system has great prestige in Switzerland, unlike in many countries, for instance, in eastern Europe. Photo: Keystone

improving their diets – thanks to good milk.

What was achieved was, of course, not quite as perfect as hoped for. The “export” of the Swiss dual track vocational education and professional training system has nevertheless been an enduring issue ever since. There is a long list of Swiss vocational training projects covering Bolivia, Burkina Faso, Ghana, India, Indonesia, Myanmar and many other countries extending right back to Nepal, the country where the first pilot projects took place. Today, Switzerland is helping to set up courses there which can be attended whilst also in employment.

The reputation of the Swiss vocational training system even impresses major industrial nations. In 2015, the USA signed an agreement with Switzerland on vocational training. The USA hopes to discover why Switzerland is so successful at producing the professionals sought by the business community. Suzi LeVine, US ambassador in Berne, finds it “fascinating” how companies and state vocational schools interact in Switzerland.

Two thirds opt for an apprenticeship

Swiss professionals are not surprised. The dual track vocational education and professional training system enjoys great prestige in Switzerland. Two thirds of all young Swiss people opt for an apprenticeship over pre-university education spent entirely at a grammar school. They do so because the dual track system is an unequivocal success story. Switzerland’s competitiveness is attributable to the country’s well-educated specialists, and the dual track vocational education and professional training system is arguably the main reason for the low rate of youth unemployment. The system does not turn out unemployed graduates. While the average rate of unemployment in Europe stands at 10%, it is

3.3% in Switzerland. The demeaning experience of not finding a role in the modern working world is not something shared by the vast majority of young adults in Switzerland.

This result is astonishing as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) is a regular critic of the Swiss education system. It complains that the rate of those obtaining entrance qualifications for higher education is the lowest of any European country. While well over 60% of all young people achieve such qualifications on average in Europe and then go on to enrol at university, the rate only stands at 20% in Switzerland. This supposed distance from the academic world is a consequence of the “successful product”. The Swiss dual track vocational education and professional training system is integrated into an extremely permeable education system that provides alternative routes to higher education. Every vocational qualification without exception provides opportunity for further education. It is commonplace in Switzerland today for young people to opt for the dual track vocational education and professional training system and to sit university-entrance examinations either in parallel to their training or during the first few years of their career. This “vocational baccalaureate” opens the door to universities of applied sciences as well as traditional ones. Around 40% of students today went through the application-oriented dual track vocational training system first, and this number is rising.

A tendency towards idealisation abroad

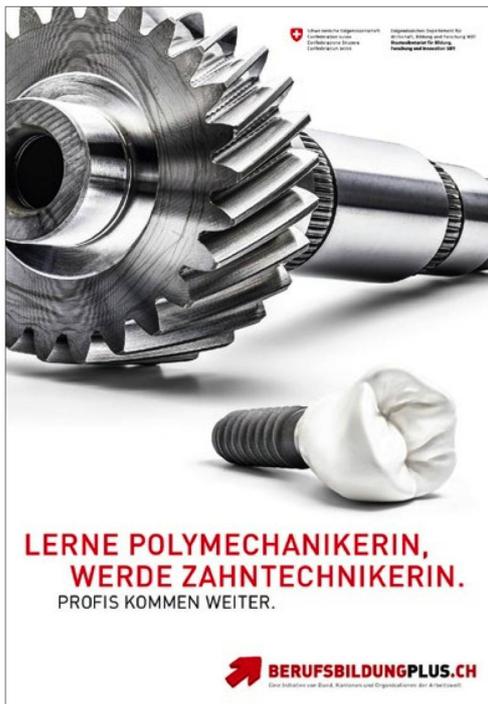
A low rate of university entrance qualifications, low youth unemployment and no major shortages of specialist workers – these key points explain why the Swiss model is regarded as a paradigm. Last summer, Serbia joined

the list of nations keen to adopt the model. Serbia’s neighbour Bulgaria, where a rapid reform of vocational training is underway, is much further along the road. Swiss education experts talk of a “highly promising” transformation in the case of Bulgaria. However, such reports can result in idealisation. The experiences of the last 50 years show that the transfer of the dual track vocational training model has its limitations. It can almost never be transferred directly. Modifications to take account of country-specific circumstances are inevi-

The dual track vocational education system

Technical and academic subjects are taught in tandem in a dual track vocational education system. Trainees spend three days of the week working at their training enterprise, for example, and attend technical college for two days where general subjects are also on the curriculum. In Switzerland, federal government, the cantons and industry organisations work together on vocational training. This means that the business world is not a “recipient” of trained specialist workers but instead has a considerable degree of responsibility for their training. (mul)

table. First and foremost, it is necessary to remember that Swiss vocational training is based on the fundamental principles of a nation forged by the will of the people and a system whereby local politicians work only part-time under their public mandate. The economy and training enterprises assume a great deal of responsibility and the state creates the stable legal framework required. Such conditions rarely exist in developing countries in particular. From an historical perspective, the Swiss dual track vocational education and professional training system has been developing for over 200 years – emerging from the guild system that put great emphasis on and took pride in crafts-



The dual track vocational training system is also actively promoted in Switzerland, such as through this campaign by the State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation.

manship. Artisans' professions shaped their identity and ensured social status. That continues to apply today.

The tangible approach of long ago – teaching farmers in remote mountain regions how to make cheese – sometimes leads to a glorified portrayal of Switzerland's current efforts in support of vocational training in developing and transitional countries. The Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) now invests barely 4% of its resources in vocational training projects in the strict sense of the term. It is much less still for the countries of eastern Europe. Rudolf Strahm, an economist who is an expert in education and development aid, is critical of this development.

Swiss development aid has neglected its original principles in this respect, he says. Today it spreads its funding across many countries and issues. Experts from different backgrounds concur with Strahm's criticism or at least explain the trend apologetically. Development targets are constantly being shifted worldwide. With the UN's Millennium Development Goals, supported by Switzerland, the emphasis in education has moved away from vocational training towards basic education and literacy. The logic behind this is understandable. The best vocational training system is of little use if underprivileged youngsters do not learn to read and write. But the wind is now changing direction again as the new UN Agenda for Sustainable Development is calling upon the international community to pave the way to affordable and high-quality vocational training for everyone.

Tool of economic diplomacy

The transfer of education is obviously not solely the remit of the SDC in Switzerland. Simonetta Sommaruga (SP), Minister of Justice, is now also an advocate for vocational training projects abroad. She wants greater investment in vocational training in the countries where asylum seekers come from. As migration from poverty has become a permanent phenomenon, this approach may become more important in future. However, the dual track vocational education and professional training system as an export success has the most indefatigable of supporters in Federal Councillor Johann Schneider-Ammann. He has turned this system into a tool of Swiss economic diplomacy. The number of foreign trade delegations which are closely scrutinising the Swiss vocational training system is constantly increasing.

This offensive is nonetheless not without dissonant voices. Mauro Dell'Ambrogio, State Secretary for Ed-

ucation, Research and Innovation, bluntly declared at the end of 2015 that he knew of a handful of successful "isolated experiments" at most, but not of any country that had set up a dual vocational training system from scratch. The "global admiration for the Swiss education system" was seductive, he said. However, the fact that "incompatible application of the model" can actually result in damaging consequences – such as older employees having to accept lower wages on the pretext of a lack of vocational training – is overlooked. Apprenticeships require prestige in order to be attractive. "However, prestige is only achieved as a result of qualified trainees going on to enjoy successful careers, and such examples do not exist in the beginning."

Prestige is key

Dell'Ambrogio's views were widely criticised. Many experts nevertheless essentially endorse them. The success of training is heavily dependent upon its prestige. Whereas Swiss apprentices proudly point to the education pathways open to them, there are often huge reservations about application-led training in the destination countries of the "educational export". Trades are often seen as having a lower status and offering few prospects. There is certainly no lack of examples illustrating this view. When Caritas wanted to implement vocational training projects in Kosovo, the local authorities gave the charity a warm welcome. However, the authorities were initially not interested in vocational training. They wanted university courses. Caritas had to put a slant on its argument and advised running some vocational education courses under the aegis of a university for image reasons.

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