



*Apprenticeship contract termination
and dropout from VET: a comparison of
educational-political challenges
and strategies in Norway and Switzerland*

*La terminación del contrato de aprendiz y el abandono en
la formación profesional: comparación de desafíos
y estrategias político-educacionales en Noruega y Suiza*

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Abstract

Vocational education and training, and thus the preparation of young people for the job market in many respects, follows different patterns in Norway and in Switzerland. Both countries, however, struggle with delayed transitions into apprenticeship training, apprenticeship contract terminations and dropouts. In both countries, the lowering of the dropout rate is one of the top priorities in educational policy.

The present article examines the challenges and educational-political strategies of both countries regarding the integration of young adults into VET. It is based on a comparison of research literature from both Norway and Switzerland on the transition from school to VET, on apprenticeship contract termination, and on dropout. Despite a great number of non-linear educational pathways, both countries are successful in leading a great number of young adults towards graduation in different ways and with the help of different offers and measures. The strategies of both countries concerning the vocational integration of young adults are discussed in the final conclusion.

Key Words: transition; apprenticeship contract termination; dropout; occupational choice; Norway; Switzerland

Resumen

La formación profesional, y por lo tanto la preparación de los jóvenes para el mercado laboral, en muchos aspectos, sigue diferentes patrones en Noruega y Suiza. Ambos países, sin embargo, se enfrentan problemas con con transiciones retardadas a la formación de aprendices, la terminación de de contrato de aprendizaje y abandono escolar en programas de formación. En ambos países, el descenso de la tasa de deserción es una de las principales prioridades de la política educativa.

El presente artículo examina los desafíos y estrategias de ambos países en relación con la integración de los adultos jóvenes en la formación profesional. El artículo se basa en una comparación de la literatura de investigación de Noruega y Suiza sobre la transición de la escuela a la formación profesional, la terminación contrato de aprendizaje, y sobre la deserción. A pesar de un gran número de itinerarios educativos no lineales, ambos países tienen éxito en la conducción de un gran número de adultos jóvenes hacia la graduación en la formación profesional de diferentes maneras y con la ayuda de diferentes ofertas y medidas. Las estrategias de ambos países en relación con la inserción profesional de los jóvenes adultos se discuten en las conclusiones finales.

Palabras clave: transición; terminación de contrato de aprendizaje; abandono escolar; la elección ocupacional; Noruega; Suiza

1. Introduction

In the vocational education and training of young people, there are great differences between Norway and Switzerland in many respects. Whereas Switzerland is characterised as a collective skill formation system combining strong firm involvement with a high level of public investment in VET (Busemeyer & Iversen, 2012), Norway can be classified as a hybrid between a statist and a collective skill formation model (Nyen & Hagen Tønder, 2014). Young people in Norway are legally entitled to three years of upper secondary education, and even the first two years of VET programmes are school-based. In Switzerland, company-based VET programmes are the most common form of vocational education and training (Wettstein, Schmid & Gonon, 2014), the majority of young people complete their training at training companies. Vocational qualifications are rather narrow in Switzerland: with about 240 skilled trades, there is a high level of vocational specialisation. In Norway, on the other hand, there is much emphasis on broad basic skills and a good educational background in order to prepare young people in the best way possible for a constantly changing labour market. In both years at school, a number of vocations are combined within programmes. Occupational choice therefore takes place step-by-step, the decision to pursue a certain occupation is made only after having completed two years at school. By way of international comparison, both countries show low rates of youth unemployment (e.g. OECD, 2016a) and, according to a US study, both Norway and Switzerland feature among the top six countries when it comes to vocational education – along with Germany, Austria, the Netherlands and Australia (Hoffman, 2011).

Notwithstanding the many strong points of the two different systems, both Norway and Switzerland struggle with apprenticeship contract terminations and dropouts. In both countries, dropping out of a VET programme carries a great risk of remaining without any upper secondary level qualification in the long term. For years Norway has been formulating goals to increase the successful completion rate, which is measured five years after the beginning of upper secondary education (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2014b). Furthermore, some of the 19 counties have set specific goals to reduce the number of apprenticeship contract terminations (e.g. Akershus fylkeskommune, 2016). In Switzerland, the transition from compulsory school to further training at upper secondary level was the principal focus of education policy for a long time. Since the decline in the number of school leavers and the resultant easing of the apprenticeship market, dropouts and failed examinations have increasingly moved into focus. The Confederation, the cantons, professional organisations and teachers' associations jointly set a goal of 'reducing the dropout rate during vocational education and training' in 2015, calling on trade associations to support appropriate projects (EDK, 2015).

The article presented here pursues the following questions:

Which education policy challenges do Norway and Switzerland face when it comes to integrating young people into VET? Which role do dropouts and apprenticeship contract terminations play concerning the vocational integration of young adults?

As a first step, the two VET systems will be briefly introduced. The focus here is on the transition from school to further education, as well as on occupational choice. As a second step, educational pathways, dropouts and apprenticeship contract terminations will be analysed in both countries. As a conclusion, the strategies of the two countries to facilitate the vocational integration of young people are discussed.

2. Method

The present article is based on a comparison of research literature on the transition from school to VET, on apprenticeship contract terminations, and on dropout in Norway and in Switzerland. In social sciences, comparisons between countries and political systems are supposed to be helpful in identifying challenges and different ways of dealing with these challenges – regardless of differing structural and political frameworks and conditions. The challenge examined in the present article is the integration of youths and young adults into education and vocations. This includes a successful transition from compulsory schooling to VET, and, further on, the successful completion of VET. Apprenticeship contract terminations and dropouts place young people at considerable risk of not reaching final graduation. For this reason, these two issues are addressed in the present comparative study. The article consists of a literature analysis on these topics in both countries. In addition, for Norway, some statistical data and background information on apprenticeship contract terminations received from the Akershus county were consulted. These data should therefore not be interpreted as providing general information but rather should be seen as complementing the cited studies with local information when general information on national level is missing.

3. Vocational education and training in Norway

In Norway, compulsory education is provided in single-structure comprehensive schools. It lasts for ten years and comprises two levels (primary level: grades 1-7, and lower secondary level: grades 8-10). Since 1994, young people in Norway have been legally entitled to three years of post-compulsory education. Thus, one of the most important principles of the educational reform at the time was implemented: creating equal rights to education for everybody, independent of their place of residence, gender, socio-economic background, ethnicity, age or ability to work. Young people may choose from three general academic and nine VET programmes offered at the same schools. General academic programmes are completed with a university entrance qualification after three years. The main model of VET has been the so-called 2+2 model: two years of school-based education are followed by two years of apprenticeship training at a training company (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2014a).

Most young people exercise their right to education. Almost 98 per cent start upper secondary level education immediately after having completed compulsory school (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2014b). Although all of them are accepted, access to the programmes is regulated: the better their marks during compulsory schooling, the higher their chances of being accepted for their desired programme. Around half of school leavers start a VET programme (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2015). Pursued by almost a quarter of all students, Health and Social Care was the biggest VET programme, followed by Technical and Industrial Production (18 %) and Electrical Trades (13.4 %). The VET programmes show considerable gender segregation. More than 90 per cent of students in Building and Construction as well as in Electrical Trades are male, whereas VET programmes in Design, Arts and Crafts as well as Health and Social Care are chosen mostly by women. The only programme chosen equally by women and men is Restaurant and Food Processing Trades (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2015).

The content of the first two years of school can be divided into three parts: common core subjects, common programme subjects and vocational specialisation. All in all, there is little vocational specialisation: apart from general education content, which is comparably important throughout the first two years of VET, the emphasis is on broad vocational skills (Nyen & Hagen Tønder, 2014). “In-depth study project” [*yrkesfaglig fordypning*] provides a counterbalance. This subject was introduced in 2006, with the aim of providing students with experience in the use of working methods and tasks within vocations before the start of apprenticeship training. The subject covers about 30 per cent of the VET provided during these two years. The counties are responsible for developing training plans. In the second year at the latest, the aim is for the students to do more practical work and to spend, say, one day a week at a training company. These periods of practical work are important both for the young people and for the training companies. Young people are given an opportunity not only to gain a comprehensive insight into the activities of a certain vocation but also to demonstrate their strengths. The training companies, for their part, use these periods of practical work as a selection tool (Nyen & Hagen Tønder, 2012).

For the second part of their education, apprenticeship training, students need an apprenticeship contract. Usually, they start looking for apprenticeship places during their second year at school. This means choosing a vocation. They may choose from among 180 skilled trades, all of them with a nationwide curriculum. In 2014, about 27,000 young people were looking for apprenticeship places, by the autumn, when training started, 19,000 apprenticeship contracts had been concluded. Thus, about seven out of ten young people looking for apprenticeship places are given an apprenticeship contract in the end. Furthermore, the figures for each county are quite different. The number of new apprenticeship contracts has been continuously increasing. At the same time, however, the number of people looking for apprenticeship places has grown, most of all in VET programmes in Health and Social Care, Services and Transport and Technical and Industrial Production (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2015).

In addition to the slightly more than 19,000 apprentices (*lærling*) who had started work at a training company, 1,900 training candidates (*lære kandidat*) were listed at the time (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2015). In contrast to an apprentice, who follows a regular training course, a training candidate attends a personalised training programme. Instead of the trade or journeyman’s examination (*fag-/svenneprøve*), they may sit a less demanding skills examination (*kompetanseprøve*) and in this way acquire a certificate of competence (*kompetansebevis*). This option is quite common, especially in the fields of Service and Transport, Building and Construction and Health and Social Care.

Young people who cannot find an apprenticeship place are entitled to attend school for a third year (*alternativ Vg3*) – leading up to the same trade or journeyman’s examination. In autumn 2014, 700 people were registered for this school-based certificate (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2015). For the time being, however, this programme has been considered inadequate, both due to its short length and its relative lack of workplace training. Individual attempts have therefore been made to strengthen this alternative third year at school by extending it from 12 months to 18 months, with more practical experience (Mogstad Aspøy & Nyen, 2015a).

Another possibility for young people who do not find an apprenticeship place is to complete their education with the supplementary programme for general university and college admissions certification (*påbygging til generell studiekompetanse*). Young people

who have successfully completed the first two years are given a chance to obtain a university entrance qualification by way of a third year at school. This way, however, they do not acquire a VET qualification. The number of young people taking up this offer has considerably grown in recent years: in 2007, about a fifth of those who had started the first year of VET started a third year in a general academic programme two years later. However, the failure rate for this route is comparatively high. Some students consider this path to be something of a compromise resulting from unsuccessful searches for an apprenticeship place rather than a deliberate choice (Markussen & Gloppen, 2012).

By order of the Ministry of Education and Research, further measures have been tried out in recent years that are supposed to help students find an apprenticeship place or to improve their qualifications so that they can successfully complete their third year and attain a university entrance qualification. There is, for example, an apprenticeship course (*læreplasskurs*) aimed at young people who have not found an apprenticeship place by the summer. These courses are of different lengths and are meant to support these young people in their search for apprenticeship places as well as increasing their motivation. A final assessment of this offer is still to be made (Mogstad Aspøy & Nyen, 2015b).

Finally, it must be mentioned that the Norwegian educational system provides several ways to acquire professional qualifications, not just that of *regular* training in the context of the 2+2 model, which addresses mostly young people. There is also the possibility of acquiring a professional qualification as a practical candidate (*praksiskandidat*). Practical candidates are adults with at least 25 per cent more professional experience in a certain field than the normal duration of VET in the occupation concerned. They must document their professional experience and pass a theoretical examination before being allowed to take the regular trade or journeyman's examination. This path is no exception: every year, about a third of all trade or journeyman's examinations are passed by practical candidates. Almost two-thirds of qualifications are acquired by apprentices in the regular way, with about 3 per cent of them achieved by those students who completed the last part of their training at school (Utdanningdirektoratet, 2016b). Compared with just under 25,000 trade or journeyman's examinations, the number of certificates of competence (*kompetansebevis*) is comparatively low, at about 500 to 600. Nevertheless, this path offers good prospects for some young people, and some of them apply for the trade or journeyman's examination as a practical candidate after a number of years.

According to the OECD (2015), the graduation rate at upper secondary level in Norway is almost 90 per cent, above the OECD average of 84 per cent. Together with Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands and Iceland, Norway stands out with more than 10 per cent of upper secondary level degrees being acquired by people over 25. The average age of those acquiring a VET qualification is 28, which is markedly higher than the OECD average of 22.2 (OECD, 2015).

4. Apprenticeship contract termination and dropping out in Norway

As has already been mentioned, the vast majority of young people in Norway start upper secondary education immediately after their compulsory schooling (Utdanningdirektoratet, 2014b). After five years, about 70 per cent successfully complete their education. This

figure has risen slightly compared with previous years, but it is still clearly below the national goal of 75 per cent (Utdanningdirektoratet, 2014b). Some counties have already achieved this goal, in some counties the figures are clearly below the national average.

There are big differences between general academic and VET programmes. Whereas about 83 per cent of those students who started a general academic programme successfully completed their education after five years, among those attending VET programmes the completion rate is only 58 per cent (SSB, 2016). In both programmes the share of women who graduate (87 % and 61 % respectively) is clearly bigger than that of men (78 % and 56 %). Among the VET programmes, *Media and Communications* shows the highest graduation rate (81 %); it is lowest for *Restaurant and Food Processing* (46 %).

Most of all, the transition from the second year at school to apprenticeship training is problematic and results in students “leaving” or “dropping out”. Just under 68 per cent of students in the second year of a VET programme start apprenticeship training in the following year. For general academic programmes, the transition rate from the second year to the third year at school is nearly 95 per cent (Utdanningdirektoratet, 2014b).

Furthermore, not all of those young people who start apprenticeship training will successfully complete their VET – some of them will drop out of apprenticeship training. There are no exact figures concerning terminations of apprenticeship contracts at the national level. However, according to figures from the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, in recent years, an average of 20 per cent of apprentices have been dropping out of their apprenticeship training each year, at least temporarily, before graduation (Utdanningdirektoratet, 2016a). This figure cannot be equated with the number of apprenticeship contract terminations. Apprentices who have changed occupation or transferred to another company after having terminated their contracts, and who at the time of the review had already started another training course, are not included.

Some counties, such as Akershus, provide somewhat more detailed information about terminations of apprenticeship contracts. In 2013, 187 out of 2,628 current apprenticeship contracts there were terminated without new contracts being entered into. Compared with the total number of current contracts, this is a share of 7.1 per cent (Akershus fylkeskommune, 2014). This figure is relatively stable – it has slightly declined – compared with previous years, however it is still above the current target of a maximum of 6.5 per cent (Akershus fylkeskommune, 2016). Also – as already mentioned – it includes only those terminations of apprenticeship contracts which are not followed by new contracts. If, in parallel to the termination of a contract a new one is entered into, such as in cases of changing the training company or changing from an apprenticeship to a training contract, this is not counted as the termination of a contract.

The occupations of retail butchering, painter/decorator, equestrian trades and hair-dressing constantly show an above-average termination rate – as high as over 30 per cent. In most years, cookery and bricklaying are also listed as having an above-average rate. However, due to the very small numbers of current apprenticeship contracts in these occupations, these figures must be taken into perspective, as already few contract terminations make a high rate. The high number of terminations among hairdressers, an occupation with many current contracts, should be treated the most seriously. However, the termination rate of slightly more than 20 per cent in 2011 dropped to 14 per cent in 2013 (Akershus fylkeskommune, 2014).

The causes of the termination of apprenticeship contracts are highly varied. By far the most frequent reason listed in the statistics is “private reasons” – a collective term for physical or mental problems on the part of the apprentice concerned as well as for problems between the contract partners affecting the apprentice’s wellbeing. “Wrong choice of profession”, “moving house” or “abuse of regulations” are also listed as causes. However, the county points out that, as there are often multiple causes for the termination of apprenticeship contracts, these reasons must be interpreted with care (Akershus fylkeskommune, 2014).

Compared with other counties, Akershus has one of the highest graduation rates (Utdanningdirektoratet, 2014b). It may thus be assumed that in other counties the termination rate is much higher. This is confirmed by a report from the county of Vestfold, which provides evidence that, since 2009, the number of terminated apprenticeship contracts has continuously gone down – it was 9.1 per cent down by 2013 (Vestfold fylkeskommune, 2015). Beyond this, however, it is difficult to provide evidence for this assumption, due to a lack of statistics at national level.

5. Vocational education and training in Switzerland

In Switzerland, about two-thirds of young people enrol in a VET programme. At 27 per cent, the proportion of students who attend a general education is low in comparison with other European countries. VET takes two to four years and is offered by 240 different skilled trades with different intellectual demands. Three-year or four-year VET programmes leads to a Federal VET Diploma (*Eidgenössisches Fähigkeitszeugnis EFZ*). As a further step, one may also acquire a Federal Vocational Baccalaureate (*Berufsmaturität*), which grants access to universities of applied sciences (*Fachhochschule*) without further examination. Two-year VET programmes are aimed at young people who have performed less well at school but who are more practically gifted. This leads to a Federal VET Certificate (*Eidgenössisches Berufsattest EBA*).

Vocational education and training is mostly of a dual nature, with training at small companies of less than 50 employees being the most frequent option (SERI, 2015; Wettstein, Schmid & Gonon, 2014). Education takes place at three sorts of location: training companies, vocational schools and branch training centres, where branch courses are taught. The bulk of educational time is spent with training companies. Usually apprentices spend three to four days a week at the company and attend vocational school one or two days a week. The branch courses are organised by trade organisations and take between two weeks and three months over the entire period of training. All in all, the emphasis lies clearly on specific vocational and practical skills, there is comparably less emphasis on general educational contents. In most of the trades general education covers three lessons per week: general education [*allgemeinbildener Unterricht ABU*] is a multidisciplinary subject which covers educational objectives both from the fields “society” (e.g. economy, ecology, culture, ethics and law) and “language”. Language teaching follows always in connection with educational objectives from the field “society”, the aim is first of all to enhance communication skills. A foreign language is in most of the trades not part of general education. Only a few trades, especially the numerical biggest in commercial and retail business, have extended the amount of general education, most of all by adding one or to foreign languages.

Companies that meet the legal criteria for the training of apprentices are free to decide whether to participate in training, and they select their apprentices according to their own selection criteria (Imdorf, 2014). The rights and duties of training companies and apprentices are set out in an apprenticeship contract, a special kind of employment contract focusing on the training of the apprentice. Thus, apprentices are not just people to be trained; they are also staff members with a special status. They are included in the actual work and service processes, in many branches they generate revenue that exceeds the expenses for their training (Strupler & Wolter, 2012). Particularly in small companies, apprentices often take over tasks which would otherwise be carried out by semi-skilled or skilled employers.

Preparation for the transition into upper secondary education happens during the final three years of compulsory schooling. In most of the 26 cantons, upper secondary education is divided into two to four different performance levels (schools of basic qualification and schools of extended qualification). Preparation for choosing an occupation counts among the tasks undertaken in schools at secondary level I, and it forms part of the cantonal curricula. Actual implementation is left to the individual school. At most schools, lessons on occupational choice start at seventh grade. The goal of this preparation for occupational choice is to prepare the young people for integration into education at upper secondary level and for their later professional lives, as well as supporting them in the process of occupational choice itself. In this way, the schools are supported through occupational guidance, studies advice and careers advice.

In eighth and especially ninth grade students start their actual search for an apprenticeship place and write applications. Most apprenticeship places are filled from November during the final year at school. An informal “fair play” regulation applies to the Swiss apprenticeship market, according to which apprenticeship places should not be filled before 1 November, in order to reduce the pressure on young people during their search. However, this regulation has increasingly been ignored in recent years, with ever more companies filling their vacancies before the autumn holidays or even in summer. In recent years, the number of apprenticeship places has exceeded the number of young people looking for an apprenticeship place (SERI, 2015b). The number of written applications for VET by young people has thus gone down compared with previous years. However, it is still true that young women and most of all foreign young people apply many more times than young men or young people from Switzerland respectively (SBFI, 2015b).

The choice of occupation by young women and men in Switzerland is highly genderspecific. For decades, VET programmes in commerce have clearly been the most popular for both women and men. In other areas, however, the majority of professional apprenticeships are distributed very differently among women and men. Whereas young women tend to opt for school-based courses and focus most of all on occupations in business and administration, health and social care and personal services, young men often choose occupations in architecture and the construction sector, as well as engineering and technology (Wettstein, Schmid & Gonon, 2014).

The level of immediate transitions from compulsory schooling to upper secondary level education declined during the apprenticeship crisis of the 1990s, and has remained at about 75 per cent for several years (SKBF, 2014). Slightly less than half of young people immediately enrol in a VET programme, and slightly more than a quarter of them start education at a general education school. About 15 per cent of the students make use of a transitional option (e.g. a 10th school year or a preparatory course for VET), and another 10 per cent opt for an informal transitional solution (e.g. motivation semester, periods of

practical work, social year or foreign stays) or do not pursue any activity connected to VET (SKBF, 2014). The number of young people making use of transitional options or intermediate solutions has gone down in recent years (SBFI, 2015b). However, due to factors such as insufficient adjustment of supply and demand on the apprenticeship market even today, with several thousand apprenticeship vacancies not being filled, thousands of young people are making use of transitional options or intermediary solutions after school.

Basically, these transitional options or intermediary solutions are meant to make it easier for young people to start their education at upper secondary level. They are supposed to help them by “compensating for” school, language and other deficits, thus improving their chances of finding a (demanding) VET place as well as to help young people with their decision-making and to provide them with decision guidance (compensation as well as orientation function, see Meyer, 2014). In the years when apprenticeship places were hard to come by, transitional options were also given a “systemic buffer function” (Meyer, 2014, p. 42). They are supposed to rebalance the imbalance of supply and demand, thus ensuring that young people are not left without any solution after leaving compulsory school. Studies show that this function – contrary to the intended functions under educational policy, which mostly emphasise the correction of individual deficits – can be considered to be at the forefront (e.g. Meyer, 2014).

Even though a large proportion of young people do not start upper secondary level education directly after compulsory school, most enter this level of education sooner or later. Ten years after leaving compulsory school, the number of people who have not at least started an upper secondary level education is 2 to 3 per cent (Keller, Hupka-Brunner & Meyer, 2010). Currently, the graduation rate at upper secondary level is about 90 per cent (SERI, 2015). The average age when acquiring a VET degree is 21.4, which is slightly below the OECD average of 22.2 (OECD, 2015).

6. Apprenticeship contract termination and dropping out in Switzerland

Most young people in Switzerland start post-compulsory education – either immediately after compulsory school or after a transitional option. Not all of them, however, graduate – at least not initially. For the time being there are no exact figures on apprenticeship contract termination and dropouts at national level. Previous figures have come from the cantonal VET authorities or research projects, which each apply different methods of calculating the rates of apprenticeship contract termination. In Germany, the method of calculating this rate has been a topic of scientific and education policy debate for many years (e.g. Uhly, 2015). Appropriate figures are calculated by way of a special calculation model and are published yearly (e. g. BIBB, 2014). Following this model, Switzerland has created the methodological foundations for the publication of figures on the termination of apprenticeship contracts at regular intervals. Focus is placed on the question of how many apprentices are concerned by the termination of an apprenticeship contract in the course of their vocational education and training. Accordingly, in future, the rates of terminated apprenticeship contracts are supposed to be calculated longitudinally (Schmid & Kriesi, 2016). Up to now, the rates of terminated apprenticeship contracts have mostly been calculated with reference to the share of terminations of apprenticeship contracts in

one year compared to that of all running contracts. According to this calculation, the rate was 9.7 per cent in 2014, with major differences between the cantons, which had rates ranging between 2.7 per cent and 13 per cent (Nock, 2015). On the whole, according to canton-level calculations and estimates, it can be assumed that about one in four apprentices may experience the termination of an apprenticeship contract in the course of education (Schmid, 2015). These calculations include all terminations of apprenticeship contracts, including those immediately followed by new contracts, for example if the apprentice continues training at another company.

Independently of how the rate is calculated, there are large differences between branches and occupations. For example, the hospitality industry, hairdressing and beauty and the transportation and automobile industries, as well as some occupations in the construction sector, show above-average rates. On the whole, occupations that are less intellectually demanding have higher termination rates than those that are moderately or highly intellectually demanding. Furthermore, the rates are above average for foreign young people. There are no differences between women and men (Stalder & Schmid, 2006).

Apprentices and apprenticeship trainers give different reasons for the termination of apprenticeship contracts. Most contract partners cite performance-related difficulties as reasons for a termination. That aside, they often make different judgments on the situation. Apprentices frequently point to the quality of training given by the company, but apprenticeship trainers seldom give this reason. In most cases the apprentice is responsible for the termination according to the trainers. Aside from performance at school and at the company, they mention insufficient commitment or problems with their parents. Generally, it has become obvious that, in most cases, termination of an apprenticeship contract is due to several factors, in the context of which the chronology of what has happened is usually difficult to ascertain (Stalder & Schmid, 2006).

Between 60 and 75 per cent of the young adults concerned start a new course of education within three years of the apprenticeship contract termination – they often do so after only a short interval or even immediately after termination (Schmid, 2010). The majority of them do not pursue an entirely new education pathway but rather continue their apprenticeship at another company or change to a less demanding (or occasionally more demanding) apprenticeship in the same vocational field. On average, young people are clearly more satisfied with their new education pathway than with the old one. They have been able to use the opportunity of apprenticeship contract termination to optimise their working and training conditions, to correct unsuitable occupational choices or for reorientation (Schmid & Stalder, 2012).

According to estimates, between 50 and 75 per cent successfully complete their VET after having started again. About a quarter to a half of young adults leave the educational system without formally graduating. For youths and young adults, early termination of an apprenticeship contract thus constitutes the biggest risk of remaining without upper secondary level qualifications in the long run (Schmid, 2013).

7. Discussion

In the international debate, when it comes to vocational education and training, both Norway and Switzerland are counted among the top six countries (Hoffman, 2011). Furthermore, both count among the countries with the highest employment and the

lowest youth unemployment rate (OECD, 2016a, 2016b). However, both countries are confronted with delayed transitions into apprenticeship, apprenticeship contract terminations, dropouts and delayed graduation. Both in Norway and in Switzerland, about 98 per cent of young people start a post-compulsory education, however not all of them graduate. In both countries the upper secondary graduation rate is similar – in Switzerland it is about 90 per cent; in Norway it is 88 per cent (OECD, 2015). On the whole, both countries are successful in leading a high number of young adults towards graduation, in different ways and with the help of different offers and measures, despite a large number of non-linear educational pathways. The following discussion starts out from three points in time during the course of education and discusses them in the context of a comparison between Norway and Switzerland: 1. transition to apprenticeship training; 2. apprenticeship contract terminations and dropout; and 3. successful completion of vocational education and training.

7.1. Transition to apprenticeship training

One of the biggest risks with the integration of young people into vocational education concerns the guarantee of a sufficient number of apprenticeship places as well as the adjustment of supply and demand on the apprenticeship market. In both Norway and Switzerland, the transition to apprenticeship training is a great challenge. In both countries, thousands of young people are left without an apprenticeship place every year. In Norway this transition from the school-based part of VET to apprenticeship training, which usually happens between the second and third years of VET, is the time when students are at greatest risk of dropping out of VET. About three out of ten young people looking for an apprenticeship place are not successful. Indeed, it was made possible for the number of apprenticeship contracts to be continuously increased over the past few years. Nevertheless, there are still not enough apprenticeship places in all regions and occupations. Although almost all young people start further education immediately after compulsory schooling, for many this is no guarantee that they will be able to successfully complete their education, at least not as originally intended. Many of those dropping out of VET take the trade or journeyman's examinations some years later, thus still acquiring a professional qualification. However, these pathways are associated with a number of risks and imponderables, and the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research has formulated a goal of increasing the number of people acquiring a professional qualification within five years of starting VET. Measures to achieve this goal are currently being tested and evaluated (e.g. Mogstad Aspøy & Nyen, 2015b).

In Switzerland, too, many young people looking for an apprenticeship place face challenges or difficulties, and only about 75 per cent of school leavers start a certifying postcompulsory education immediately after completing their compulsory schooling. However, the great majority of those unwilling or unable to start VET immediately will start it at a later time, in most cases after having made use of one or several transitional options or intermediate solutions. On the whole, however, young people in Switzerland face considerable insecurity during the transition from school to post-compulsory education, and this transition is often difficult especially for those young people who are socially disadvantaged or disadvantaged at school. Several studies show that social and cultural origin, independent of school performance, considerably co-determines whether someone finds an apprenticeship place or not (e.g. Sacchi, Hupka-Brunner, Stalder & Gangl, 2011). Most of all, this concerns access to company-based VET,

which has different selection patterns than school-based VET (Seibert, Hupka-Brunner & Imdorf, 2009). Apprenticeship trainers apply their own, often less standardised selection criteria (Imdorf, 2014). Furthermore, the selective school system – the separation of students into different performance groups after six years of primary school – increases social inequalities. Access to upper secondary education is strongly influenced by the type of lower secondary programme young people were previously enrolled in – independently from their actual performance, according to PISA measurements (BFS & TREE, 2003; Hupka-Brunner & Wohlgemuth, 2014).

In Norway as well, young people are faced with having to apply for an apprenticeship place and have to contend with the unpredictability of the apprenticeship market. While working at a training company in the first two years of school, they have, however, the opportunity to show their motivation and strengths, and apprenticeship trainers get to know apprentices and their way of working and learning. Thus, it is most of all the marks from the first two years of VET in school, the number of absences and the age of the student which predetermine whether someone will obtain an apprenticeship contract or not (Mogstad Aspøy & Nyen, 2015a). Thus, at least when it comes to criteria of social origin, Norway seems to have achieved the goal of providing everyone with the same right to education, although there are not enough training places in every field all over the country.

7.2. Apprenticeship contract termination and dropout

As far as the successful completion of post-compulsory education is concerned, a great risk is presented not only by a delayed start to apprenticeship training but by apprenticeship contract terminations. In Switzerland, apprenticeship contract terminations in fact represent the biggest risk of not graduating at upper secondary level in the long run. About a quarter of apprentices are affected by the termination of an apprenticeship contract in the course of training, and a quarter to a half of them leaves the educational system without any formal qualifications. In 2015, the Confederation, the cantons, professional organisations and teachers' associations – set a goal of 'reducing [the] drop-out rate during vocational education and training' and called on the professional associations to support projects serving this purpose (EDK, 2015). Furthermore, the Swiss Federal Statistical Office intends to improve the data concerning apprenticeship contract terminations and to publish figures on this at regular intervals in the future. Thus in Switzerland there is a growing awareness that young people should be supported not only until they start their VET but until they have successfully completed it.

In Norway the focus of education policy measures is on the transition from the second to the third year of VET, rather than on apprenticeship contract terminations. Generally, one assumes that the number of apprenticeship contract terminations is comparatively low. A direct comparison of figures on terminations of apprenticeship contracts in Switzerland and Norway is difficult, because of gaps in statistical data and different definition and calculation methods. Generally, however, when it comes to apprenticeship contract terminations, there are many surprisingly clear similarities. In both countries there are different definitions and methods of calculating rates, and in both countries one should be careful when defining the various events. In Norway this most of all concerns the terms *fracfall*, *omvalg*, *bortvalg* and *gjennomføring*, which are often used inconsistently (Markussen, Frøseth, Lødding, Sandberg, 2008; Markussen, 2011); in Switzerland this applies to the terms *Lehrvertragsauflösung*,

Lehrstellenwechsel and *Lehrabbruch*. In both countries, this can be the case in certain occupations and sectors such as hairdressers, bricklayers and the hospitality trade. A surprisingly major congruence between Norway and Switzerland also emerges when it comes to the legal regulations governing apprenticeship contract terminations.

7.3. Successful completion of vocational education

One of the major differences between Norway and Switzerland is the time required to complete VET. Whereas young people in Switzerland are on average 21.4 years old when they complete their vocational education, the average age in Norway is 28. Despite a high number of delayed starts, the majority of young people in Switzerland still complete a course of post-compulsory education some years after having left compulsory school. Thus Switzerland is succeeding in integrating not only intellectually strong young people but also those with a weaker school performance into continuing education, and is leading them towards graduation. More than half of those who, according to PISA, have very low reading skills (reading skills level ≤ 1) and who thus belong to a risk group acquire a professional qualification (Stalder, Meyer & Hupka-Brunner, 2011). There is a wide offer of apprenticeships and skilled trades, which includes both young people with high levels of performance and motivation at school and those who are more ‘practically gifted’, those with a weaker scholastic performance or those who are tired of school. Furthermore, young people with a weak school performance benefit from the fact that the selection criteria of small and medium-sized companies, which train the vast majority of young people in Switzerland, are often not very standardised. In less demanding occupations, companies are more interested in criteria such as motivation to learn and the ability to integrate when it comes to selecting their apprentices (Buchholz, Imdorf, Hupka-Brunner & Blossfeld, 2012). In Norway, up to now, there are not many alternatives for less scholastically inclined pupils or those tired of school: regardless of the post-compulsory programme chosen, education starts with two years at school, including a considerably high amount of general education. A decision was reached some years ago to step up support for alternative educational paths to the 2+2 model. Models involving a more frequent change between school education and training at companies – so called change models (*vekslingsmodell*) – are intended to improve the educational connection between the two places, to make education more practice-related and thus to increase the motivation of the young people (Høst, Nyen, Reegård, Seland & Hagen Tønder, 2015). This is in accordance with the Education Act, which stipulates that ‘Education shall be adapted to the abilities and aptitudes of the individual student, apprentice and training candidate’ (Opplæringsloven § 1–3). It is not yet clear how many young people will make use of this offer and how much it could help a larger number of young people to graduate sooner and thus at a younger age. Up to now, it is difficult to say whether the change models indeed do represent support for alternative educational paths. A final evaluation has not yet been conducted.

In Switzerland, the volume of vocational qualifications acquired by adults is still not very high at present. Indeed, pathways for acquisition of vocational qualifications have become more diversified in Switzerland as well. Like in Norway, adults with more than five years of professional experience in a certain field may immediately take a final examination to obtain a vocational qualification. However, in 2014 only slightly more than 2,000 people acquired a vocational qualification in this manner (Maurer, Wettstein & Neuhaus, 2016) – compared to 70,000 Federal VET Diplomas and Federal VET Certificates awarded

through normal pathways (BFS, 2016). In 2014, a total of around 7,600 persons over the age of 25 obtained a vocational qualification, mostly by way of regular apprenticeship training (Maurer, Wettstein & Neuhaus, 2016). Alternative pathways to vocational qualifications are therefore not very popular in Switzerland. This raises the question of what steps Switzerland can take to make these educational pathways more appealing.

8. Conclusion

Norway and Switzerland both face several challenges in their efforts to integrate young adults into VET and ensure that they successfully complete their training. In both countries, virtually all young people start upper secondary education – immediately after leaving compulsory school or after one or a few intermediate years. However, not all of them graduate, at least not in the originally intended way: in both countries, young people dropping out from VET as well as apprentices with apprenticeship contract terminations run a big risk of remaining without any upper-secondary qualifications in the long run. All in all, it may be stated that Norway and Switzerland apply different strategies when it comes to integrating young people into education and vocations. Switzerland is particularly characterised by leading a high number of young people with weak school performance, rather practically gifted or tired of school towards a professional qualification. The integrative achievements of the highly practice-oriented system and the great significance of VET in Switzerland are unique even by international comparison. The strong point of the Norwegian educational system is its inclusive nature, which has also been emphasised by the OECD (Kuczera, Brunello, Field & Hoffman, 2008). This does not just refer to the comprehensive school system and the legal entitlement to three years of post-compulsory education; it also involves flexible structures and open-mindedness when it comes to alternative educational paths, making it possible to integrate people whose educational paths are different from the ‘ordinary pathways’ into continuing education and vocations.

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