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Swiss Academic and Career Paths Designed to Cross

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Zurich

Think about jobs for high school students in the United States, and the images that come to mind include ice cream scooping, dog-walking, and baby-sitting. In Switzerland, though, it's just as likely that students as young as 16 are donning suits and handling a client's bank account, or putting on safety goggles to work side by side with an engineer designing manufacturing equipment.

About two-thirds of Swiss youth pursue vocational training as part of their secondary education, most of them through an on-the-job apprenticeship. For three or four days a week, they work at a host company under trained staff members and receive a wage. They spend the rest of their time at a vocational school where they are taught the theoretical underpinnings of their fields.

It is both a cultural tradition and a system that Swiss officials credit for matching workforce needs and economic growth.

"It's not devotion, it's engagement. We feel responsible for training our young people," said Rosemarie Savary, the head of the training division at the Vaudoise Insurance Group, in Lausanne. The company plays host to 106 apprentices, about 8 percent of its staff.

Long-Standing History

Long overshadowed by the training system of its German neighbor, the **Swiss system of vocational education and training**, or VET, has begun to attract U.S. policymakers. That's not only because of recent calls, from industry groups up through the White House, to make secondary education more relevant, but also because the Swiss approach offers lessons on how to overcome obstacles with which American states have struggled.

Among them: figuring out how to involve businesses in

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Converting Routes

planning work-based learning experiences and making sure the vocational track doesn't close the doors of opportunity for youths who change their minds about their careers or later decide to go to college.

"We do not accept that young people should run into a dead end," said Christian Wasserfallen, the president of the committee for science, education, and culture in the lower house of the Swiss parliament speaking recently to a delegation of U.S. officials at the Education Ministry's central headquarters, in Berne.

The Swiss embrace of work-based learning has deep roots. Laws regulating apprenticeships here began in the 1880s, and the Swiss Constitution charges the federal government and the country's 26 cantons, or states, with ensuring that the general and vocational courses of study achieve "equal recognition" in society.

Switzerland's federal government plays a limited role in education, with most functions, especially for compulsory education, performed by the cantons. The central government's main role is in setting standards for diplomas and teacher training, and in helping facilitate the VET system.

In one of the main contrasts between the Swiss and U.S. secondary education systems, though, businesses here play a far more integrated role. For each of the VET system's more than 230 recognized occupations, professional associations outline the skills and objectives apprentices need to master.

For their member companies, professional associations also craft the curricula that guide on-the-job training and the assessments that apprentices take halfway through and at the end of their three- or four-year apprenticeships.

Accountability comes through a system in which third-party examiners drawn from host companies in each field audit the internship offered at each company to make sure it is specific enough so that a candidate comes away with skills that are concrete, yet broad enough to be applicable to all employers within the industry.

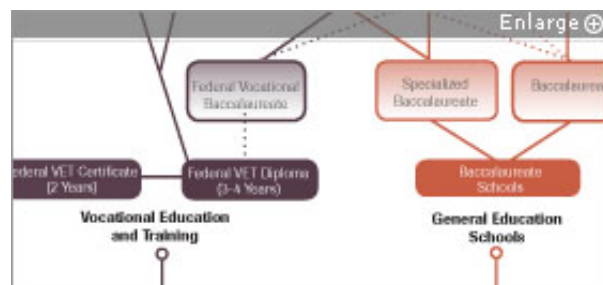
A federal teacher-training organization, meanwhile, ensures that company employees who oversee apprentices learn pedagogical techniques.

While most of the training is work-based, VET students also receive academic instruction in general culture and languages while not working at their apprenticeships.

About 30 percent of Swiss businesses take part in VET by hosting apprentices; economic analyses suggest that, on average, participating firms reap a net benefit despite the costs. Officials note, though, that the benefits of a highly skilled talent pipeline take a while to show up in any company's bottom line.

"If you educate young people, you have to invest, and the return on investment is perhaps not very soon," said Marion Fürbeth, the head of HR Young Talents in Zurich for Credit Suisse. The bank employs more than 750 apprentices in the areas of commercial banking and information technology.

The Swiss take pride in their system's "permeability"; students entering secondary education can follow several pathways to higher education, which consists not only of university study but also continued vocational learning through Professional Education Training, or PET, a set of specialty professional exams and courses.



SOURCE: Swiss Confederation, Federal Office for Professional Education and Technology

There is evidence to suggest that the long-term investment pays off for the country as a whole.

Data from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, a group of leading industrial countries that includes the United States, show that youth unemployment in Switzerland in 2011 was among the lowest of member countries, at 7.7 percent. The average in OECD nations, as of 2011, was 16.2 percent. And only 10 percent of Swiss students do not complete either a vocational or academic path. By contrast, the national high school dropout rate is estimated at 30 percent in the United States, and it is far higher for students of color.

Swiss lawmakers have shown a willingness to change the system, based on an analysis of labor needs and a desire to make transitions among the tracks more flexible. Amid an economic crisis in the mid-1990s, and concerns that too few Swiss youths were attending universities, the parliament in 1994 created an option for students in VET to earn a professional baccalaureate—a degree roughly equivalent to the high school diploma.

The credential allows VET students to enter a university of applied sciences, without additional training.

Learning Lessons

Young people here say they largely view the bifurcated system as two ways of achieving the same goal: preparation for their careers. And some see distinct advantages to pursuing VET rather than the general academic track.

"Nowadays, professional experience is much more valuable even than five to 10 years ago," said Nick Bänninger, a third-year apprentice at Zurcher Kantonalbank. Mr. Bänninger began secondary schooling in gymnasium—the Swiss equivalent of an academic high school—but anticipating a career in banking, later decided to change to VET.

As always, there are still areas that Swiss officials identify for improvement. Some of the work fields are highly competitive, as are placements at banks like Credit Suisse; others appear to be less so. Different regional attitudes toward the system also persist, with VET less popular in French-speaking cantons than in German-speaking ones.

Nor has the system overcome a certain status divide among members of Swiss elites, who sometimes prefer their children to go to gymnasium rather than through VET. Research continues to fuel debates in the cantons about whether the two tracks truly offer equal opportunities.

Finally, echoing complaints of some U.S. leaders, some representatives of the professional associations say educators in the primary schools often are unfamiliar with VET or suspicious about the role of business in the system.

"Most of the teachers have never been inside a factory," said Robert Rudolph, the head of education and innovation for the Swiss Mechanical and Electrical Engineering Industries. "They discourage people from going into industry."

In 2011, member companies had problems filling all open VET positions, and some applicants didn't possess the requisite math skills, he said.

Still, the lessons from Switzerland's system hit home for American policymakers.

For John D. Barge, the state schools superintendent in

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Georgia, the highlights of the Swiss system include many options for students and business support for education that is programmatic, not merely financial.

"Businesses not only invest their financial resources, they invest their time, by teaching apprentices how to work," said Mr. Barge, whose state is working to provide career-exploration opportunities early in high school.

"They don't just give them responsibilities and abandon them," he said. "They guide them and they teach them."

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