

Vocationalising education or educationalising vocational training? A lab report from Switzerland

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Introduction

While countries with predominantly academic school based upper secondary education are "discovering" vocational education and training (VET), countries with VET-based post-compulsory education systems such as Germany, Switzerland or Austria are critically reviewing their own situation. This paper takes up the case of Switzerland, which can be considered, in several respects, as a sort of VET laboratory. The present paper

- raises a few conceptual and terminological questions regarding the "vocationalisation" debate;
- describes the VET lab in question and how lab conditions have changed over time;
- shows advantages and shortcomings of a post-compulsory educational system relying as heavily on company-based VET training as Switzerland does;
- by taking the example of Switzerland, has a look at the polarity between "vocationalisation" and "educationalisation" or "generalisation".

To start with: some conceptual and terminological questions

"Vocational education and training enables young adults to make the transition into the working environment and ensures that there are enough qualified people in the future. It is geared to the labour market and is part of the education system." (OPET 2006:3)

This short definition of the purpose of VET in Switzerland – put forth by its main regulating agency, the Federal Office of Professional Education and Technology OPET – illustrates how strongly VET is geared to labour market needs. The fact that VET is part of the country's educational system is mentioned at the very end of the definition, almost apologetically.

Adding the term that was chosen for the title of the 2006 TIY workshop, "vocationalisation", we have a number of conceptual and terminological questions at hand:

- What makes an education or training "vocational"? And what does it mean to "vocationalise" an education or training?
- What is the difference between education and training anyway?
- Is labour market integration the only point of reference for VET - or is it even the "nature" of VET to be (exclusively) geared to it?

Wollschläger and Reuter-Kumpmann (2004), referring to Greinert (2004) puts forth a number of "taxonomic" questions which might help to shed some light on this (and further) terminological confusion:

- Who determines how VET is organised?
- Where does VET take place?
- Who determines the content of VET?
- Who pays for VET?
- What qualifications are gained at the end of vocational education and training, and to what opportunities do these qualifications lead?

In this paper, I will try to answer some of these questions for the case of Switzerland, which I consider as a sort of life size laboratory for VET matters. My main concern will be to show that in the strongly "vocationalised" Swiss VET system (I dare anticipate the use of the term before having explored it), an assumed antipole of "vocationalisation" is becoming more and more important, which I call, for lack of a better term: "educationalisation". Greinert's taxonomical questions listed above already give a hint that this polarity is multi-dimensional: It can touch aspects of organisation, locus, subject matter, financing or certification – or any combination thereof.

Lab description

Switzerland has close to 7.5 million residents, living in three distinct linguistic regions: the large majority, about three quarters of them, in the German speaking part, a bit over one fifth in the French speaking part (west/south-west), and about 5% in the Italian speaking part (central south, mainly Ticino). About one in five residents has a nationality other than Swiss, mostly due to substantial economically driven immigration during the second half of the 20th century on one hand, and very restrictive naturalisation procedures on the other hand.

Switzerland is a Confederation with 26 cantons, which politically have a tremendous weight vis-à-vis the federal (national) level, particularly in regard to education. Preschool and compulsory education is essentially under cantonal jurisdiction, post-compulsory education and training is regulated, financed and controlled jointly (in varying proportions) by federal and cantonal levels.

The Swiss educational system – or rather systems – accommodate(s) roughly one million students at preschool and compulsory levels (up to 9th grade), something over 300'000 at upper secondary and about 200'000 at tertiary level.

Thus, one of the essential features of the Swiss educational system is its relatively small overall size, combined with a high degree of organisational decentralisation – which tends to complicate things, but creates interesting systemic conditions for lab experiments...

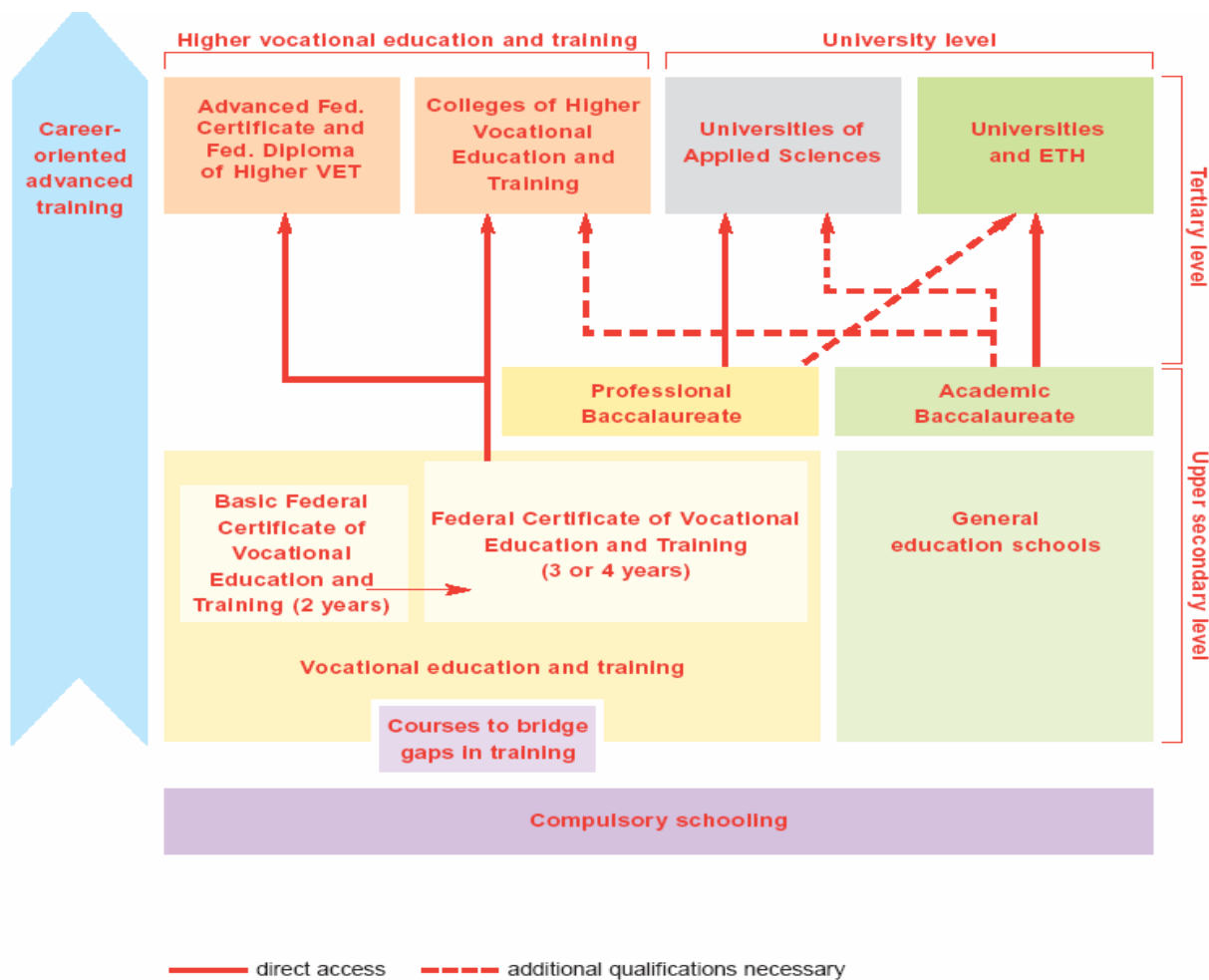
Switzerland's educational system is highly selective and segregative, starting out at an exceptionally early level: Starting in 6th or 7th grade, lower secondary education is heavily tracked, with up to four different tracks within one and the same canton - and usually very little permeability between the tracks. As in most selection processes within the lower part of the educational system, the influence of socio-economic status and family background on who is put on which track is substantial. About one third of all students are enrolled in a lower secondary track or programmes summarised somewhat euphemistically as "fulfilling basic requirements". Contrary to more integrative systems such as in the Scandinavian countries, these tracks receive less per capita resources than the others. Not very surprisingly, students with a migrant background, low socio-economic status and/or other family backgrounds unfavourable to learning are heavily over-represented in those tracks. PISA has shown that in regard to the influence of social background on educational achievement and success, Switzerland is, along with Germany, among the "leaders" (OECD 2005). Therefore, critical voices have come to label this practise as factual social rationing of education. As Hupka pointed out in her paper (Hupka, Sacchi et al. 2006), the tracking on lower secondary level strongly affects the post-compulsory educational options that are open to students.

The upper secondary completion rate has reached a peak of over 90% at the beginning of the 2000s, but has been slightly decreasing since. Female and male rates have

reached parity, closing a gender gap that has been substantial until relatively recently: Up until the early 1980s, the female upper secondary completion rate did not exceed two thirds, while the rate of young men was already above 85%. Vocational education and training plays a central role in the post-compulsory part of the Swiss educational system. The proportion of vocational vs. general education is about 3:1 overall, with strong gender and regional disparities (see Figure 2).

As in other countries with a strongly developed vocational sector, tertiary level enrolment is relatively weak in Switzerland. Due to a substantial expansion of the Universities of Applied Sciences (UAS), entry rates are approaching 40% today (from under 30% in the 1990s), but are still considerably below OECD or EU levels (>50%). Still, only little over 20% of an age cohort in Switzerland will graduate from an education at ISCED level 5A, compared to about one third on average in the OECD.¹

Figure 1 Schematic overview of the Swiss educational system

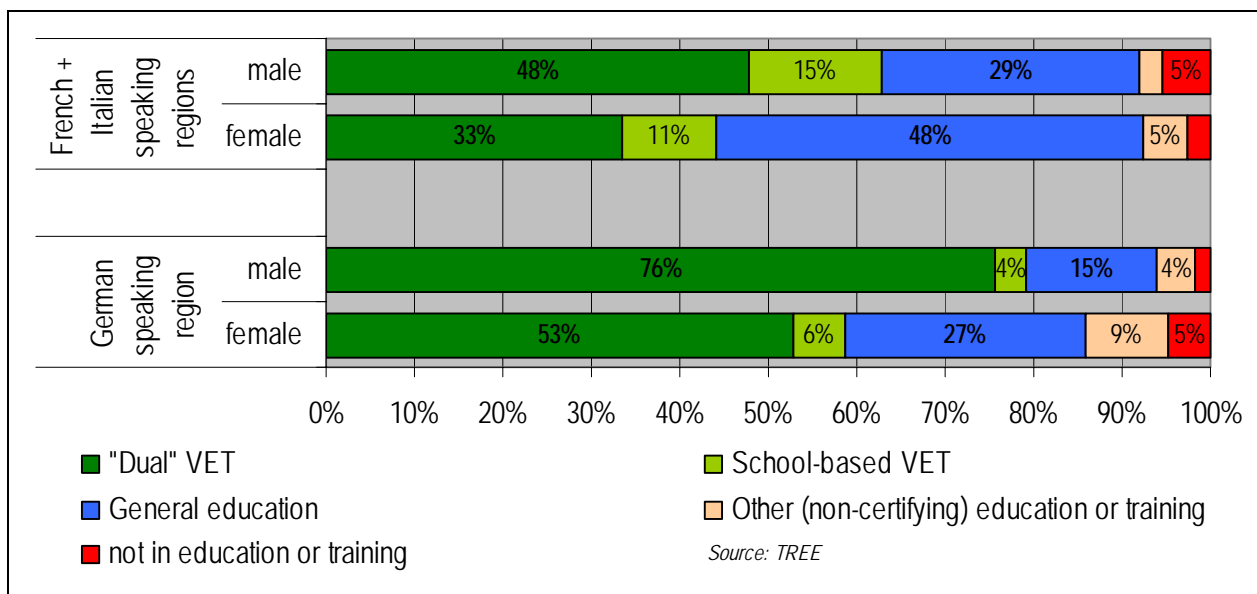


Source: OPET 2006

As has already been stated, vocational education or training (VET) is the main pillar of Swiss upper secondary education. Overall, almost two out of three school leavers enrol in VET. However, upper secondary education and training offer varies enormously regionally and by gender, as Figure 2 shows:

¹ For general statistical information on the Swiss educational system, see system indicators collection on the website of the Swiss Federal Statistical Office SFSO (www.statistik.admin.ch)

Figure 2 Upper sec. pathways by gender and region
School leavers cohort 1999/2000, situation in 2nd year



The most common form of VET is the company-based or “dual” form, also known as apprenticeship. As can be seen in Figure 2, enrolment patterns by region and gender suggest a highly segmented and segregated upper secondary sector: If we look at the two contrast categories, young men in German speaking Switzerland and young women in the French and Italian speaking parts of the country, it appears that they face an altogether different reality of numbers and proportions regarding post-compulsory education or training. While Swiss German young men will be found, in three out of four cases, in “dual” VET, this will be the case for only one third of young women in French/Italian speaking Switzerland. Contrariwise, almost half of the latter will be found enrolled in predominantly academically oriented general education, while this is the case for only 15% of young Swiss German young men.

The border line between the French/Italian part of Switzerland and the German part is not only linguistic, but also marks fundamental system differences. Under the political and cultural influence of its Western neighbour, France, general, academically oriented education is given a much higher preference in the Romandie, the French speaking part of Switzerland, while VET is perceived more pointedly as a “second choice”. In the German speaking part of the country, VET has (in the public opinion) a more self-confident and “equal” place within the hierarchy of the educational system (see Geser 2003).

Gender segregation, which is superposed with these regional differences, can be observed not only between general education and VET, but also within VET, on the level of particular professional orientations: With a few exceptions, gender proportions within a particular profession are strongly biased: towards the male sex in the case of the “crafts”, industrial and technical professions, towards the female when it comes to professions in the social or health sectors.

Company-based VET is “dual” in several respects: the term dual firstly refers to the two learning places, the training company and the professional college. Secondly, it refers to the duality between practical training and “academic” learning. It thirdly refers to the two collectivities largely responsible for company-based VET: private enterprise and the public sector (which is responsible for the regulatory aspects and the vocational colleges).

The "dual" apprentice's status and situation is closer to that of an employee than to that of a student: He or she will go through an application and hiring process, sign a contract with the training company and spend at least three days per week on average with practical work and training within the company (for which they receive a small salary of several 100€ monthly). The rest of the week is spent in vocational college, i.e. "in school", where the "general" part of the training takes place. The "working" perspective is also important to the apprentices themselves: if they are satisfied with their apprenticeship (which they are to a large majority), they will consider themselves essentially as "working" rather than as "studying", and they will show identification patterns in regard to their training company much like those observed among regular employees.

The dual VET configuration has a fundamental impact on the nature of the school-to-work transition in Switzerland (and other countries with a strong dual VET system): It basically means that for a majority of youth in the country, this transition is already in full development at the interface between lower and upper secondary levels.

A minority of VET trainees (about one in seven overall) will enrol in school-based VET. As the term says, they will essentially do their training in (professional) school and acquire their practical experience during phases of work placement in private or public enterprises.

At the end of VET, graduates obtain a federal certificate which formally entitles the holder to exercise the profession in which he or she has been trained, and which basically gives direct access to qualified labour in this profession. If a Professional Baccalaureate is acquired in addition to the federal VET certificate, this gives access to further education and training on tertiary level, mostly in the Universities of Applied Sciences.

VET and school-to-work transition in Switzerland

Up until the beginning of the 1990s, the Swiss discourse - both political and scientific - about transition into labour market was virtually non-existent. Transition was not something one worried or argued about, it was just something that happened. Europe envied Switzerland for its low unemployment rate in general, and for its low youth unemployment in particular (see Figure 3). The system was generally considered

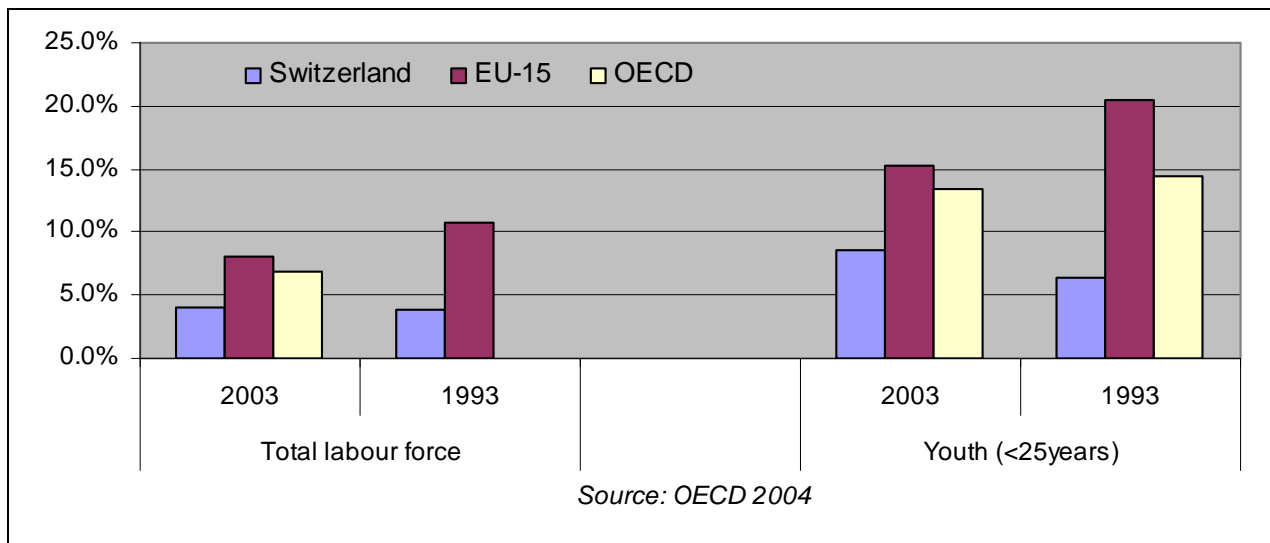
- to ensure a high proportion of youth completing upper secondary education and training,
- to secure adequate qualification profiles for the future labour force,
- to keep youth unemployment low
- to keep transition to labour market smooth.

Then the problems started. Firstly the country started tumbling through its longest post-war recession period. In the process, it became painfully visible how tightly the essentially private enterprise-based VET "market" in the dual system is linked to the labour market as a whole: While demand for VET was on the rise (for demographic and other reasons), supply, i.e. the number of company-based apprenticeship places decreased dramatically.

And as, at the beginning of the present decade, Swiss economy was slowly recovering from the long crisis of the 1990s, it became evident that the proportion of companies offering apprenticeship places had substantially declined. To make things worse, it also became evident that it tended to be the "wrong" type of companies that still did offer VET places: statistics show a strong bias in favour of handicraft and industrial profes-

sions, while important segments of the tertiary sector such as ICT seem to prefer "body shopping" to training their future staff themselves.

Figure 3 Swiss, EU and OECD (Youth) Unemployment, 1993 and 2003



Despite important reforms of the VET system's legal basis during the same period, designed to strengthen its position within the educational and economic system as a whole (see below), the shortage of supply of VET places has worsened, leaving an ever growing proportion of youth without an (immediate) educational perspective at the end of compulsory school. This gives rise to a dramatic competition among applicants for VET places. Nowadays, almost one out of three VET applicants leaving compulsory school has to wait at least one year until he or she finds a suitable apprenticeship place.

The effects of this displacement process start to show even on macro level: Upper secondary completion rates have been slightly declining lately (from >90% to 87% in 2004), clearly falling short of the ambitious benchmark of 95% that Swiss education policy has formulated recently (EDK 2006).

Transition to labour market after graduating from (upper secondary) VET has become clearly more difficult, too. First results of TREE regarding this transition (Meyer 2005) suggest that almost one out of three (upper sec.) VET graduates has to face a period of unemployment during the 12 months following graduation. Further TREE results suggest considerable precariousness of first employment, i.e. job contracts for a limited time only, job-skills mismatch in the direction of overqualification and very modest salaries. The first employment profiles of VET graduates are vexingly similar to the ones of youth not having completed upper secondary education. However, it has to be expected that the situation of VET graduates will rapidly improve with increasing duration of labour market participation.

The Swiss labour market in headlines

The Swiss labour market can be roughly characterised as follows:

- High degree of tertiarisation;
- Relatively dynamic;
- Relatively high average qualification level of labour force, with a substantial curb of demand for un- or low qualified labour in the past two decades;

- Highly segregated by gender and ethnic origin;
- Relatively high rates of labour market participation for both men and women (women often in part time jobs);
- Considerable degree of labour immigration, especially at the upper and lower end of the qualification spectrum;
- Strongly locally anchored, relatively small amount of (spatial) mobility;
- Low level of unemployment;
- High productivity, but strong disparities between large internationally operating enterprises on one hand, and small and medium sized enterprises on the other hand, predominantly operating in relatively small home markets.

System response to changed lab conditions

Parallel to the structural changes and crises described above (but only partially in direct response to them), the Swiss VET system has gone through a substantial reform process during the past two decades. The main reform elements are the following:

- Strengthening and upgrading of VET programmes on tertiary level (implementation of Universities of Applied Sciences UAS);
- Upgrading of VET on upper secondary level by means of implementing the "Professional Baccalaureate" (PB, as access diploma to the UAS, with a considerable increase of the "general education" proportion of the PB programmes);
- Moderate reduction of the number of VET professions (down to approx. 200 from over 260) by means of "generalising" or grouping some of the highly specialised programmes in place for each (sub-)profession;
- Increasing permeability and compatibility across/between VET programmes (and across/between VET and general education programmes), both horizontally and vertically;
- Restructuring of VET programmes for low achievers;
- Harmonisation and institutional concentration of VET regulation and legislation under federal control (delegating implementation to the cantons and the representatives of private enterprise);
- Implementation of a legal base for trade-specific compensation funds (where non-training companies pay a "fee" for not offering VET).

The reform elements regarding "tertiarisation" (implementation of Professional Baccalaureate and Universities of Applied Sciences) can be clearly interpreted as an effort to "educationalise" VET, i.e. to increase the "scholar", "academic" or "general education" part of the programmes.

So far, it is these two reform elements that have proven to be particularly successful in the reform process. Over 10% of an age cohort obtain a Professional Baccalaureate today, little more than ten years after its implementation, and UAS participation has considerably contributed to boosting enrolment in tertiary education and training, which, as previously said, is quite low in Switzerland by international standards.

Yet the reform measures have not proven successful, on the whole and so far, in stopping or even inverting the erosion of enterprise participation in VET. Demand for upper

secondary education and training dramatically exceeds supply. Mostly due to a lack of adequate offer, an ever growing percentage of compulsory school leavers is not in a position to enter the post-compulsory sector directly, giving rise to a virtual explosion of all kinds of intermediate training years situated between lower and upper secondary levels. As can be seen in figure 1, the governmental agency responsible for VET, the federal Office for Professional Education and Technology (OPET), labels these offers somewhat tendentiously as "courses to bridge gaps in training", suggesting that failing to enter VET directly is essentially a matter of insufficient student achievement. TREE has shown that achievement is a relatively marginal factor when it comes to explain why youth does or does not directly enter (certifying) upper secondary education and training (Meyer 2003).

Despite intense promotional efforts both on federal and cantonal levels during the past decade, private enterprise failed to follow the governmental whistle blow. VET offer has at best stopped declining, and the compensation funds designed to make the "free riders" of a given trade pay are far from becoming operational. A substantial increase of full-time school-based VET in order to "fill the gap" seems to be out of question for political reasons. In the debate, the opinion prevails that VET has to be company-based in order to be fully functional for labour market needs. This stalemate presently does considerable damage to the adequate functioning of post-compulsory education and training in Switzerland, as it seriously hampers the chances to a smooth transition from lower to upper secondary education and training, particularly for less well resourced candidates. As Hupka (2006) pointed out, the Swiss VET system not only has a capacity problem, but also a substantial equity problem.

"Educationalisation" (or generalisation) instead of vocationalisation?

Despite a number of structural and performance problems, the VET system remains the backbone of the school-to-work transition in Switzerland. Some structural reforms, particularly the implementation of the Professional Baccalaureate and the Universities of Applied Sciences (UAS) have contributed to strengthen the system. However, the system has reached some limits during the past two decades. A number of those limits can be situated in a polarity between "vocationalisation" and "educationalisation" or "generalisation":

- Generalisation of upper secondary education as such: Today, upper secondary completion has become the standard of basic education in post-industrial economies. In Switzerland, the percentage of youth envisaging entering the labour market directly after compulsory school is closing in on zero. Given the substantial structural imbalance between demand and offer of upper secondary education, the Swiss educational system is confronted with the question: Is it – should it be – mainly or even exclusively the task of market economy/private enterprise to take care of this shortage (by increasing company-based VET places)? If not, who else could/should fill in the gap? It would be worth reflecting on the adequacy (or even necessity) of opening the range of actors offering VET beyond private enterprise. This might not only contribute to solving the problem of "volume" (i.e. a substantial increase of the scarce VET offer), but possibly also help to attenuate the strong gender segregation both on upper sec. in general and in (dual) VET in particular (see Figure 2).

- In a standardised, systematised way, the Swiss VET system has only a very faint idea of the skills its clients acquire in the process. Basically, labour market entry is considered as sufficient "proof" of successful training. However, IALS/ALL² results suggest that general reading literacy in Switzerland is weak to moderate for up to 30% of young adults having completed upper secondary education (OECD & Stat-Can, 2000, 2005). Given the clear evidence that lifelong learning activities correlate positively with reading literacy (ibidem), one has to assume that an important part of Swiss VET graduates are seriously handicapped when it comes to maintaining their skills throughout their labour market careers. This lack will also increase the risk of (labour market) de-qualification, a risk that paradoxically is enhanced if VET contents and training plans cater too exclusively to labour market qualification needs. This would clearly call for a reinforced "educationalisation" or "generalisation" of VET, with a strong focus on securing the ability for lifelong learning (and the maintenance of labour market relevant qualifications as a secondary goal). A large majority of VET reforms launched and implemented in Switzerland over the past twenty years have been geared to structural and organisational questions. It might be time to turn more attentively to content and subject matter.
- The same argument applies, maybe even more urgently, in regard to the so called low-achievers. As has been briefly sketched, they are particularly affected by the shortage of VET places. The reform agents put much hope into the new "Basic Federal VET Certificate" (see figure 1), a reduced, less demanding form of the full VET Certificate, requiring only two years of training (instead of three or four). However, an adequate offer has yet to be put into place, and again, private enterprise is principally called to see to this. Given the fact that private enterprise has been generally reducing VET participation during the past two decades, it might be that development of this new type of VET falls somewhat short of the high expectations. Alternatives are crucial, though, because the consequences of insufficient further qualification, education and training are particularly dramatic for this population, not only in view of labour market participation, but for the mastery of the complex requirements of (post-)modern life as a whole.
- Labour market data based on the Swiss census show that among the VET graduates in the whole of labour force, almost 60% do not exercise the profession they have initially learnt during their apprenticeship. As mentioned above, the direction of professional mobility goes from the (secondary) production sector to the (tertiary) services sector (Sheldon 2005), leading to the paradox that a substantial percentage of a strongly "tertiarised" labour market is initially trained in the industrial production sector. One does not need to go as far as to conjure up the "end of the profession", as this is done in the "de-professionalisation" debate (*Entberuflichung*, see for instance Baethge and Baethge-Kinsky 1998). Nevertheless, this situation gives rise to the question whether it makes sense to train as many mechanics, bakers or carpenters, if probabilities are this high that they will leave their trade or never take it up at all.
- This leads us to the general difficulty of negotiating, defining, and measuring complex skills portfolios such as to be found in VET. Little do we know in Switzerland about how exactly they are acquired, why and under which circumstances their acquisition works (well) or not, and what the particular effects of the "duality" of VET are. Given the large variety of VET organisation in Switzerland, the country could

² International Adult Literacy Survey/Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey

serve as a life size research lab where these questions could be further investigated.

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