

Baumeler, C., Engelage, S., & Strebel, A. (2018). Creation, maintenance, and disruption. occupational associations and their heterogeneous institutional work after the Swiss VET policy reform. In C. Nägele & B. E. Stalder (Eds.), *Trends in vocational education and training research. Proceedings of the European Conference on Educational Research (ECER), Vocational Education and Training Network (VETNET)* (pp. 61–69). <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.1319630>

Creation, Maintenance, and Disruption. Occupational Associations and Their Heterogeneous Institutional Work after the Swiss VET Policy Reform

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Abstract

Collective skill systems rely on institutional arrangements among a multitude of actors. In Switzerland, occupational associations are responsible for defining the occupations' training content and creating apprenticeship positions. They are important for fostering companies' contribution to VET, representing their members' interests in the national arena, and working together with public authorities to design and implement VET policies. In the aftermath of the Swiss VET policy reform of 2004, all occupations needed to be reformed and the number of occupations reduced, for example, by creating occupational fields. The increased pedagogical requirements and administrative workload put small occupational associations under pressure. However, after ten years, different outcomes (creation, maintenance, and disruption of occupations) are visible. With the theoretical framework of institutional work and based on a qualitative comparative case study, this contribution depicts the reform processes of three different occupational associations and identifies commonalities and differences between the three cases.

Keywords

institutional work, VET policy reform, comparative study, occupational associations

1 Introduction

Collective skill systems are vocational education and training (VET) regimes characterised by employers' associations' involvement in organising training, the provision of portable, certified occupational skills, and dual training (alternation of school-based learning and work-

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based training) (Trampusch, 2010). They rely on institutional arrangements among a multitude of actors (Busemeyer & Trampusch, 2012). Policy reforms might put these institutional arrangements to a stress test or disrupt them.

In Switzerland, the Confederation is responsible for vocational law and the enactment of training ordinances; the cantons implement the law and supervise vocational schools and host companies. Labelled as a “parastate administration” (Linder, 1994, p. 129), public authorities have delegated public tasks to private actors. Hence, 155 occupational associations (*Organisationen der Arbeitswelt*), which have been identified as key actors for establishing or transforming VET systems (Culpepper, 2003; Thelen, 2004), are responsible for defining the occupations’ training content and creating apprenticeship positions. In Switzerland, their organisational form is not regulated. Firms and host companies’ membership is voluntary.

The Swiss VET system is based on a new VET law, which was enacted in 2004. This VET policy reform has been characterised as self-preserving (Trampusch, 2010), meaning that the inherited path of the dual VET system was followed. However, it also included various novelties (Bundesrat, 2000; Maurer & Pieneck, 2013). All occupations needed to be reformed, which demanded increased pedagogical requirements and administrative workload. Further, one aim was to reduce the number of occupations by merging similar ones into occupational fields. This should broaden occupational profiles to improve mobility on the labour market. Additionally, intercompany courses were required and, to create general binding, sectoral training funds were newly possible.

The reform’s implementation was neither fast nor automatic. To adapt their training regulations to the new law, occupational associations needed to conduct thorough analyses of the training content (BBT, 2007). The reform of 300 occupations was closely accompanied by public authorities (Berner, 2013). In the end, the number of occupations was reduced to around 230. However, against expectations, some small occupations were maintained, and new ones created.

Size matters because it is associated with available resources and influence in policy-making. The occupational associations’ size is strongly related to the number of apprenticeship positions they provide. Less than 20 train more than one thousand apprentices per year, whereas around 140 are responsible for the remaining 210 occupations. Among them, around 90 occupations are estimated to train less than 100 apprentices annually (Mitterecker, 2016). Together, the small occupations provide around 40 per cent of apprenticeship positions (SBFI, 2015) — a proportion that is relevant for maintaining the Swiss VET system.

So far, most studies about the influence of associations in institutional processes have focussed on influential associations (Micelotta & Washington, 2013; Trampusch, 2010; Wettstein et al., 2014). The role of small and less resourceful associations has rarely been studied (Lawrence et al., 2013). Regarding the Swiss VET reform, small occupational associations found it most difficult to implement it owing to their comparatively limited resources. Therefore, this contribution addresses a research gap and intends to deepen the understanding of the practices of small organisations in changing organisational environments. We address the following research questions: Which different practices did small occupational associations develop to deal with the recent Swiss VET reform? How can the diverse outcomes (creation, maintenance, and disruption of occupations) be interpreted?

2 Theoretical framework: Institutional work

The institutional work perspective (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Lawrence et al., 2009, 2011, 2013) deals with various forms of institutional change and tries to understand the role of actors in these processes. It states that institutions need to be purposefully and actively created, maintained, and disrupted, and focuses on the knowledgeable, creative, and practical work of individuals and collective actors attempting to shape institutions.

Institutional work involves reflexive awareness and effort. It addresses cultural-cognitive, normative, and regulative pillars of institutions (Scott, 2008). Cultural-cognitive elements are shared understanding or scripts that guide action. Normative elements include values and norms. Regulative institutions consist of rules and regulations. Although it is possible to analytically distinguish between the three pillars, they are empirically interrelated elements of institutionalisation.

An occupation (*Beruf*) can be conceived of an institution (Lawrence, 2004; Abraham & Hinz, 2008). It represents “a systematized combination of formal knowledge, know-how and experience, not geared to any single workplace and is bound up with a particular system of wage relations” (Clarke et al., 2013, p. 944). It is collectively organised, related to occupational labour markets, and needs to be normatively, cultural-cognitively, and legally defined (Nicklich & Fortwengel, 2017).

Institutional work relates *creating* an institution to institutional entrepreneurship (Eisenstadt, 1980; DiMaggio, 1988; Battilana et al., 2009). Institutional entrepreneurs are “organized actors who envision new institutions as a means of advancing interests they value highly yet that are suppressed by extant logics”. (Greenwood & Suddaby, 2006, p. 29) They are individual or collective change agents who initiate and implement divergent changes despite pressures towards stasis. Divergent changes break with the institutionalised template for organising, which is a field’s shared understanding of the aims to be pursued and the appropriate methods to be followed.

From the perspective of institutional work, institutional *maintenance* is not the uncontested, relatively unproblematic, and taken-for-granted reproduction of institutional order (Micelotta & Washington, 2013) but “involves considerable effort, and often occurs as a consequence of change in the organization or its environment” (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006, p. 234). From this point of view, institutions are actively reproduced, and hard work might be necessary to ensure their stability. Therefore, it is important to understand how actors can stabilise their practices in changing contexts. Incumbent actors often mobilise resistance against regulatory change and try to re-establish the status quo or work to adjust and adapt to inflected institutional arrangements.

Finally, institutional work of *disruption* refers to deinstitutionalisation, which is a “process by which the legitimacy of an established or institutionalized organizational practice erodes or discontinues”. (Oliver, 1992, p. 564) In this case, organisations fail to continually reproduce previously legitimate or taken-for-granted actions. This might be the case if changes in the political field, in government laws and societal values, or functional economic considerations, call the legitimacy of a traditional practice into question. Then, deinstitutionalisation might be a proactive and conscious response by organisations to changing circumstances or the result of environmental changes over which they exert little control and respond only passively or sub-consciously.

3 Method: Qualitative comparative case study

We explore our research question by using a qualitative comparative case study (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2005). The aim of case study research is to conduct an in-depth analysis of the phenomenon in question. Therefore, qualitative inquiry typically focuses on relatively small and purposefully selected samples.

Purposeful sampling selects information-rich and illuminative cases that offer useful manifestations of the phenomenon of interest (Patton, 2005). Thus, we purposefully selected three information-rich cases in a maximum variation sampling. This kind of sampling strategy allows for capturing variation, as well as describing common themes that cut across variation. The selection criterion is the maximum heterogeneity of outcomes (creation, maintenance, and disruption of occupations) after the Swiss VET reform.

The cases selected were the associations responsible for the artisanal weaver, cable car mechanic, and piano maker occupations. They represent three of the smallest occupations in the Swiss VET system and, therefore, allowed for identifying the types of institutional work in which small organisations can engage. However, the outcome of their institutional work was different. Whereas the cable car association could act as institutional entrepreneurs and create new occupations, the weavers maintained theirs against all odds. In contrast, the piano makers represented a case of disruption because they could not uphold the legitimacy of retaining their individual occupation and needed to merge with similar occupations.

The case studies were based on document analysis and theory-generating expert interviews with key representatives of the occupational associations (Bogner et al., 2009). The analysis of the different sources served to reconstruct the occupational reform processes (Langley, 1999). In the following, we start with the case of disruption as a most likely case, given the normative demands of merging small occupations into occupational fields. Then, we depict a case of unexpected maintenance, and, finally, a case of creation.

4 Results

4.1 Disruption: Case study of the piano makers and tuners

The case study of the piano makers is an example of disruption because they needed to merge with other occupations. Today, musical instrument makers deal with the maintenance, repair, construction, and sale of instruments. They were among the first that were reformed, and the new apprenticeships started around 2007. In 2016, 12 apprentices started training.

The state initiated the reform by letting the piano makers know their occupation had been identified as too small and, therefore, needed to merge into an occupational field with other small occupations working with wood. The concerned occupations had various meetings and managed to find a compromise. They formed two sub-groups: instrument makers and woodworkers. In this process, the piano makers did not look for alternatives, such as replacing the apprenticeship with further education or sending apprentices to a well-known school abroad, as they were convinced of the high value of their dual training.

The various associations also needed to merge into an umbrella organisation of musical instrument makers and build a new office. The association of the piano makers still exists today as a part of the umbrella organisation and consists of 270 members, all professionals and holders of apprenticeship diplomas. Most people who work for the association do so voluntarily or with a small remuneration.

The new association started with the drafting of the regulations. In this process, the public authorities forced them to give up their own occupational titles, which was very painful. Even today, there is no new occupational identity of musical instrument makers, and the piano makers still want to return to their former denomination.

The piano makers' association perceived public authorities of the Confederation as inflexible. To increase their influence, they built a political network by choosing a member of parliament as president.

The reform's implementation was costly. The umbrella association created a new office to deal with the reform, new pedagogical documents needed to be written and translated into three national languages, and a national training centre had to be established.

Only after visiting twelve locations did the association successfully find a place for the training centre. This was a VET school for agriculture, which faced a lack of apprentices, and the responsible canton was interested in filling the void with the musical instrument makers. Additionally, the new training regulations foresaw inter-company courses that needed new machines and materials. Only by mobilising personal networks did they acquire sponsors and could finance the equipment.

Financing the training centre and the umbrella organisation increased costs. Therefore, new modes for financing needed to be developed. One solution was to introduce a general binding sectoral training fund. Now, every firm active in repairing or building musical instruments needs to pay into it, whether it trains or not. As this is a sector with few firms, they need to pay comparatively large fees. This resulted in conflicts, for example, the cancellation of memberships. There was even a lawsuit with a professional who refused to pay. The court decided in favour of the association, which was perceived as an important step in stabilising the new financial mode.

4.2 Maintenance: Case study of the artisanal weavers

The weavers' occupational association maintained their small occupation (Strebel et al., 2018). Today, artisanal weavers design and weave fabrics on looms for clothing, accessories, and home textiles. In 2016, nine people started training. The occupational association consists of 360 members who are mostly individual VET diploma holders. The members' participation in working groups is mostly voluntary and barely remunerated.

The VET reform was perceived as an existential threat because of the seemingly high requirements for updating training regulations. Especially, the timeframe of five years to update regulations was too short, and the association lacked resources for drafting a new ordinance. Simultaneously, cantonal authorities closed down a VET school that provided weekly VET courses in weaving and a number of school-based apprenticeship positions.

At first, the weavers complied with the public administration's requirement to merge with others. They evaluated to create an occupational field with similar occupations. However, in the end, they did not find an occupation with which they could merge.

Instead, the weavers' association evaluated alternative solutions for training (nationwide-recognised continuous education certificates or individualised continuing education) and even the possibility of abandoning its apprenticeship. In the end, they decided to maintain their apprenticeship. This decision was justified as follows: Inquiries showed their VET diploma holders were successfully integrated into the labour markets and their practical skills were valued. Further, a VET certificate guaranteed a certain wage level for weavers, which might not be the case with other certificates.

After cantonal authorities intervened in favour of the weavers and federal authorities extended the deadline for VET reform, the weavers decided to maintain their apprenticeship and engage in the reform process in 2007. While defining new curricula, new elements were introduced. More weight was given to design, training in customer service, and sales. Moreover, the name of the occupation was changed, and more school days were introduced, which increased training costs.

Implementing the new ordinance was demanding, as pedagogical materials needed to be developed for the newly created inter-company courses and workplace trainers and exam experts had to be trained. The weavers' association, owing to its limited resources, needed to mobilise voluntary member support to fulfil these tasks.

To mobilise voluntary member support and encourage firms to provide apprenticeship positions, the association used mechanisms such as valorisation and demonisation to foster compliance. Members who voluntarily contributed to the implementation were rewarded through social events and the provision of free further training opportunities. Their contribution was regularly praised in the association's publications. Contrarily, people that did not join events were mentioned as negative counter-examples. Further, they used informal channels and face-to-face meetings that proved to be best-suited for persuasion and consensus-finding. Concerning the participation of host companies in training, the association actively promoted exchange and consensus finding by creating forums for informal exchange and by fostering networks

among members and host companies. It is in such forums and networks that informal group pressure was used to foster compliance.

4.3 Creation: Case study of the cable car mechanics

Surprisingly, the cable car association created new occupations and acted as an institutional entrepreneur in a time when the number of occupations was to be reduced. Today, cable car mechanics are responsible for maintaining and servicing of cable cars. In 2016, 35 people started with the new apprenticeship.

The cable car association is a long-standing employer association that employs staff and has a high degree of organisation and a well-established network with 388 member firms. Before creating their apprenticeships, there only existed a continuous education format for graduates of other occupations, further qualifying them as certified cable car specialists.

In the early 2000s, the occupational association developed the idea of creating a new apprenticeship. They argued that diploma holders from other occupations were no longer suited to deal with complex cable car technology and mere technicians often lacked customer service skills. Therefore, they wanted to create two apprenticeships integrating elements of various occupations (electrician, mechanical engineer, motor mechanic) and add training in tourism-related subjects. Because they expected to train only a few apprentices, they planned to create a new training centre. In 2003, the results of a member survey showed that up to 60 firms were ready to train apprentices and most supported the centre's creation.

In 2004, the public administration granted permission to start drafting training regulations. In particular, the association convinced public authorities that their skill requirements could not be met by other occupations, the number of companies was sufficiently high to offer apprenticeships and a labour market for the future cable car mechanics, and that they provided perspectives for youth in mountain regions.

To implement the new regulations, the association created its own training centre. With this decision, they limited risk for the cantonal authorities, which are legally responsible for the school-based part of VET. The association financed the development of training regulations and the centre through various sources: a newly created, non-compulsory branch fund, additional funding to support economic development in mountain regions, and contributions from private foundations. This gave them more autonomy from the cantons, as well as the full financial risk because the cantons sending apprentices would only contribute to the costs of vocational school courses. Further, the association found a location for the new training centre in a mountain municipality, who wanted to revive its local economy. Finally, in 2006, the association started training new apprentices.

However, although the association prepared their firms with information about training, trained future workplace trainers, and monitored the firms, implementing training proved to be difficult. Particularly challenging was the financing of the training centre, gaining host companies, and finding apprentices.

The decision to organise courses in an association-led training centre had important financial consequences. It created an incentive structure for member firms to engage in training. If they were not offering sufficient apprenticeship positions, their association had to cover the financial deficit. Initial calculations had foreseen at least 20 apprentices annually, so the training centre would become self-supporting. Faced with a low number of apprentices, the association needed to take measures for their project to survive. The focus now clearly shifted away from actual firm needs towards having enough apprentices to financially self-sustain the training centre.

Among others, they successfully negotiated an agreement with the cantons to increase their contributions for the initial years. They also increased normative pressure on companies. Another explanation for the low number of apprentices was the lack of visibility and social

recognition of the new occupations. Therefore, the association engaged in occupational marketing to attract school-leavers. Finally, when the first graduates became cable car specialists, they could start training apprentices on their own, which facilitated further institutionalisation of training in firms.

5 Preliminary conclusion

The selected cases depict practices developed by small occupational associations to deal with the recent VET policy reform in Switzerland. However, there were three different outcomes. Whereas the piano makers could no longer legitimise an independent occupation and needed to merge with others, the weavers maintained their occupation. Further, the occupation of cable car mechanics was created in an institutional environment, in which the number of occupations was to be reduced.

Comparing the three cases allows for identifying the following commonalities. They show that creating, maintaining, and disrupting occupations requires effort and demands that associations conduct cultural-cognitive, normative, and regulative institutional work. None of the depicted processes has been easy or smooth. Without active collective actors and their institutional work, those occupations would not have been created, maintained, or—even in the case of de-institutionalisation as a single occupation—upheld as a specialisation within a broader apprenticeship scheme. They needed to invest in cultural-cognitive (i.e., theorising skill deficiencies and the need for apprenticeships and new training centres), normative (i.e., increased normative pressure on companies to train and create an attractive image of the new occupation), and regulative (i.e., drafting training ordinances and curricula and creating branch funds) institutional work. Often, voluntarily working individuals or smaller groups were key to success. This high engagement can be interpreted as being normatively driven. These actors have been convinced of the high value of dual apprenticeships, which can also be interpreted as a deeply anchored cultural template in Switzerland.

Further, the provision of the occupations was not functionally necessary owing to immediate labour market needs. In every case, alternative training opportunities existed, such as on-the-job training, continuous education within or outside the VET system, or training opportunities in neighbour countries. These occupations exist today as a result of the inventive and strategic institutional work of collective actors who were able to position themselves within the new legal framework. As the cases show, labour market needs were actively constructed and argued with towards members and external stakeholders.

Preliminary results, which still need to be further elaborated on, show functional differences in the following dimensions: dealing with members (coercion versus valorisation/demonisation), funding (voluntary or obligatory branch funds versus mere member fees), negotiating with public administrations (for example co-optation of politicians), organisation (professionalised or relying on voluntary work), and timing of the reform process.

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