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School Dropout and Completion

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Chapter 9

School Dropout and Completion in Switzerland

Elisabetta Pagnossin

Introduction

Today, the Swiss education and training system is in the process of fundamental changes aimed at harmonising and rationalising some essential structural elements at the different educational levels. The complexity of the Swiss education system comes from the historical and cultural characteristics of the country. By way of introduction, a short description of its key features will permit a better understanding of the main tendencies of the current reforms and of the aims pursued at the political level.

At the end of compulsory education, at age 15, the majority (more than 70%) of Swiss young people opt for vocational training. However, progressively, and for many reasons, young people are now less keen to pursue this kind of education immediately after compulsory schooling. There is a tendency for an increasing proportion of young people to spend 1 or 2 years attending a 'transitional program' before going on to post-compulsory schools. Most of those who have attended one of these programs re-enter the official educational system and obtain a diploma of post-compulsory education some years later; only very few do not and therefore leave the school system without a qualification. The integration into the labour market of those without a qualification is highly compromised; therefore, their risk of unemployment and need for social assistance are quite high.

All these elements will be discussed in detail in the different sections of this chapter.

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The Contextual Framework: The Swiss Education System

The Swiss education system¹ (shown diagrammatically in Fig. 9.1) is characterised by federalism and decentralisation based on the principle of subsidiarity.²

The sharing of responsibilities in education between the federal and canton levels is quite complex, and varies depending on the educational level and on the political institution(s) concerned. In fact, in the context of what is called 'cooperative

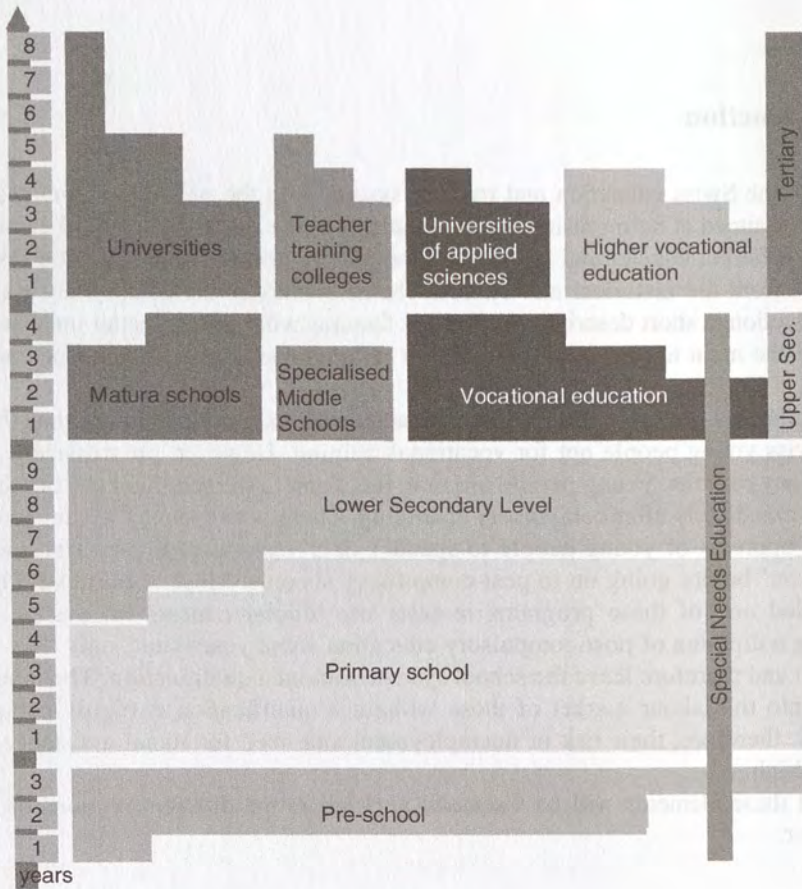


Fig. 9.1 Simplified diagram of the Swiss education system

¹All data cited in this chapter come from the data bank of the Swiss Federal Statistical Office (<http://www.bfs.admin.ch.bfs/portal/fr/index/themen/15.html>) if not otherwise stated.

²According to this principle, superior levels (Confederation or cantons) can pass regulations or undertake tasks where and when the subordinate levels are not in a position to do so. The application of this principle results in a highly decentralised system where municipalities hold strong political responsibilities.

federalism', each of the 26 cantons³ that form the country has its own education system, organised with substantial autonomy.

The coexistence of so many cantonal education systems implies the existence of different structures for compulsory schooling, with advanced or basic requirement tracks, which prepare respectively for academic/general versus vocational curricula. Compulsory education is divided into two cycles: the primary school and the lower secondary level, but their structures are not uniform between cantons. Nevertheless, for the majority of children, selection⁴ starts at the lower secondary level, when they are 11–12 years old, on the basis of the requirements of the track⁵ in which they are allowed to enrol. Under some conditions, changes from one type of track into another are possible even before the end of compulsory schooling. In reality, it is quite difficult. In 2006, 29.9% of the children at the lower secondary level were enrolled in a basic requirement track; 61.3% in an advanced one and 8.8% in a school without a specific track (see Fig. 9.2).

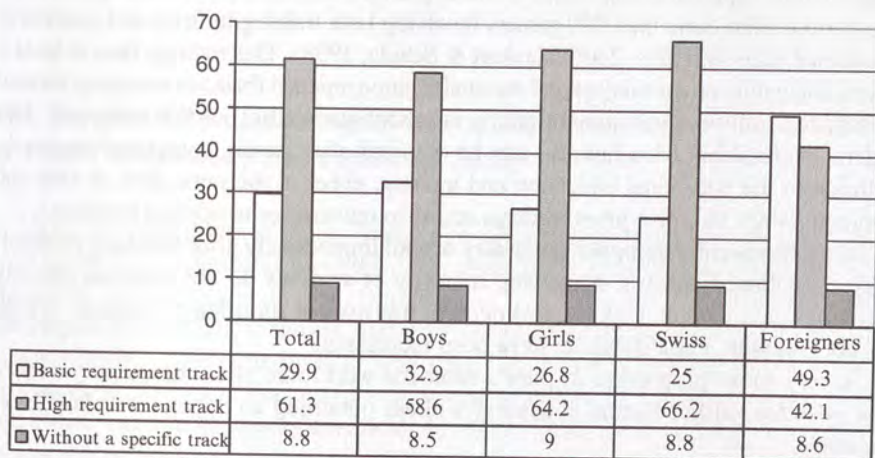


Fig. 9.2 Participation in different tracks within lower secondary education in Switzerland in 2006 (%)

³The Swiss Conference of Cantonal Ministers of Education (CDIP – EDK) is the council which brings together the 26 Ministers of Education. It is divided into four regional conferences that partly reflect the multilingualism of the country. Intercantonal agreements ('concordats') are the most binding instruments that permit cooperation between the signatory cantons. The Intercantonal Agreement on Education Coordination (dating from 1970) forms the concrete legal basis for intercantonal collaboration concerning compulsory education.

⁴It is not really true to say that children choose the type of education they are going to follow, as they are about 10 years old. The selection is made on teachers' decisions that are taken mainly on the basis of the school marks obtained and the performances students have reached. In some places cantonal tests are important. Therefore, teachers propose the type of school they consider suitable for the children; their parents have, under some conditions, the right to oppose those decisions. In theory, switches from one type of school to another are possible, but they are quite difficult to make.

⁵Depending on the canton, there are between one and four tracks.

It is important to note the higher proportion of boys (32.9%) and foreign children (49.3%)⁶ in the basic requirement classes. Conversely, two thirds of girls (64.2%) and Swiss students (66.2%) follow advanced requirement curricula.

At the end of compulsory schooling (the ninth year), children's options are already dependent on the previous kind of education received, and the choices are successively more restricted. The upper secondary level is split up into two main pathways: general/academic education and lower vocational education and training.

The first pathway, which lasts 3 or 4 years, is through the Matura schools⁷ and provides the possibility of direct entrance to the cantonal universities and the federal institutes of technology. There are also specialised middle schools which prepare pupils for higher vocational education (universities of applied sciences), for instance, in the fields of healthcare, communications and information technology, and the social sciences.

In the second pathway, the most common form of lower vocational training is the 'dual system' (apprenticeship) that combines practical and theoretical learning. Students can choose from more than 200 careers involving both training in firms and courses in vocational schools (Dubs, 2006; Hanhart & Schulz, 1998). This training lasts at least 2 years, depending on the subject and the qualification attained (basic or advanced federal certificate). Full-time vocational training in school also exists, but it is quite rare. The federal professional baccalaureate can be obtained after having completed studies in addition to the vocational education and training, either at the same time or after the apprenticeship. This also gives students access to universities of applied sciences.⁸

Most pupils enter an upper secondary school immediately after finishing compulsory education. However, a growing minority of students do not continue directly into this stage. In fact, over the last decade, transitional short length courses, which do not end with a qualification, have been increasing.

A very small proportion of pupils enter the workforce after compulsory school and abandon further formal education without obtaining an upper secondary level diploma.

The Current Reforms in the Swiss Education System

Many changes are taking place within the Swiss education system. The national political authorities are willing to adopt the requirements that are shared worldwide due to the internationalisation of education systems, and to address issues such as mobility, harmonisation, quality, equity, accountability, efficiency and many others.

⁶ Depending on the type of data available, it is not always possible to characterise foreigners by their socioeconomic status. First generation young immigrants are often, but not always, of lower socioeconomic status.

⁷ It is possible to sit for the final examination and to get the certification at any age and without attending a school. Private courses exist for supporting students in their preparation.

⁸ In 2006, 80% of students were enrolled in a tertiary level institution (67% in a university, 33% in a university of applied sciences) and 20% followed an upper vocational institution.

All the levels of the education system have already been or are being reformed. For instance, the general education tracks underwent profound reform a decade ago, and this reform is currently being evaluated. A new law on vocational education came into force in 2004 and the landscape of tertiary education is being reorganised.

A new intercantonal Agreement on Education Coordination of Compulsory Schooling ('*Harmos Concordat*') has been announced and came into force on August 1, 2009 for the signatory cantons.⁹ It is the first step of a formal process towards the harmonisation of some basic educational structures at the national level.¹⁰ At the same time, but independently, popular demand for harmonisation and coordination of education at the intercantonal level has been given clear political expression, thanks to the role of 'direct democracy'.¹¹ In fact, on May 21, 2006, Swiss citizens accepted some changes in the articles of the Federal Constitution concerning education and training in the country.

These two national projects aim at better coordination and collaboration between cantons on compulsory schooling and on the conditions that define and precede the transition to post-compulsory education.

The Target: 95% of Teenagers with a Diploma of Post-Compulsory Education by 2015

In 2005, the proportion of young Swiss who obtained a qualification at the end of post-compulsory education was 89%. This percentage is quite high compared with the mean of 82% among the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, and 83% among the European Union's member States (OECD, 2005). In light of that data, the Swiss Conference of Cantonal Ministers of Education declared its eagerness to reach the target of 95% of teenagers with a post-compulsory certificate by 2015.¹² The rationale for increasing the proportion of boys and girls who complete their upper secondary education comes from the consideration that it has become an essential qualification to enter the workforce and to start a professional life.

It is possible to analyse the distribution of the two types of diplomas in Switzerland. Over time, the percentage of teenagers choosing vocational training

⁹At the same time, another Convention has been signed between the French-speaking cantons ('*Convention scolaire romande*') aiming at a stronger coordination and harmonisation than the national one ('*Harmos Concordat*'). See www.ciip.ch and www.edk.ch

¹⁰For instance, changes concerning the structure and the duration of compulsory education (which will start earlier), as well as the curricula that will be harmonised at the regional linguistic level.

¹¹Direct democracy is a system of democracy giving citizens more direct participation in the legislation process through such tools as referendums.

¹²The Swiss Conference of Cantonal Minister of Education (CDIP), *Lignes directrices du projet Transition, communiqué de presse du 27.10.2006*. The European Union declared that their target is 85% of young people with a certificate of post-compulsory schooling by 2010.

has diminished.¹³ The reasons put forward to explain this trend are numerous and will be discussed later. Nonetheless, the choice of the type of education remains quite differentiated with regard to cultural and linguistic areas inside the country, to gender and, to a lesser extent, nationality. In fact, boys, foreigners and German-speaking pupils more often choose vocational education.¹⁴

An analysis of the evolution of the diploma in terms of numbers completing confirms the increase in teenagers who complete upper secondary education (see Fig. 9.3). The rate of increase since 1990 is greater for girls than for boys, though girls have not yet reached the same level as boys in attaining this standard of education.

The decrease in the proportion of diplomas delivered in vocational education is mostly due to girls' diminishing interest for this type of training. At the same time, the increase in the percentage of females who obtain a qualification of general education is significant.

In order to increase the number of young people who obtain a post-compulsory education qualification, it is also important that they can do it as quickly as possible, to minimise the possibility of abandoning their study in the meantime. One of the strategies to increase completion is to reduce the amount of time and money it takes for the individual and the community. Some of the factors that add to that cost include changes in the educational pathway (e.g., with the breaking of an apprenticeship contract); a lack of apprenticeships available in the desired fields; and the necessity to wait 1 year in a transitional course before starting the training or education curriculum.

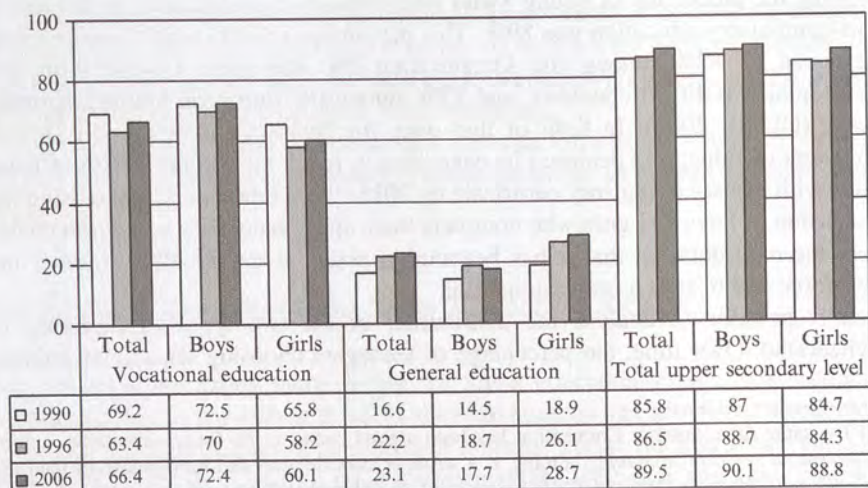


Fig. 9.3 Trend in students obtaining an upper secondary education diploma in Switzerland (%)

¹³It was 76.3% in 1990 and 72.7% in 2006.

¹⁴In 2006, at the upper secondary level, 79.4% of boys and 65.7% of girls were enrolled in vocational education, as were 72.4% of Swiss students and 74.6% of foreigners.

Analysis of the percentage of young people who enter post-compulsory education immediately after finishing the compulsory phase shows an important increase in the role of transitional courses.¹⁵

The choice of general education has risen slightly. On the other hand, direct entry into vocational training has diminished considerably over time. The decrease of the proportion of boys entering vocational training is not compensated by an increase in entry to a general/academic education stream, as it is for girls. However, the increase in the proportion of registrations for a transitional solution is roughly the same for both sexes.

Two major trends, obviously interwoven, can be identified: on the one hand, the decreasing number of young people in lower vocational training, and, on the other, the increasing number of enrolments in transitional programs. These two trends will be discussed in the following sections.

Trends in Lower Vocational Training

A major problem has developed concerning opportunities for apprenticeship training that has its roots in changes in industry that have affected the apprenticeship contracts' market. At the end of compulsory education, there is now a shortage of contracts in the fields of vocational training preferred by young people. There are several reasons that can explain this situation.

Number and Types of Firms Providing Apprenticeships Is Changing

The number of firms that provide apprenticeships – the essential partners of the dual vocational training system – is progressively decreasing, especially in some fields. For instance, in 2007, only 32% of Swiss firms supplied apprenticeship contracts (Burri & Brunner, 2007a, p. 4). They provided 79,000 apprenticeship places,¹⁶ but 3,000 of these remained vacant (about 3% every year). Among the firms providing apprenticeships, nearly 70% are large (with more than 100 employees), even though 60% of Swiss firms are small (fewer than 10 employees) (Mühlemann et al., 2004).

¹⁵TREE (Transitions from School to Work) is a longitudinal research study on school-to-work transitions carried out in Switzerland at the national level. This study largely confirms the data presented by the Swiss Federal Statistical Office (Amos et al., 2003; Meyer, 2005).

¹⁶This number represents a slight increase (+3%) compared to that of the previous year. Since 2000, the small positive and negative fluctuations tend to result in an overall stable situation (Burri & Brunner, 2007a, p. 10).

Costs and Benefits of Apprentice Training

The proportion of firms providing training is relatively small, even if it seems that apprentice training is economically attractive. Many research studies conclude that, in Switzerland, firms make profits from the work of nearly two thirds of the apprentices trained. For the other one third of apprenticeship contracts that cannot be considered as lucrative, engaging the trained apprentice¹⁷ at the end of his or her contract can reduce the costs for the firm because it removes the recruitment costs and those arising from the training of a new employee. During the last year of their apprenticeship, the young trainees reach a level of competence that equals two thirds of the productivity of a qualified employee in that particular field (Mühlemann, 2008; Mühlemann & Wolter, 2007). For the firm, the training costs are compensated by the benefit arising from the apprentice's productive labour. The cost-benefit ratio depends on the firm's size and on its appreciation of the expected cost-benefit balance when the enrolment of an apprentice is decided.

Employers apply many selection criteria when they choose their future apprentice. A survey has been conducted in order to evaluate employer priorities: the way in which the profession has been chosen;¹⁸ the motivation¹⁹ and the skills²⁰ for it are considered as the most important elements (respectively 65%, 62% and 58%) in the candidate selection. The other criteria are: subjective impressions (47%), the candidate's school career (37%), his or her more personal characteristics²¹ (10%) and personal interests²² (5%) (Burri & Brunner, 2007a, p. 18, b, pp. 37–38).

The qualifications and qualities of the young candidate are also quite important, as firms want to engage people who correspond to the firm's aspirations and expectations (Mühlemann & Wolter, 2007, p. 46). As mentioned before, qualifications and education skills are not the most important selection criteria for a firm. However, the educational gaps of their apprentices oblige them to invest more time in their training, which also raises their costs. Of course, the educational gaps of a candidate can deter a company from engaging him or her. Nonetheless, other factors are considered in calculating the cost-benefit ratio, whose balance is always fundamental in determining the offer of apprenticeship contracts. Most reasons

¹⁷ The proportion of apprentices who remain in the same firm is a good indicator for understanding the willingness of a firm to plan its staff renewal. The proportion depends on the company's size. In large firms (more than 250 employees) more than half (58%) of the apprentices trained remain at least 1 year after the end of their training; in the small ones (0–4 employees) the proportion is 18%. In between, the progression is linear. Differences appear according to sectors of activity: in the secondary sector, about half of the apprentices trained remain. In the tertiary sector, the volatility is much more important, with only one third of the trainees being re-engaged.

¹⁸ This can include aptitude tests and the job interview.

¹⁹ This means the interest shown for the profession and for the company.

²⁰ They include technical, methodological, social and personal competencies, as well as the general state of health.

²¹ Characteristics such as age, sex, nationality and place of residence.

²² For example, hobbies, sport and membership of different types of associations.

invoked by firms for training apprentices (or not) are bound to this rational calculation (that is, too low a benefit expected in relation to the time needed, or not sufficient work available for the apprentice). The short- or long-term perspectives are also always taken into account.

Number and Types of Apprenticeship Contracts

The evolution of the apprenticeship contracts' market is bound to that of the job market: the economic situation determines both. Two other trends that influence the economic situation (Flückiger, 2007) must be taken into account: economic globalisation and technological development that reduces the need for particular skills. The consequences are relocation, demand for mobility, expansion of the tertiary sector and reduction of small-scale and industrial production. They concern precisely the types of jobs in which the apprenticeship contracts were previously the most numerous and appropriate, and they have not been compensated by apprenticeships created in the service sector.

There is an imbalance,²³ which has become constant, between the supply of and the demand for apprenticeship contracts, not only from a quantitative point of view, but also from a qualitative one, and which depends on the fields considered. From a quantitative point of view, this vocational system is healthy if there are sufficient apprenticeship positions available – that is, there are at least 12% more contracts available than contract requests by young people looking for vocational training (Puipe, 2003). From the qualitative point of view, it is important to note the lack of apprenticeship positions in the professional branches that will be in particularly high demand in the future (that is, in the sectors of information and communication technologies, health and the retail trade). Conversely, the supply of positions is too high in some fields that will not guarantee a job in the future (Puipe, 2003, p. 20).

However, the imbalance is relative, as every year there are some apprenticeship positions that remain vacant in certain economic sectors (for instance, the building industry and hotel services).

It is possible that some contracts are not signed due to the uncertain future of certain professions, leading subsequently to problems of retraining, and the transfer of acquired skills into another profession or qualification.

Since apprenticeship salaries are not high (Schwaab, 2008) and the costs of the training vary considerably among young people and among firms, another reason some contracts are not signed can be due to the location of the position, obliging the candidate apprentice to incur possibly prohibitively high mobility costs.

²³ Since 2006, many initiatives have been created in order to change this situation: they are directed towards the candidates for vocational training (for example, an Internet platform with all the apprenticeships contracts supplied) and also to firms, in order to make them more aware of the advantages of this training activity.

It is now important to analyse the apprenticeship places that remain vacant. For instance, in August 2007, 96% of the contracts supplied that year were signed.²⁴ A few training possibilities were still open, in particular in the building, painting, and carpentry professions (8%) and in metal or machine production (6%). On the other hand, apprenticeship positions in trade/office and technical drawing professions were almost all assigned. The attribution of contracts for the health professions rapidly reached 99% (Burri & Brunner, 2007a, p. 15).

Finally, although demographic trends can partly influence the availability of apprenticeship contracts, researchers consider these as a minor factor.

Apprentices' Satisfaction with Their Field of Training

A survey concluded that 71% of young people engaged in apprenticeship training in 2007 declared that it was in the field that they wanted to be in; 6% of them said that they were trained for a profession that they didn't desire, and 16% for a profession that they considered a second choice²⁵ (Burri & Brunner, 2007b, p. 54).

The lack of satisfaction with the profession in which they are trained can have consequences for the young apprentices in the more or less short term, with the breaking of the training contract or with substantial difficulties in entering the professional world (Herzog et al., 2004b; Kaiser et al., 2007). Consequently, it is very important to avoid the situation of limited choices in which teenagers must start training for a profession that doesn't reflect their desires and expectations (Rastoldo, 2006). The lack of interest and motivation can re-emerge later (Finzi et al., 2008; Meyer Schweizer, 2009; Schmid & Stalder, 2007b). The proportion of rescinded apprenticeship contracts reaches nearly 20% every year.²⁶ This proportion is quite high, and it is harmful both for the teenager and the firm. For the teenager, such a situation causes a delay for his or her training (with much time and energy lost) and the uneasy feeling of failure, which can cause health problems (Michaud, 2001; Neuenschwander, 2008; Neuenschwander & Süss, 2004; Stalder & Schmid, 2006b). Firms are also losers, as the cancellation of a contract during the schooling year causes additional costs and organisational problems, and naturally a feeling of failure too, that can induce discouragement for training apprentices.

A research study conducted in the canton of Bern (Moser et al., 2008; Schmid & Stalder, 2007a; Stalder & Schmid, 2006a) shows that in the group of teenagers

²⁴More than half (61%) of the new candidates who start an apprenticeship are boys. The gender division of labour in the different groups of professions is still very marked. Boys are trained for professions in metallurgy (95%), the building industry (85%) and in technical fields (70%). The majority of girls are in the health sector (85%), retail (75%), clerical sector (65%) and hotel services (60%) (Burri & Brunner, 2007b, p. 33).

²⁵The remaining 7% of young people interviewed didn't reply.

²⁶Bessey & Backes-Gellner, 2008; Masdonati & Lamamra, 2007; Masdonati et al., 2007; Stalder & Schmid, 2006b.

who rescinded an apprenticeship contract, half of them very quickly signed another one, mostly in the same field but with another firm. For the others, only one in three hadn't found a solution after 18 months; most of them were immigrants and had already rescinded an apprenticeship contract. Their dropout was very often definitive. Another qualitative research study conducted in Geneva canton generally confirmed these conclusions (Rastoldo et al., 2009).

Recruiting apprentices has become very selective (Haeberlin et al., 2004), as the number of apprentice contracts has become more scarce. A study has concluded that a young candidate must write on average 18 applications in order to obtain a contract. Big differences appear among the various groups of professions. A candidate must apply more often for a place in retail services (on average 29 times), for desk or office jobs and health services (for both of these, 25 applications), and for places in hotel and household services (24). It seems to be somewhat easier to get a contract in the fields of the building, painting and wooden industries (10), metallurgy and machine industries (12) and in the drawing and technical professions (17) (Burri & Brunner, 2007a, p. 19).

Some significant differences concern the nationality of the candidates seeking a contract. In 2007, young foreigners wrote on average 39 applications before finding an apprenticeship place, while young Swiss made only 14 applications. More than 20% of young foreigners had to write more than 50 applications, and 10% wrote even more than 100 (Burri & Brunner, 2007b, p. 72; Fibbi et al., 2003). And while boys had to write on average 15 applications, girls had to send about 20 letters. It is clear that some individual characteristics influence, in a positive or negative way, the chances of a candidate obtaining an apprenticeship contract.

The motivation and the opportunity to mobilise social resources must be added to these socioeconomic and demographic factors, which include social origin, nationality, gender and age.²⁷

Overall, if employers want to enrol a new apprentice, they have an abundance of choice. Normally, they prefer the best candidates, those who have finished the higher requirement tracks and have been good students, with good marks. With the shortage of contracts available and the consequent candidate selection process, the result is a tendency towards young people who are over-qualified for the position obtained. Furthermore, as the number of low qualification jobs progressively decreases, every young person must obtain a diploma if he or she wants to be able to integrate into the labour market.

On the one hand young people can consider their personal interests, values, aptitudes and aspirations and the expectations of other people (including parents) in determining their career choices, but on the other hand a degree of rationality induces some young people to make choices depending on the actual opportunities available, and on the realities of the labour.²⁸

²⁷ It seems that employers prefer to engage candidates who are not too young.

²⁸ Research has analysed the various stages of the process leading to the choice of the professional field from the teenagers' perspective, describing the different constraints and successive decisions (Herzog et al., 2004a; Schulz, 2007).

Apart from all of the factors already mentioned (economic, political, demographic and personal), the education system must recognise its responsibilities. First of all, it does not enable all students to acquire the fundamental skills required to start an apprenticeship. Secondly, the skills transmitted do not match those needed in the job market. Finally, its mode of organisation favours discrimination against young people when they are hired. If the education system doesn't prepare students with curricula that are adapted to the needs of the economy, then the expectations that the job market has of the education system have not been made clear enough. The economic world and the education system are both responsible for the gap teenagers must face. Therefore, the gap between the skills taught at school and those demanded from the job market must be filled by the development of better collaboration and cooperation between the two parties. Nonetheless, if the preparation of students for a professional life is one of the missions of the educational system, it is not the only one (Perriard, 2005, pp. 16, 20).

The lack of apprenticeship places, especially those that need only basic qualifications, combined with increasing numbers of young people who complete compulsory education and are ready to start vocational training, means that more young people do not have any alternative, and are obliged to enter transitional courses. Generally, attendance in one of these short educational or vocational programs, before starting training that leads to some certification, is chosen by default by the teenager. One exception should be mentioned: those who must wait until they turn 18 before starting special vocational training (for example, health or child care training). The 1 or 2 years spent in such transitional programs lengthens the overall time before entering the workforce, causing costs for the young person and the community. The discussion on the advantages and disadvantages of these programs is still open. These options are positive experiences if they permit most of the teenagers who follow them to subsequently obtain a diploma instead of remaining without a qualification.

The Transitional Programs

The programs defined as 'transitional' or 'intermediate' generally follow post-compulsory education and precede upper secondary training. They do not provide a professional qualification. They are extremely varied, depending on the objectives pursued, but also according to the field and type of training. They are not coordinated at the national level, and they vary between cantons. The majority are organised at the public level, but private initiatives also exist. Each program can concern a different target group, as the age or the required skills can differ. Their content and organisation can also be extremely different. Participants must pay for most of them or receive a small remuneration, as in the case of courses organised by the unemployment insurance.

For instance, in 2005, young people involved in these kinds of training were distributed in the different programs in the following proportions:

- Programs with training in schools exclusively: 38%
- Programs combining theory and practice training: 27%

- Programs organised by the unemployment insurance: 29%
- Other types of learning (various information and training periods, language courses, etc.): 2%
- No information: 4% (Egger et al., 2007, p. 24).

According to Böni (2003, p. 98), the transitional programs do not fundamentally differ in content from an underpaid professional activity; they are similar to vocational training but they do not lead to a training certificate. Therefore, they have a lesser value on the job market.

Most of the transitional programs last 1 year. For 2006, figures are as follows:

- 1–6 months: 32%
- 7–12 months: 38%
- More than 12 months: 5%
- Don't know/no reply: 25% (Burri & Brunner, 2007b, p. 59).

The proportion of young people who spend a few months in a transitional program has progressively risen over the years;²⁹ it was 13.6% in 1990, 16.6% in 1995, 17.4% in 2000 and 19.7% in 2005.³⁰ In 2005, girls in the program (22.4%) outnumbered boys (16.9%); young foreigners (35.9%) outnumbered Swiss nationals (15.8%); and young people from the French-speaking part of the country (23.9%) outnumbered those from the German-speaking (18.8%) and the Italian-speaking regions (7.3%).³¹

A survey was conducted in 2007 on the upcoming activities planned by the 1,370 young people enrolled that year in a transitional option in Switzerland. The following figures were obtained in relation to where the young people interviewed anticipated they would be in a few months time:

- Searching (again) for an apprenticeship contract: 34%
 - In the preferred profession: 79%
 - In another profession: 21%
- Enrolled in another school: 23%
- Searching for a job: 13%
- Starting a supplementary training/language course: 7%
- Starting the apprenticeship contract already signed: 3%
- Other: 6%
- Don't know/no reply: 14% (Burri & Brunner, 2007b, p. 60).

Between two thirds and three quarters of young people, after having attended one of these transitional programs, subsequently started some certifying educational or vocational training (Egger et al., 2007, p. 50).

²⁹ This is calculated as the percentage of the total number of pupils who were enrolled the previous year in the ninth (and last) year of compulsory schooling.

³⁰ For instance, the absolute numbers were 9,693 teenagers in 1990 and 16,870 in 2005.

³¹ Regional differences can be easily explained by the diversity in the cantonal education systems.

The choice and the availability of these intermediate or transitional programs is mostly dependent on external factors, such as the economic situation in the country: when the economy weakens, firms offer fewer apprenticeship contracts and these are allocated to the most qualified candidates (Fuhrer & Wolter, 2007). But personal factors can also play a role in the decision to undertake a transitional program, when it may be the only alternative for the young candidate. For instance, delaying for a year the decision to choose a profession to follow can be helpful for many young people.

Another important function of these programs is that they provide an opportunity to improve low educational skills. They are also useful when an apprenticeship contract has not yet been found, or prior to entry to vocational training that requires a minimum age.

Young People Without a Post-Compulsory Diploma

A typology of young people without a post-compulsory qualification has been established (Eckmann-Saillant et al., 1994). It is divided into six categories. The first one is composed of young people in 'a precarious situation' who are exposed to various social risks, for instance, physical or psychological problems, marginality, immigrant status and low social and economic status. The second category is that of the young 'new immigrants', who are characterised not only by cultural traits (as that of a foreign language) but also by an underprivileged legal status. The uncertainty concerning the length of their stay in Switzerland can prevent them from seriously starting any long-term training. The 'passive conformists' are middle-class young people who haven't yet acquired the economic independence to live according to their aspirations. The 'rebellious' are in conflict with parents, school and society, a situation that can delay their entry into professional life. The 'second generation immigrants' are torn between two cultures and are not able to decide on the profession they will enter, since different professions are viewed and valued differently by the two cultures. The last category, the 'young workers' want to be economically independent as soon as possible.

The proportion of teenagers who leave the education and training system without a post-compulsory school qualification can be seen as an indicator of the education system's failure in its effectiveness in retaining and training the young generation (every youth whatever his or her situation) until the threshold that permits minimal personal and professional development and provides the basis for lifelong learning.³²

One indicator is the proportion of young people aged 18–24 who leave school without finishing a post-compulsory education and who do not enter another type of training. An international comparison shows that the Swiss dropout rate³³ is among the lowest; its level already nears the benchmark of 10% aimed at by the

³² The responsibility of the educational system for giving all young citizens the fundamental right to education and training is a Constitutional principle (Federal Constitution, art. 41), and one of the objectives of the Harnos project (art. 3) is to give everyone the possibility of integrating into the labour market and develop according to his or her capacity.

³³ It is important to note that the national definition of the rate of dropout is slightly different from that used for the international comparison on the basis of Eurostat data. The differences concern the length of time spent without training (4 weeks or 1 year) and the higher level of education obtained.

European Union for 2010, as declared within the framework of the Lisbon Strategy. This international comparison of dropout rates reveals major differences between countries, with percentages that range from 5% to 50%.

Between 1996 and 2006, the proportion of Swiss young people who left school prematurely³⁴ rose from 5.5% to 10.4%, with a decrease to 8.5% in the following year (see Fig. 9.4).

The factors that can lead to dropping out are numerous and quite complex given the multiplicity of life experiences and situations of each individual. The circumstances that can influence the decision to stop upper secondary education can be caused by socioeconomic, cultural and geographical elements or be linked to the family situation and the environment. Other factors such as conditions in the labour market, the organisation or functioning of the education system or the demographic context can also be determinants. In Switzerland, the transition from compulsory to post-compulsory education can be tricky, as mentioned earlier, for instance arising from the problems engendered by the lack of apprenticeship contracts. A recently published report (Häfeli & Schellenberg, 2009) presents findings about the different factors that can encourage the vocational training of at-risk youth.

In the past dozen years, there has been no consistent gender differentiation in dropout rates; the trend alternates with small fluctuations around an overall stability. On the other hand, gender has some influence on the direct or indirect entrance to post-compulsory training that results in a qualification,³⁵ and also the type of training attended (Vouillot, 2007).

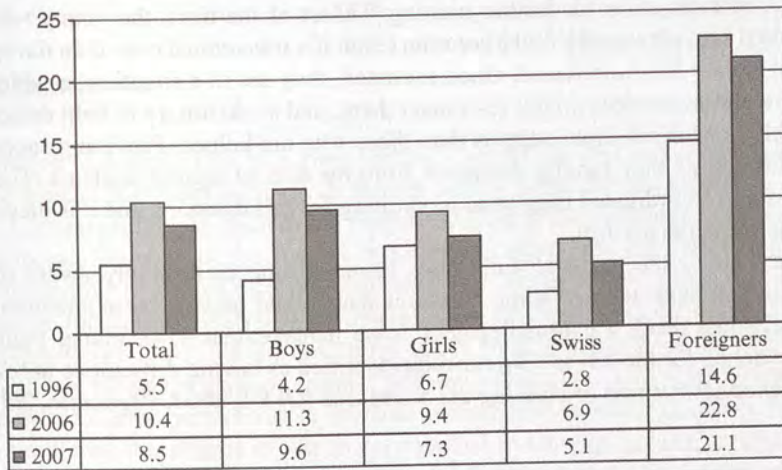


Fig. 9.4 Rates of dropout in Switzerland (% of 18- to 24-year-olds without post-compulsory education)

³⁴Increasingly, it is extremely difficult to have a profession without a post-compulsory qualification; those in this situation are at risk of being excluded from active life with the important economic and social consequences that this implies.

³⁵For instance, young people, especially girls, who want to acquire a profession in the health sector must wait until 18 years of age. In the meantime, they start a transitional program of 1 or 2 years.

Since 1996, there has been a clear difference between the proportion of young Swiss and foreigners who give up school. The dropout rate is about 5% for Swiss teenagers and between 15% and 25% for foreign students.³⁶ But foreigners do not constitute a unique homogeneous category and their situations can differ considerably, especially according to socioeconomic background.³⁷

Every year, a cohort of approximately 2,000–2,500 young people (that is, 2.5–3% of every cohort) gives up education but is not able, in the mid-term, to enter either a new education or training program at upper secondary level or the labour market. These young people are at a serious risk of being dependent on social security benefits, perhaps over a lengthy period of time.

Today, as a result of the 'knowledge society' and changes in the economy, an upper secondary qualification has become the minimal criterion for gaining a place in the job market and avoiding job insecurity, unemployment or dependence on social security.

The unemployment rate for 20- to 24-year-olds is relatively high: it reached 6.1% in 2005 and 3.4% for those aged 15–19, compared to the national average of 3.8% (Office fédéral de la formation professionnelle et de la technologie [OFFT], 2004; Weber, 2004, 2005, 2007).

For the same year, the average proportion of the adult population obtaining social security benefits in Switzerland was 3.3%; this percentage was the highest among the younger age groups (for those aged up to 17 years, and 18–25 years, it was 4.9% and 4.5%, respectively).

Very often, people in this situation have multiple problems; they combine lack of skills with personal problems, social and family difficulties, and have different degrees of motivation for further training.³⁸ Most of the time, the young who are motivated can more easily find a solution (even if a transitional one) than those who are not (or are less) motivated. Once excluded, they are in a situation in which the cantonal social services do not re-contact them, and so do not try to help those who probably need much more support than those who are helped. Providing support is then difficult as they rapidly disappear from the lists of regular students. There is no census or coordinated long-term monitoring for this category, and it is inevitable that their records are lost.

Since 2006, the political authorities have become increasingly aware of the problem and have adopted some measures that should prevent these situations. At the individual level, a national project, 'case management – vocational training', was launched for the 13- to 18-year-olds identified as having difficulties in following vocational training or entering the workforce (OFFT, 2007; Pagnossin, 2009).³⁹

³⁶In 2006, the proportion was 6.9% for Swiss nationals and 22.8% for foreigners.

³⁷The TREE longitudinal study shows that young people who dropped out come mostly from a lower socioeconomic status (Meyer, 2005).

³⁸The level of motivation of these young people is often discussed and questioned. For example, Böni (2003) concludes that most of the teenagers who, 2 years after having finished compulsory education are still without a professional solution, remain motivated and pursue their efforts in searching for an apprenticeship contract or a training alternative.

³⁹The following year a second project, 'case management +', was launched and concerns 18- to 24-year-olds.

The implementation is actually taking place at the cantonal level; it will be fully operational in 2011. On the one hand, the need for cross-institutional coordination has been recognised. It should include educational and social authorities, as well as those involved in the vocational training and economic sectors. All of these stakeholders should closely collaborate in order to identify those students who are still in compulsory schooling but are potentially in a precarious situation. In order to help them enter upper secondary education and, subsequently, the job market, objectives and measures must be jointly decided and coordinated by those who will be responsible for their planning and implementation. The accompanying measures must also be individualised and would be defined as successful when the young person finds his or her professional direction. On the other hand, 'case management' or coaching should be applied to those students identified as at-risk before finishing their compulsory education and they should be individually accompanied until they have acquired a qualification and are integrated into the workforce.

At the same time, a special program developed by national and cantonal authorities with the economic sector will involve private firms. It aims at helping them in some aspects that can be a source of difficulty in their role of training. Special attention will be given to administrative and social aspects in order to help them in their (present and future) training partnerships.

All these measures are quite expensive and will need much energy and organisation for them to be adopted. But young people without a qualification or a job are also expensive in the long term. Hopefully this coordinated plan will be successful, but it is too early yet to evaluate it.

Conclusion

The choice of a profession is a long process, carried out over various stages and during which time many people can inform and/or influence the teenagers' decisions. Contextual factors, such as the responsibilities of the educational system and the economic situation of the country must also be taken into account, as they can produce various important effects. Most research is on transition, either as a global process or focused on analysing its determinants and influences at the individual level (Masdonati, 2007; Neuenschwander, 2007; Neuenschwander et al., 2006).

Vocational training is the most popular pathway within upper secondary education – hence the economic partnership in the dual system attracts much attention. In fact, some problems, the origins of which are external to the educational system, have important vocational training consequences. It has been seen that economic aspects (such as costs and profits, selection criteria) and the sociological ones (including influences of immigration, lower socioeconomic status, exclusion and discrimination) all have an impact on vocational training.

The Swiss VET system promotes inequity⁴⁰ as it develops a specific mode of selection that is different from selection procedures of exclusively based programs

⁴⁰ As concluded by a German study (Maaz et al., 2008).

(Hupka et al., 2006). It should be added that this selection intervenes after the program-based selection at the lower secondary level; these institutional aspects must not be forgotten. A good level of achievement at school is also, but not always, important (Imdorf, 2007a, b).

Completing post-compulsory education has become essential for successful integration into the workforce. Young people who enter into the job market directly after compulsory schooling are very rare, but many teenagers spend a year or two in transitional courses before starting upper secondary education. The debate on the usefulness of these short-term training courses, increasingly praised by young people for different reasons, even if they do not lead to certification, is still open. They are, however, flourishing, partly because of the problems encountered due to the lack of apprenticeship places, and because vocational training is extremely popular in Switzerland. Three quarters of teenagers initially choose vocational training as their upper secondary education pathway, even if this proportion is declining slightly. Most of the remaining students (nearly one quarter) enter a general/academic education. Nonetheless, a very small minority of about 2–3% of every cohort do not acquire a qualification, risking unemployment or dependency on social security benefits during their future life.

Research on dropping out is mostly reported in studies on vocational training or transitional solutions. Short interruptions or 'deviations' from the standard pathways do not always imply that teenagers have definitely abandoned the educational and training system, but only delayed; they can re-enter it later.

It appears that having not obtained an apprenticeship contract in the desired field, or having already gone through a transitional program, are the best predictors of rescinding an apprenticeship contract (Kaiser et al., 2007). Other research adds that being immigrants, of low socioeconomic status, living in an urban region, and/or having low school achievement, are the most usual characteristics of teenagers who stop, at least once, their vocational training (Bertschy et al., 2007, 2008a, b). Qualitative research on young people rescinding their apprenticeship contract has concluded that stopping a vocational training program is a phenomenon that cannot be easily generalised, as it is extremely complex, but that it is not always synonymous with definitively dropping out (Lamamra & Masdonati, 2009; Rastoldo et al., 2009).

Currently 89% of young Swiss people have attained an upper secondary school qualification, a high percentage by international standards. The target is to reach 95% of young people living in Switzerland with this level of qualification. Many measures have been considered to attain this objective. Most of them are based on better coordination and cooperation at the national level, and concern those pupils who are thought to be at risk before finishing compulsory schooling. It is too early to evaluate these measures since they have not yet been completely implemented; many of them are just political declarations of intention and the success of their realisation cannot be assessed for many years.

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