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Job or further training?

Impact of the Swiss Basic Federal VET Certificate on the careers of low achieving young people

Abstract

Purpose

The two-year basic training course with Basic Federal Certificate was established in Switzerland by the new Vocational Training Act in 2002 with the intention of ensuring upper secondary education and training for disadvantaged young people.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the findings of a longitudinal study of youths who participated in the two-year vocational education and training (VET) programme. The main objective is the evaluation of intentions regarding the two-year training course.

Design/methodology/approach

A sample of 319 trainees on a two-year training course in the retail sales and hotel sectors were questioned at the end of their training about their educational and family background, their occupational and personal situation as well as their prospects. Their integration into the labour market was recorded 14 months later. These results are compared with the results of a sample of 183 graduates of an Elementary traineeship in the same occupational fields.

Findings

The results of the study confirm some assumptions made about the effects of the training with Basic Federal VET Certificate. However, the findings also point to crucial aspects that require further investigation.

Originality/value

The findings of the investigation provide insight into the first experiences with the new standardised VET programme. In addition, the presented research is the first longitudinal study focusing on the occupational perspectives of underachieving youths in Switzerland.

Keywords

Transition from school to work, VET, employability, disadvantaged youth, longitudinal study, programme evaluation

Paper type

Research paper

[1]

1 Introduction

1.1 *Aspects of transition from school to work*

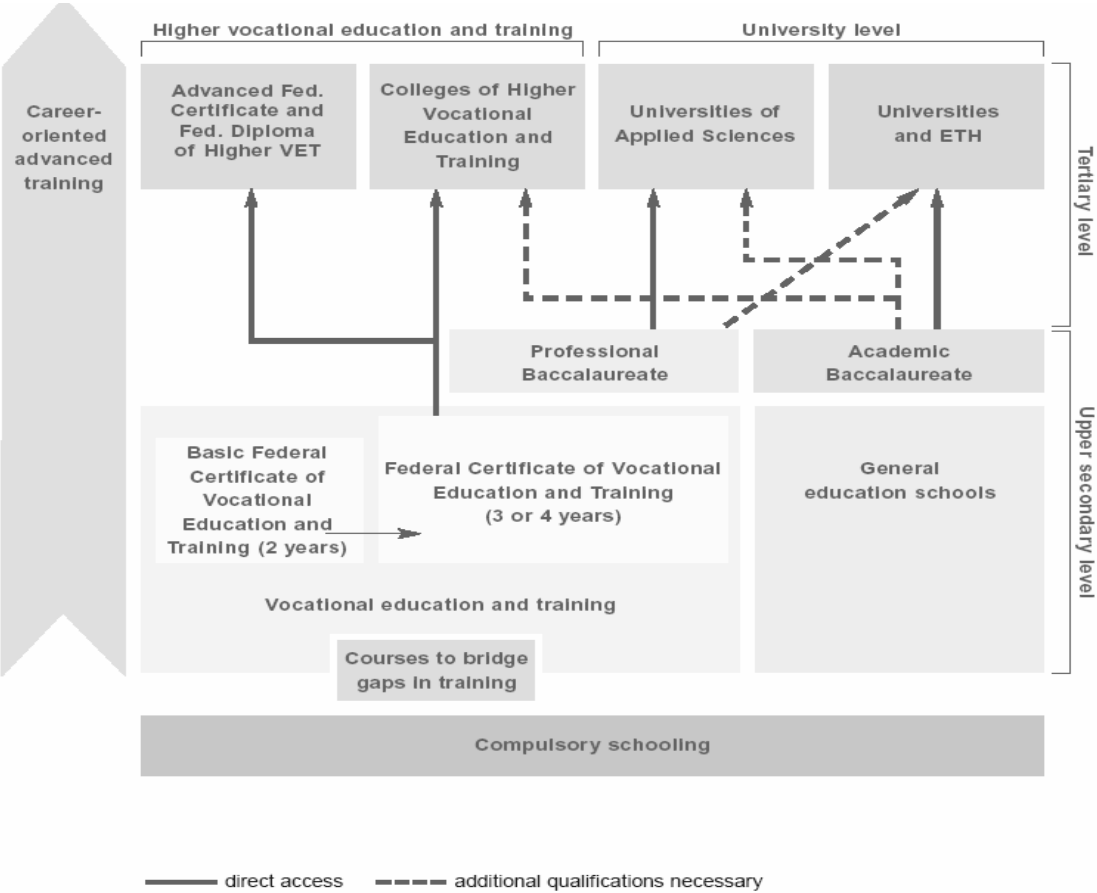
In the past decade, the transition from school to work has become more and more difficult for young people, not only in Switzerland, but also in other European countries. On the one hand, sources of these difficulties lie in a tight labour market and a short supply of apprenticeships, and on the other hand they can be found in more intricate qualification requirements and in the increasing educational expectations of today's society (Behrens, 2007; Niemeyer, 2008; Walther, 2007). Evidence of this in Switzerland is given by: an increased number of school leavers engaging in courses to bridge the gap between obligatory and post-obligatory education (Meyer, 2003), higher rates in youth unemployment (Meins and Morlock, 2004) and elevated numbers of young people depending on social welfare (Drilling and Christen, 2000).

Compulsory school in Switzerland is highly selective and consists of different levels in the lower secondary school track that range from basic to expanded curricula. As research shows, people with low academic achievements and individuals with a migration background encounter several difficulties in the transition from school to work. For instance, they are more likely to follow a school track with basic curriculum and face major difficulties in the transition from lower to upper secondary level than young people following a lower secondary school track with expanded curriculum (Hupka *et al.*, 2006; Meyer *et al.*, 2003). They are also at risk of being discriminated against in the award of apprenticeship training positions (Imdorf, 2005, 2007a, 2007b; Haeberlin *et al.*, 2004). The same group of disadvantaged young people also face difficulties in the transition from vocational education and training (VET) to the labour market (Bertschy *et al.*, 2007; Lischer, 2007). Similar findings from other European studies support these statements (Reissnig *et al.*, 2008; Friese and Siecke, 2008; Behrens, 2007; Seibert and Solga, 2005).

1.2 *Vocational education and training (VET) in Switzerland*

Vocational education and training is the predominant form of upper secondary education programme in Switzerland and it is regulated by the 2002 Swiss Vocational Training Act (Swiss Confederation, 2002). Two thirds of young people enrol in VET programmes after graduating from compulsory school (Office for

Professional Education and Technology [OPET], 2008). Vocational education and training in an apprenticeship-based, dual type programme (a combination of school-based and work-based learning) is the main form of VET in Switzerland; it is more common in the German than in the French and Italian parts of Switzerland (OPET, 2008; Stalder and Nägele, in press; Wettstein and Gonon, 2009). As shown in Figure 1, the Swiss VET system is characterized by a principle of potential upward mobility, offering permeability between the different programmes and avoiding dead-ends. National regulations, also known as ordinances, for Federal Certificate-VET-programmes in 73 of over 250 skilled occupations had been determined by the educational year 2009/2010, whereas the number of ordinances for Basic Federal Certificate-VET-programmes currently totals 24 (OPET, 2009).



Source: Federal Office for Professional Education and Technology (OPET), 2008

Figure 1: The Swiss VET system

The basic training course with Basic Federal VET Certificate is a two-year, standardised vocational training programme (approximately five per cent of all VET programmes run for two years). The basic training course is aimed at academically

challenged youths and focuses predominantly on practical activities. The standardisation of the training ensures that young professionals with a Basic Federal VET Certificate meet labour market needs. This is linked to the expectation that integration into the labour market and permeability to further training – for example, transfer onto the Federal VET Certificate programme – is taken into account (OPET, 2005). Young people are entitled to get individual support and counselling if successful completion of their training is in danger (Swiss Confederation, 2002; OPET, 2007a). The introduction of the two-year basic training course under the new Swiss Vocational Training Act (see above) represents a shift in paradigm: the Elementary training programme, which preceded the enactment of the new Vocational Training Act of 2004, ensured the vocational training of practically talented, underachieving youths and was geared towards the individual ability of the learner. However, in contrast to the new two-year basic training course, the Elementary training programme did not result in a standardised, federally recognised certificate of upper secondary level (Kammermann *et al.*, 2009a; Wettstein and Broch, 1979). Due to its lack of federal recognition, the Elementary VET was not very popular amongst youths, parents and employers (Kammermann *et al.*, 2009a; Stalder and Nägele, in press).

However, there is some concern among experts in the field of Special Education regarding the rise in requirements to enter and successfully complete the VET with Basic Federal Certificate (Kammermann *et al.*, 2009a; Lischer, 2007).

Based on this concern, our research aims to compare the two training programmes. In a longitudinal research study we evaluated different aspects characterizing the old and the new VET programmes and hence investigated the above mentioned shift in paradigm in order to contribute to the existing body of knowledge on VET opportunities for disadvantaged young people. Table 1 summarizes the specifications of the two programmes (see Kammermann *et al.*, 2009a).

	Elementary training programme	Basic VET programme
Special Needs Education oriented	yes	no
individualization	yes	no
standardisation	no	yes
upward mobility in VET	no	yes?
employment prospects	low	high?
attractiveness	low	??
high level of requirements	no	?

? = is component part of the presented research

?? = has yet to be tested, is not part of the presented research

Table 1: Elementary training and Basic VET

Switzerland's VET system is strongly employer-driven... The involvement of professional organisations in the process of VET policy making is stipulated by law. Employers have responsibility for determining the content of VET (through ordinances which describe the competencies to be taught in every programme and training plans) and of national examinations, and have the exclusive right to initiate the design of new ordinances... and prepare training plans. Employers are also directly engaged in the provision of VET by offering apprenticeship places (one third of employers providing such training places [note of the author])...The tri-partite Swiss partnership arrangements including the Confederation, the cantons and professional organisations rely on the principles of consensus and cooperation (OECD, 2009, p. 16).

Swiss educational policy aims to ensure that by 2015 95 per cent of all youths accomplish a post-obligatory education qualification at upper secondary level (Swiss Conference of Cantonal Ministers of Education, 2006). Various measures have been introduced to achieve this aim and to optimize the transition from school to work: development of the curricula for final years in compulsory schools, implementation of career guidance and counselling, monitoring young people during their search for an apprenticeship-place, offering courses to bridge gaps in training, and implementation of Case Management as a structured practice to coordinate support measures for youths at risk (Wettstein and Gonon, 2009; see also OPET, 2007a, 2007b).

In the summer of 2007, the first graduates completed a two-year basic training course with Basic Federal VET Certificate in retail sales (retail business assistant) and hospitality (kitchen, restaurant and hotel employees).

The aim of our research project was to follow the vocational development of the young professionals with Basic Federal VET Certificates and compare their development with the vocational development of young adults who had completed an Elementary training programme in the same occupational field. The study focused on the training and employment progress of the youths (Kammermann, 2009; Kammermann *et al.* 2009b). In this paper, we discuss key findings regarding the first

and the second threshold, that is, entrance into VET and entrance into labour market [2]. A discussion of the implications and some considerations regarding the limitations of our research conclude the paper.

2 Methods and research design

The occupational prospects of graduates in the last transit through an Elementary training programme and those embarking upon the first two-year basic training course with Basic Federal VET Certificate – surveyed at the end of training and 14 months later – formed the core of this investigation. We also focused on the first threshold: the entrance into VET and the training process.

2.1 Assumptions

The new two-year basic training with Basic Federal Certificate results in higher potential upward mobility within the VET system.

The new two year-basic training with Basic Federal Certificate leads to increased employability and better integration into the labour market.

The requirement level of the new two-year basic training with Basic Federal Certificate is expanded due to the standardisation of the programme.

2.2 Sample – Elementary trainees

Of the 183 Elementary trainees who were questioned shortly before completing their training in summer 2006, 134 were available again 14 months later for a telephone interview. Of the 134 questioned, 77 were additionally willing to fill in a written follow-up survey. The telephone follow-up survey consisted of 77 women and 57 men; 48 women and 29 men completed the written follow-up questionnaire. The sample included people from both the German and the French speaking regions of Switzerland.

2.3 Sample – Basic Federal VET Certificate learners

Of the 319 Basic Federal VET Certificate learners involved in the survey taken in summer 2007 at the end of their training, 211 were questioned about their situation 14 months later. 87 of the young professionals additionally took part in a written follow-up survey. The telephone follow-up survey consisted of 145 women and 66

men; 69 women and 18 men took part in the written follow-up survey. The sample includes people from the German, the French and the Italian parts of Switzerland.

2.4 Contents of the survey

In addition to questions on academic and family background, the questionnaire distributed at the end of the training also included items for evaluating the training, psychological well-being and immediate professional prospects of those interviewed. A substantial number of the questions were taken from the Swiss national youth survey 'TRansition from Education to Employment, TREE' questionnaire (TREE, 2008). Based on the methodological approach of the project 'Termination of apprenticeship contracts in the canton of Berne (LEVA)' (Schmid and Stalder 2008), the survey that followed 14 months after completion of training was carried out using both telephone and written interviews. The telephone interviews focused on the employment situation of those questioned and included details on the development of the year since completion of training, on the apprenticing company or employment establishment, on conditions of employment, on satisfaction and on future prospects. The written questionnaire concentrated on the learned occupation, conditions of employment or training, subjective psychological well-being and social support – this too, was based on the TREE questionnaire and the project 'Termination of apprenticeship contracts in the canton of Berne (LEVA)' (see above).

The results presented in this paper concentrate both on the entry into the VET programme as well as into the labour market. They are based on the analysis of contingency tables, using chi-square tests for independence.

3 Key findings

3.1 Entrance in VET

Questions on the first threshold concentrated on the prerequisites of the youths, on their academic and family background.

Our results confirm the difficulties of young people with low academic achievements and youths with a migration background in the transition from lower to upper secondary level: Elementary trainees and Basic Federal VET Certificate learners differed significantly in their academic and national background (see Table 2). It can be seen that more Elementary trainees than Basic VET Certificate learners were born

overseas and attended special needs classes or schools at compulsory level. Almost half of the Elementary trainees and a little more than one third of the Basic Federal VET Certificate learners had to engage in courses to bridge the gap before being able to start their VET programme. These results are not proof of a smooth transition from obligatory to post-obligatory education.

	Elementary Trainees		Basic VET Certificate Learners	
	Questioned	Per cent	Questioned	Per cent
Born in a foreign country	87*	48%	118*	37%
Mainly special class schooling	69**	40%	28**	10%
Attended courses to bridge gap	80	44%	118	37%

* $p < .05$ (corr. residual stand. ≥ 2 resp. ≤ -2); ** $p < .01$ (corr. residual stand. ≥ 2.6 resp. ≤ -2.6)
Elementary Trainees: N=183; Basic Certificate Learners: N=319

Table 2: Academic and migration background

The following presentation of results regarding the second threshold focuses on the employability and labour market integration of the young people after completing their training.

3.2 Prospects at the end of training

The results of the transition at the second threshold show a disillusioning situation: the future for more than half of the questioned Elementary trainees and Basic Federal VET Certificate learners is still extremely insecure shortly before completing their apprenticeship; only 47 per cent of the Elementary trainees and 45 per cent of the Basic Federal VET Certificate learners were guaranteed a continuing solution (occupational solution, i.e. employment or further training). There was no significant difference between the two with regards to a secure prospect but there was a difference in the type of prospect. Table 3 demonstrates that the Elementary trainees tend to find a place of employment whereas the Basic Federal VET Certificate learners tend more towards a continuing apprenticeship.

<i>Multiple Answers Possible</i>	Elementary Trainees		Basic VET Certificate Learners	
	Questioned	Per cent	Questioned	Per cent
Work Assured	76*	42%	99*	31%
Certificate Programme Assured	22*	12%	83*	26%

* $p < .05$ (corr. residual stand. ≥ 2 resp. ≤ -2)
Elementary Trainees: N=183; Basic Certificate Learners: N=319

Table 3: Vocational prospects at the end of apprenticeship

3.3 Employment situation 14 months after apprenticeship

Former Elementary trainees and Basic Federal VET Certificate learners did not differ significantly in their occupational solutions 14 months after successful completion of their apprenticeship: 81 per cent of the Elementary trainees and 88 per cent of the Basic Federal VET Certificate learners questioned stated that they were in an occupational situation. When questioned, 19 per cent of the Elementary trainees and 12 per cent of the Basic Federal VET Certificate learners were without employment or apprenticeship positions. The employment situation for the two groups was, however, different: a higher percentage of employed Elementary trainees continued working for their apprenticing company than did Basic Federal VET Certificate learners, the latter more frequently found employment with another company (Table 4).

	Elementary Trainees		Basic VET Certificate Learners	
	Questioned	Per cent	Questioned	Per cent
Employed in Learned Occupation in Apprenticing Company	33**	24.6	26**	12.3
Employed in Learned Occupation in Another Company	34*	25.4	76*	36.0
Placement in Learned Occupation	2	1.5	0	0.0
Paid Employment in Learned Occupation Not in Apprenticing Company	0	0.0	2	1.0
Paid Employment Not in Learned Occupation in Another Company	17	12.7	22	10.4
No Paid Employment, Other	26	19.4	26	12.3

Comparison of frequency distribution: Chi-Square $p=.009$

* $p<.05$ (corr. residual stand. ≥ 2 resp. ≤ -2)

** $p<.01$ (corr. residual stand. ≥ 2.6 resp. ≤ -2.6)

Elementary Trainees: $N=134$; Basic Certificate Learners: $N=211$

Table 4: Employment situation 14 months after completion of apprenticeship

Employment conditions of Basic VET Certificate learners and Elementary trainees did not differ significantly: the majority of working people of both training programmes were working fulltime and were in a salaried position. However, there was a difference between salaries for Basic VET learners and Elementary trainees (see Table 5): Elementary trainees received a salary below 3,000 Swiss Francs per month more often than expected, whereas Basic VET certificate learners earned a salary

above 3,500 Swiss Francs per month more often than expected. While reflecting on these results it has to be considered that in the hospitality sector and in some large retail companies mandatory minimal wage guarantees have been implemented during the time span between the questioning of Elementary trainees and Basic VET Certificate learners. Hence, the stated differences cannot fully be attributed to the new training programme. However, employment conditions seem to be upgraded for Basic VET Certificate learners – due to higher salaries.

	Elementary Trainees		Basic VET Certificate Learners	
	Questioned	Per cent	Questioned	Per cent
below 3,000 Swiss Francs	24**	33.3	18**	15.3
3,000 – 3,500 Swiss Francs	35	48.6	55	46.6
above 3,500 Swiss Francs	13**	18.1	45**	38.1

Comparison of frequency distribution: Chi-Square $p=.002$

** $p<.01$ (corr. residual stand. ≥ 2.6 resp. ≤ -2.6)

Elementary Trainees: N=83; Basic Certificate Learners: N=121

Table 5: Salary conditions

3.4 Permeability to further training

The aim of increasing permeability to further training programmes through the introduction of the two-year basic vocational training has been achieved: significantly more young people (26%) in both sectors were on an apprenticeship programme leading to a Federal VET Certificate 14 months after completing their Basic Federal VET Certificate programme in comparison with 10 per cent of Elementary trainees. It is evident in Table 6 that the apprenticeships after a Basic VET Certificate predominantly took place with the initial apprenticing company.

	Elementary Trainees		Basic VET Certificate Learners	
	Questioned	Per cent	Questioned	Per cent
Further Training: Federal VET Certificate in Learned Occupation in Apprenticing Company	6**	4.5	34**	16.1
Further Training: Federal VET Certificate in Learned Occupation in Another Company	7	5.2	21	10.0
Other Further Training	9	6.7	4	1.9

Comparison of frequency distribution: Chi-Square $p=.001$

** $p<.01$ (corr. residual stand. ≥ 2.6 resp. ≤ -2.6)

Elementary Trainees: N=134; Basic Certificate Learners: N=211

Table 6: Occupational situation 14 months after completion of apprenticeship

3.5 Pathways in first year after VET

Table 7 shows a continuous increase of employment rate and hence a decrease of unemployment rate for Elementary trainees and Basic VET Certificate learners during the first 12 months after completion of their training. The amount of people in further training remains stable. In detail, the comparison of the pathways shows a considerable decrease in unemployment for Basic VET Certificate learners during the first months after completion of training whereas the decrease for Elementary trainees is marginal. The employment rate of Elementary trainees increases predominantly during the first months after VET qualification procedures whereas the employment rate for Basic VET Certificate learners seems to ameliorate in the second half of the year following the end of the training programme.

	2 months after completion of VET		7 months after completion of VET		12 months after completion of VET	
	Elementary Trainees Per cent	Basic VET Certificate Learners Per cent	Elementary Trainees Per cent	Basic VET Certificate Learners Per cent	Elementary Trainees Per cent	Basic VET Certificate Learners Per cent
employed	56.4	52.9	63.9	56.8	64.7	63.4
further VET	17.3	27.9	18.1	27.7	18.0	26.5
unemployed	19.9	17.2	15.0	9.0	12.4	6.8
Other solution*	6.4	2.0	3.0	6.5	4.9	3.3

*e.g. military service, motherhood, courses to bridge gaps ...

Elementary Trainees: N=133; Basic Certificate Learners: N=206

Table 7: Pathways in the first year after completion of VET

4 Implications

The key findings of our research confirm some of the *assumptions* related to the introduction of the new, standardised two-year basic training programme leading to a Basic Federal VET Certificate:

An increased permeability from the Basic VET to further training has *been confirmed* by the results of our research. Upward mobility is higher after a two-year basic VET with Basic Federal VET certificate than it was after Elementary training. On the one hand, this can be seen as a major contribution to the development of positive

educational and professional pathways for young people. On the other hand, development of positive upward pathways for Elementary trainees, who more often have attended special needs classes or special needs schools, seems less likely.

The chances for young professionals with a Basic Federal VET Certificate *to find a job in other firms than the training company are significantly higher* than for young professionals after Elementary training. Young workers with a Basic VET Certificate also *earn higher wages* than former Elementary trainees. Even when considering the implementation of mandatory minimal wage guarantees, it can be concluded that these findings support the view that young professionals having completed the new training programme have better employment conditions.

Based on the theory of a 'normal' biography, characterized by linear and smooth school-to-work pathways (Stalder, 2009; Raffe, 2008; Walther and Plug, 2006), it is yet necessary to critically reflect on our findings:

Learners of both the old and the new low-level VET programme are *facing difficulties at the end of their training* because their prospects towards a confirmed occupational solution (employment or further training in a three-year VET programme leading to Federal Certificate) are rather unsecure. More than half of those questioned did not have an affirmed job or training option following the end of their training. These results emphasize the importance of individual support that is foreseen by the Vocational Training Act (Swiss Confederation, 2002). Evidence is given that an intensified implementation of individual support and counselling has to be established in order to promote a smooth transition from VET into employment.

There is *no significant difference regarding employment rates* for people with a Basic Federal VET Certificate in comparison with people with Elementary training. Thus, our findings cannot fully confirm the assumption of a better fit of the young professionals with Basic Federal Certificate to labour market needs.

Our results confirm the existing research findings regarding transition at the first threshold. The situation for academically low achieving youths and young adults with a migration background at the entrance to upper secondary level remains a problematic issue: *Less Basic VET Certificate learners* than Elementary trainees *attended special needs classes or schools at compulsory level*, although the new two-year VET programme was specifically tailored to young people with poor

academic performance. These findings point to the evidence of an expanded requirement level.

As a final conclusion to our research it can be said that the two-year basic training course with Basic Federal VET Certificate seems to be a good solution for the upper segment of the low achievers.

5 Limitations and further outline of our research

The design of our research is *limited* to two occupations in the retail sales and hospitality sector and does not allow general conclusions regarding other VET programmes with Basic Federal VET certificate.

Our findings do not allow a more precise definition of the population in the two-year basic VET due to constrictions of our research design. Our research design focused on the comparison of only two different VET programmes, the elementary training and the two-year basic training, and excluded other VET programmes.

Further research should focus on three major issues. First, future studies should involve all 24 occupations for which regulations for VET with Basic Federal Certificate have been established so far, in order to validate and generalize the results reported here. This would also allow deeper analysis of the different needs and demands of the labour market. Second, the requirements and processes at the transition from lower to upper secondary level have to be carefully analysed. In particular, the gateway to lower-level vocational training, that is training for disabled young people financed by social insurance and offered by special institutions for handicapped people (Aeschbach, 2006), has to be evaluated. Special attention should also be given to the selection process of apprentices and should therefore include investigation of the training companies' criteria of awarding contracts for apprenticeship places. Third, the next step in our own research will be an additional investigation two to three years after the end of VET in order to evaluate the mid- to long-term occupational perspectives of young people with Basic VET Certificate.

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