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## **Political Parties, Organized Interests and Collective Skill Formation: Lessons from Liberal Market Economies**

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### **Abstract**

Recently, dual apprenticeship has gained renewed attention among the public and among policy-makers. This paper discusses to what extent reforms promoting dual training are successful in countries, which lack well-established traditions of social partnership in industrial relations, namely Ireland and the United Kingdom. On the basis of two condensed comparative case studies, I show that government partisanship is an important factor for shaping apprenticeship reform outcomes in terms of VET governance: Left and centrist Irish governments promoted cooperative approaches that brought together unions and employers in apprenticeship reforms, whereas the neoliberal, Conservative Thatcher government curtailed union influence in training and pursued a course of marketization.

### **Keywords**

collective skill formation; apprenticeship; comparative political economy; Ireland; Britain

### **1 Introduction**

A pressing question in the field of vocational training and education (VET) research is how far models of (dual) training are transferable from one national institutional context to another. Although institutional legacies are important in shaping policy choices, this paper demonstrates that significant reforms and institutional transformations towards collective skill formation are even possible in the “least-likely case” of Liberal Market Economies (LMEs).<sup>1</sup> For LMEs, we should theoretically expect that collective skill formation should not emerge, because the market-oriented character of the political economy prevents collective approaches to human capital investment. Studying the two cases of VET governance in Ireland and Britain from the 1980s to the mid-2000s, however, I show that Ireland has moved towards collective skill formation, whereas Britain has stayed on the liberal path, transforming VET from a collective skill formation institution towards an employment policy program, complemented by a training market.

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<sup>1</sup> This article presents some of the central findings of a monograph (Vossiek, 2018) and parts of it have been published in Portuguese (Vossiek, 2017).

This development is at odds with the conventional wisdom about where collective skill formation can occur: In Coordinated Market Economies (CMEs), VET plays a large role in national skill formation with the delivery of firm- and industry-specific skills, and while the state strongly sponsors VET, only in systems of *collective skill formation* employers are strongly involved in the governance, financing and delivery of VET, which is typically organized on a dual apprenticeship basis (Busemeyer & Trampusch 2012). Conversely, LMEs put little emphasis on VET for which state or employer support are largely absent, and are strongly focused on general skills that are primarily developed via academic higher education.

In the following, I challenge this assumption by showing that despite similar policy legacies, since the 1980s governments of different partisan compositions in Ireland and Britain have followed different pathways of including organized interests in VET reforms, which in turn led to different outcomes: Centrist Irish governments adopted a “social partnership” approach, which facilitated compromise between employers and unions and paved the way towards a more collective VET system. Conversely, the Conservative Thatcher governments deliberately reduced the involvement of unions in training reform thereby underpinning the liberal, voluntarist character of VET in Britain.

## 2 Theoretical background and methodology

In the 1990s and early 2000s, skill formation was prominently discussed in the “Varieties of Capitalism” (VoC)-literature (Estévez-Abe, Iversen, & Soskice, 2001; Hall & Soskice, 2001; see also Crouch & Streeck, 1997;). Following these contributions, VET is comparatively underdeveloped in LMEs, because investment in specific skills is stifled by the absence of strong coordinating in the political economy and weak safeguards of workers’ skill investments in terms of employment protection and unemployment insurance. For example, the firms’ willingness to invest in VET is reduced by poaching problems between employers who do and who do not train young workers beyond their immediate production needs. Also, institutions such as the statutory regulation of training content are weakly developed (Finegold & Soskice, 1988; Thelen, 2004). Finally, from a historical perspective, collective approaches to training were beset by strong class conflicts between skilled workers’ unions and employers (Thelen, 2004).

In contrast, in CMEs such as Germany or Denmark skill formation is characterized by multiple institutions of cross-class cooperation between employers and unions that shores up collective approaches in training policies and politics (ibid.). Following a recent typology by Busemeyer and Trampusch (2012) they belong to the *collective skill formation regime*, which is characterized by high *firm involvement* in the financing and provision of initial VET as well as high *public commitment*, which essentially captures the role that the state and organized interests (such as chambers of commerce, employer associations and unions) have in the provision and regulation of vocational training. Besides high firm involvement, collective skill formation systems typically show three additional characteristics (cf. ibid., p. 14-15). First, intermediary associations that aggregate business and workers interests are strongly involved in the governance and reform of initial VET. Second, the content of VET is based on sectoral or national standards and VET leads to certificates, which are usually broadly recognized on national (occupational) labour markets. Third, VET typically is organized in the form of a dual apprenticeship, which combines practical on-the-job instruction with more theoretical and general education in vocational schools.

Following the conventional wisdom, countries belonging to the *Liberal Skill Formation-regime* are characterized by low firm involvement *and* low public commitment and should be least likely cases for the emergence of collective skill formation and its four central characteristics. And indeed, it has been frequently shown in – explicit and implicit – comparisons of VET in Germany and Britain (Crouch, 1995; Finegold & Soskice, 1988; Ryan

& Unwin, 2001) that reforms towards collective skill formation and more coordination in training were most often futile and short-lived in this particular LME.

Yet, a focus on Britain (and the US) unduly neglects that even among LMEs, we can identify cases such as Ireland, where training reforms have more strongly approached firm involvement, the inclusion of intermediary associations, comparatively regulated training standards and certification mechanisms as well as the creation of regulated, dual apprenticeships as one primary channel of VET (Busemeyer & Vossiek, 2016; Vossiek, 2018). But as I show in the remainder of this article, a comparative perspective helps us to identify varieties of training coordination among these LMEs, which can be traced back to the influence of different partisan governments.

Methodologically, my findings are based on two in-depth case studies of Ireland and England since the 1980s. This case selection follows the logic of a most similar systems design (Gerring, 2007; Lijphart, 1971), where the independent variables show similar characteristics at the beginning of the research period except for our main explanatory variable of government partisanship, which is used to explain the different outcomes of reforms towards collective skill formation in both cases.

Empirically, the paper is based on a broad collection of primary and secondary sources. Additionally, between September and November 2012, I conducted interviews with 34 policy experts in Ireland and in the UK, which have been triangulated with the other sources in order to analyze the actors' positions and their development in the trajectory of the reform processes in both cases. In the analysis that follows below, I refrain from citing the interviews, which are included in a longer monograph that includes Australia in the analysis (Vossiek, 2018).

### **3 Results: Different patterns of training reform in Britain and Ireland**

Britain and Ireland are united by history, the latter being a former colony of the British Empire from which it inherited its training institutions. When taking a bird's eye view on the institutional and political foundations of apprenticeship in the two cases in the late 1970s, several similarities stand out (Vossiek, 2018). First, training arrangements were still mostly structured as craft-based apprenticeships, with weakly developed mechanisms for training standardization and certification across occupations. This usually meant that "time served as an apprentice" was the central benchmark for acquiring skilled worker status – instead of a successful final examination leading to a vocational certificate. Second, while employer associations and trade unions were to a certain degree involved in the governance and regulation of training, this usually took the form of voluntarist sectoral agreements instead of statutory regulation. Third and finally, even though firms provided training, its provision, content and regulation was quite heavily contested between employers and skilled workers organized in craft unions. A typical pattern of this conflict was that craft unions used restrictive workplace practises and their control over training to control the supply of skills in order to drive up wage levels. In turn, employers attempted either to limit their training costs by focusing on skills they required for the immediate production or by replacing skilled workers with machinery.

These three aspects remained basic features that were similar across the countries under study until the late 1970s in spite of training reforms in each country after the Second World War (*ibid.*). In the following, I now present how the countries started to diverge from the late 1970s to the early 1990s, which in part was a reaction to economic crises in each case. Where relevant, I introduce additional contextual factors, but the main focus of the following case studies is on the interplay between organized interests and different partisan governments in shaping training reform.

### 3.1 Britain: Thatcherism, anti-union politics and the marketization of training

During the 1960s and 1970s, reforms to put apprenticeships on a statutory basis and to create more cooperation had failed despite the introduction of a training levy and the creation of tripartite *Industrial Training Boards* (ITBs) and the *Manpower Service Commission* (MSC).<sup>2</sup> But beginning in 1979, when the first conservative Thatcher administration took office, it embarked on a course of radical change based on the belief that the deregulation of markets in combination with monetarist, low-inflation policies were key tools to securing the competitiveness and economic stability of the country (Finegold & Soskice, 1988; Hall, 1992). As relations between organized business and trade unions had deteriorated and no agreements on wage coordination could be reached, the government curtailed union rights, introduced in-work benefits and employment programs with a strong workfare element in order to break union power (cf. Howell, 2005; Rhodes, 2000). The logic of freeing the market by weakening the unions can also be detected in training reforms.

As a first step, most ITBs were abolished in 1982. This not only implied the weakening of unions, which had firm representation in the ITBs, but also abolished training levies as one central mechanism to induce employer participation in training and freed firms from the training regulations issued by individual ITBs (Rainbird, 2010). Only one year later, the government introduced the *Youth Training Scheme* (YTS) as a new training program for unemployed youths and alternative to traditional craft apprenticeship. This reform in 1983 had two profound effects on the training system. On the one hand, the budget of the tripartite MSC was increasingly directed to the YTS and other employment programs, thus effectively limiting the amount of resources that MSC union members could co-decide upon. Yet, on the other hand, the introduction of YTS had direct effects on the logic of training provision in Britain, effectively transforming a large part of the VET system into a training market.

What was the difference between YTS and traditional apprenticeships? First, YTS-trainees were no longer covered by voluntarist agreements between employers and unions where these were still in place after the dissolution of the ITBs, effectively giving firms much greater leeway in training provision (Gospel, 1995; King, 1993). Second, the financial logic underpinning VET was changed fundamentally, because trainees no longer received wages from employers, but were instead financed by state allowances transferred via firms, thus breaking “the historical nexus between apprenticeship and employment as a “trainee” [now became...] the responsibility of a training intermediary in receipt of a government allowance” (Toner, 2008, p. 427). As some employers opted to replace traditional apprentices with government-sponsored YTS-trainees, the traditional model of training declined rapidly. For supporters of more ambitious and regulated training models this was an unwelcome development, as research has frequently pointed out that YTS is best understood as a labor market program, given that it had low quality and variable standards of training delivery, and would not qualify as dual apprenticeship in Germanic countries (Finegold & Soskice, 1988; Marsden & Ryan, 1990).

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<sup>2</sup> In the UK, 27 *Industrial Training Boards* (ITBs) were created in 1964. Composed of employers and unions, they could raise training levies from its sector’s firms and redistribute them for training purposes. In 1973, they were complemented by the *Manpower Service Commission* (MSC), which was intended to develop coherent training and manpower policies, and gave employers and the *Trade Union Congress* (TUC) a role in training politics. However, the training levy, which had shored up employer involvement in training (Senker, 1992), was changed to exempt small and medium-sized firms from payments and lost its effectiveness to a large degree. Although these institutions were quite similar to arrangements in collective skill formation regimes, they did not lead to more cooperation between employers and unions (Finegold & Soskice, 1988; Senker, 1992), apart from some sectoral exceptions such as construction or engineering.

As a final step in the transformation of training towards a free-market approach, the MSC was abolished in 1989 after a conflict between unions and government over the latter's plans to make the participation in training courses compulsory for unemployed adults (King, 1993). In place of old-tripartite institutions for training governance, *Training and Enterprise-Councils* (TECs) were devised as new institutions for the delivery of government-sponsored training program. Yet, the inclusion of union representatives in TECs now depended on an invitation from the central government, bringing an end to formal and statutory union representation in training governance. Further underpinning the logic of a market-driven system, TECs competed with each other for public funds, which were allocated in line with their training achievements (certifications, trainee placements) (Wood, 1999).

To sum up the legacy for British training that emerged from the critical juncture under Conservative governments, the main reform significantly curtailed union influence and transformed English VET towards a market-driven, but partly government subsidized system of training delivery. Although the phase from the 1990s onwards witnessed frequent attempts to establish more ambitious apprenticeship schemes, these did not fundamentally change the logic behind training in Britain instituted under Thatcher (Fuller & Unwin, 2011; Keep, 2006).

Compared with the central characteristics of collective skill formation, Britain has moved from fragmented, but tripartite training arrangements even further away from collective solutions. In the absence of overarching coordination mechanisms and intertwining of government-sponsored employment policy with training components as exemplified by YTS, *firm involvement* is comparatively weak. The *involvement of intermediary associations* was significantly weakened via the dismantling of tripartite institutions and the creation of semi-public bodies as the TECs. Finally, mechanisms of *skill certification* are not well-developed, partly resulting from the absence of intersectoral coordination and prevalence of employment programs.

### 3.2 Ireland: From crisis to coordination and social partnership

The Irish critical juncture in training reforms can be dated back to the late 1980s and early 1990s. Moreover, it differed from Britain in terms of reform content and the political processes, both leading to greater cooperation within the training system and reform politics. As a result, training has evolved towards the collective model, because it was underpinned by a social partnership model of reform politics between non-right governments, trade unions and employer associations, which formed the basis for agreements in training and industrial relations reforms between 1987 and 2009 (Teague & Donaghey, 2009). The Irish case shows that training and industrial relations reforms can become deeply interlinked, as the first agreements on training reform were initiated before the official beginning of social partnership in 1987 (Boyle, 2005; O'Connor & Harvey, 2001), but changes were only implemented after industrial relations had moved towards bargaining centralization and wage moderation from the side of the unions. The two main training reforms were the creation of *Foras Áiseanna Saothair* (FÁS/Training and Employment Authority) as a tripartite body for the regulation of apprenticeships under a coalition between the centrist *Fine Gael* (FG) and the *Irish Labour Party* (ILP) in 1987 and the introduction of *Standards-based Apprenticeships* (SBA) in 1993 under the subsequent *Fianna Fail* (FF)-led government.

When the FG-ILP coalition came to power in 1983 it faced conditions, which made immediate reforms of the training system difficult, as dealing with an economic crisis took priority. High unemployment, mounting levels of public debt, pervasive industrial conflict and pay drift due to decentralized bargaining (O'Donnell, Adshead, & Thomas, 2011; Roche, 2007, pp. 395-398; Teague & Donaghey, 2009: p. 62) dominated the political agenda. Yet, these problems were addressed quite differently from the liberalization and free market approach that the British Conservatives had taken, resulting in social partnership as the politics driving reform

played out differently resulting in concerted reforms in a broad range of policy areas: Industrial relations, wage bargaining, taxation, welfare and training reforms were mutually agreed upon by governments, trade unions and employer associations. These developments occurred after many failed attempts to negotiate a turn towards centralized wage bargaining, when in 1986 two reports became central for the emergence of a new political compromise.

First, the report “A Strategy for Development, 1986-1990” of the tripartite *National Economic and Social Council* (NESC) published in 1986 became a focal turning point for Irish industrial relations (Culpepper, 2008; O'Donnell et al., 2011), as it switched the attention away from immediate financial and economic problems towards the argument that low Irish growth rates were the key problem causing sluggish economy recovery and performance. After the reports publication, the social partners and the incoming Fianna Fáil minority government signaled their commitment to make their contribution towards fiscal stabilization and growth-enhancing macro-economic management by the turn to centralized wage-bargaining: Unions agreed to embark on a course of wage-moderation, while the government tried to assure employers and unions that economic recovery would result in lower taxes. As this offered potential gains to unions in the form of a higher net wage and to employers in the form of reduced corporate taxes and moderate wage claims by the unions, negotiations finally resulted in the signing of the first of eight subsequent tripartite social partnership agreements, the *Program for National Recovery* (PNR) in 1987 (O'Donnell et al., 2011). From the perspective of the government, this strategy had the advantage of sharing political responsibility with the social partners, as it was yet unclear, if the new compromise would lead out of the economic crisis.

Second, a discussion paper on “Manpower Policy in Ireland” by the NESC, which directly addressed the need for training reform, became endorsed in a government White paper (Department of Labour, 1986). This document made three recommendations for policy reform: a new apprenticeship system should be based on standards achieved rather than on time-served, ensure a satisfactory balance between supply and demand for apprentices and reduce the financial cost to the state whilst maintaining quality. Its main proposition for the governance of the training system was that a new agency should include the main stakeholders of the apprenticeship system and bundle training and employment functions, which were formerly spread among different institutions. The decision to create FÁS as this new institution was already reached before the official start of social partnership in 1987, although FÁS only took up work in 1988. Within FÁS, the *National Apprenticeship Advisory Committee* (NAAC) became strongly driven by the social partners and became the main venue to discuss how exactly a reformed apprenticeship system should be structured.<sup>3</sup>

The creation of FÁS together with tripartite social partnership arrangements provided the background for an agreement on the introduction of a new apprenticeship system. In 1991 the Social Partners (*Irish Business and Employers Confederation* (IBEC), the *Irish Congress of Trade Unions* (ICTU)) and the FF-led coalition government agreed on the introduction of a new standards-based system of apprentice education and training as a part of the *Programme for Economic and Social Progress* (PESP), that was intended to solve the long-standing problems of the uneven quality of the occupationally uneven and fragmented apprenticeships. The problem concerning the negotiation of a new standards-based system was that employers were reluctant to pay for the implementation of a new scheme (Boyle, 2005, p. 48). The solution was found by FÁS leadership and the Department of Enterprise and Employment in the strategy to couple the renegotiations of the new, standards-based system to negotiations in the preparation of the tripartite agreement of 1991, which convinced employers to partake in the new system.

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<sup>3</sup> Personal communication with five interviewees that were close to the political process of training reform. Conducted in Ireland in November 2012.

The willingness of employers to change their position on the financing aspects of the new system can be seen in the light of the beneficial macro-economic results that social partnership had yielded so far.

Following the negotiations of the PESP, in 1993 the old time-served system of apprenticeships was reformed towards SBA, which are statutorily regulated and combine seven structural phases of workplace learning and off-the-job vocational education and covered 26 designated trades by 2012 (FÁS, 2012). Under the provisions of the SBA, apprentices enjoy full employee status and have a statutory entitlement to off-the-job education. Regarding the funding of apprenticeships employers fund the on-the-job phases, while the state funds the off-the-job phases. Regarding the latter, employers also contribute a special levy of 0,25% of the payroll and apprentices are paid a training allowance to the rate of pay appropriate to the year of apprenticeship whilst on the off-the-job phases. Under the governance framework of the SBA, standards are set collectively by FÁS in co-operation with the *Department of Education and Science* (DES), employers and trade unions, which jointly constitute the *National Apprenticeship Advisory Committee* (NAAC) that advises on apprenticeship.

Compared with the characteristics of a collective training system, the Irish apprenticeship system has moved towards a collective solution in three respects: *Firm involvement* is relatively strong via the training levy and for the on-the-job phases of apprenticeship, the *involvement of intermediary organizations* of capital and labor extends to their involvement in FÁS and corresponding institutions, and *skill certification* follows statutory definitions which specify training requirements for each of the on-the-job and off-the-job components.

#### 4 Conclusion

As the condensed case studies of training reform in Britain and Ireland have shown, the politics between governments of different partisan compositions and organized interests have shaped training outcomes into different directions despite broadly similar policy legacies across the two countries. The distinction between right- and non-right partisan governments crucially shaped the policy reactions to economic crises. The Conservative Thatcher governments used training as a tool to curtail union power and to make training more market driven, quite paradoxically by the infusion of public expenditures into youth labour market programs. In contrast, Irish politics were built upon more concerted efforts to reform industrial relations in tandem with training arrangements and focused on the inclusion of organized interests in new training institutions and the process of political reform. One potential take-away from this article is that countries without a cooperative tradition in training need well-balanced approaches of political inclusion in the attempt to move towards a collective skill formation system. Another – political and analytical implication – of the two countries' trajectories is that the design of reforms has a distinct impact in changing the politics of institutional change (cf. Busemeyer, 2015; Busemeyer & Vossiek, 2016): In the case of Britain, the exclusion of unions from training institutions and the displacement of apprenticeship with labour market programs in turn weakened their capacity to influence training reform politics, while the inclusion of Irish unions paved the road to negotiations and compromises of training content and delivery.

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### Biographical notes

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