

Vocational Middle Schools (VMSs) as Marginalized Part of the Swiss VET System

A Governance Perspective on Functions, Steering Instruments, Justifications and Sacrifices

Raffaella Simona Esposito

Abstract *Dual VET is considered the unquestioned standard of VET at the upper secondary level in German-speaking Switzerland. This study sheds light on a hitherto rather marginalized and disputed part of the Swiss VET system: the Vocational Middle Schools (VMSs). In contrast to dual VET, there has been only limited information about and understanding of VMSs so far, because only a few research has been done on VMSs. Therefore, referring to the theoretical framework of the Sociology of Conventions and using the example of three German-speaking cantons, the study aims to investigate the vocational education policy disputes about the significance of VMSs in the political governance of the transition to upper secondary education in Switzerland. The results show the disputed functions and criticisms attributed to VMSs as part of the Swiss VET system and highlight how these positions are justified by the relevant actors. Overall, the results provide insights into how the status of dual VET as the unquestioned standard of Swiss VET is protected and reproduce in Switzerland. Furthermore, they emphasize that the sacrifices for this are made at the expense of VMSs, which are restricted by the canton's (vocational) education policy. Looking beyond the borders of the Swiss case, the results affirm that the distribution of young people across various programs in an education system should be understood not only as the consequence of individual preferences and decisions but also as resulting from strategic steering interventions by a country's (vocational) education policy.*

Title *Vocational Middle Schools (VMSs) as Marginalized Part of the Swiss VET System. A Governance Perspective on Functions, Steering Instruments, Justifications and Sacrifices*

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1 Introduction¹

In Switzerland young people can choose between three federally recognized education programs after compulsory education: baccalaureate schools, specialized middle schools, and vocational education and training (VET) (Swiss Conference of Cantonal Ministers of Education, 2023).² Whereas general education is the gold standard of individual educational choice in many countries (Kriesi, Bonoli, Grønning, Hänni, Neumann & Schweri, 2022; OECD, 2015), in Switzerland VET predominates at the upper secondary level: In 2022 about 65 % of young people were enrolled in a VET program, compared to 28 % in a baccalaureate school and 7 % in a specialized middle school.³ This issue is debated controversially in education policy in Switzerland (Kriesi et al., 2022). One salient characteristic of the Swiss VET system is its comparatively high proportion of dual (90 %) compared to any school-based (10 %) VET programs (OECD, 2015; State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation, 2022). In large parts of Switzerland, especially in the German-speaking cantons, dual VET is highly supported and has a strong lobby. Also, Swiss dual VET is considered a model of success beyond national borders: As a “model example” (Kriesi et al., 2022, p. 26), and “showcase model” (Kriesi et al., 2022, p. 4) it inspires the design of other countries’ VET systems. However, statistics show that more young people enter tertiary level education (traditional universities, universities of applied sciences, and universities of teacher education)⁴ via a general education school-based pathway rather than via dual VET (Leemann, Esposito, Pfeifer Brändli & Imdorf, 2019). Therefore, representatives of dual VET fear that too many high-achieving students⁵ could drift into school-based (general as well as vocational) education programs and thus are ‘lost’ for dual VET. Related to this, a battle for high-achieving students takes place between general education and VET at the upper secondary level in Switzerland (Jäpel, 2016; Jütter, 2023; Kiener, 2007; Schellenbauer, Walser, Lepori, Hotz-Hart & Gonon, 2010; Wettstein & Amos, 2010; Esposito 2022). Consequently, Swiss VET policy is concerned with how the appeal of dual VET in Switzerland can be “ensured and maintained in the future” (State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation, 2019).

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- 1 The paper at hand is based on presentations held at the Crossing Boundaries Conference (in Vocational Education and Training in Kaunas (May 2023) and the European Conference on Educational Research (ECER) in Glasgow (August 2023), both published in the corresponding conference proceedings “Proceedings of the 4th Crossing Boundaries Conference in Vocational Education and Training” (Esposito, 2023b) resp. “Proceedings of the European Conference on Educational Research (ECER), Vocational Education and Training Network (VETNET)” (Esposito, 2023a). The text was translated from German by Simon Milligan, Academic Language Services GmbH.
 - 2 Young people who do not directly pursue one of these education pathways often take advantage of upper secondary interim solutions (Landert & Eberli, 2015).
 - 3 <https://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/de/home/statistiken/bildung-wissenschaft/bildungsindikatoren/t-hemen/zugang-und-teilnahme/ausbildungswahl-sekii.html>.
 - 4 The statistics refer to the traditional part of the tertiary level education (traditional universities, universities of applied sciences, and universities of teacher education) and do not consider the professional education sector as part of the Swiss tertiary level education.
 - 5 The term “high-achieving students” refers to students with good or very good school grades at the lower secondary level.

The effort to put VET on an equal footing with general education in terms of its attractiveness and reputation is not new: in the 1990s, VET fought for more recognition compared to general education. Accordingly, in 1994, in the context of the institutionalization of universities of applied sciences, the Federal Vocational Baccalaureate and thus a university entrance qualification for VET at the upper secondary level was introduced (a.o. Gonon 1994, 1997; Kiener 2008; Kiener and Gonon 1998). Today, the vocational baccalaureate is considered a central element of Swiss VET and, in combination with a Federal VET Diploma (initial vocational qualification), is seen as the royal road to the universities of applied sciences. In view of the slowing growth of vocational baccalaureate certificates, Swiss education policy has defined the strengthening of the vocational baccalaureate as a central VET policy priority since 2014.⁶

The predominant position of *dual* VET at the upper secondary level in Switzerland is politically widely accepted and fostered, both at the national and cantonal levels. In contrast, *school-based* VET programs, especially the full-time school-based VMSs, that target high-achieving students, are rather marginalized in German-speaking Switzerland: they are few in numbers and receive only little attention from VET policy and society. Despite their low proportion among all upper secondary level degrees, VMSs have been regarded by representatives of dual VET as competition, even a threat to dual VET (Esposito, 2022; Fleischmann, 2023; Hirayama, 2023; Steimann, 2022). Furthermore, VMSs have been restricted in certain cantons by education policy measures in recent years (Esposito, 2023b, 2023a).

As hardly any research has been done on VMSs (Cortesi 2017; Criblez 2012; Imlig et al. 2021; Kehl, Frey & Thomas, 2014; Wettstein & Amos, 2010), in contrast to dual VET, there has been only limited information about and understanding on VMSs as part of the upper secondary vocational education so far.⁷ The study at hand addresses this research gap by investigating the vocational education policy disputes regarding the significance of the VMSs in the political governance of the transition to upper secondary level in Switzerland. The study follows a governance perspective and assumes that young people's decisions and their distribution across education programs are not only the result of individual choices and decisions, but also of institutional conditions: admission regulations, supply, selection processes, and accessibility. Furthermore, from a governance perspective, the political governance of transitions in an education system is understood as a situation of coordination of actions in which disputes and criticism can arise and solutions must be negotiated. The aim of the study is therefore addressed through the following questions:

- What qualities and functions do actors attribute to VMSs, and what critiques arise?
- By means of what instruments do relevant actors steer the access regulations and the supply of the training places available at VMSs?
- How do actors justify their positions and steering interventions?

6 <https://berufsbildung2030.ch/de/21-projekte-de/267-berufsmaturitaet-2030>

7 This does not apply to the same extent to French- and Italian-speaking Switzerland (Cortesi, 2017; Gonon & Bonoli, 2022; Imdorf, Berner & Gonon, 2016; Wettstein & Amos, 2010).

By taking a governance perspective on educational transitions of students with a focus on the institutional conditions of transitions such as supply structures and rules of distribution as well as the coordination of action, this study complements previous research on educational transitions, which tended to focus on individual factors in educational decisions (a.o. Häfeli et al., 2015; Neuenschwander, 2011).

The rest of the paper is structured as follows: Section 2 elaborates on both the dual VET model and the VMSs as parts of the upper secondary vocational education in Switzerland. Section 3 explains why the Sociology of Conventions is an appropriate theoretical framework to address the research questions. Section 4 presents the research design, data, and methods. Based on the results presented in Section 5, Section 6 provides some further concluding reflections.

2 Upper secondary level vocational education in Switzerland:⁸ a spectrum between dominance and marginalization

2.1 Dual VET as the highly supported und unquestioned standard of VET

In some occupations, initial VET can be completed either as a dual or a school-based program (Federal Act on Vocational and Professional Education and Training 2002; Strahm et al., 2016). In the following, only the dual training model is described, as in the next subsection the school-based training model is discussed related to the VMSs. In the dual training model, young people usually spend three and a half days as apprentices in their host company, where they are actively integrated in the company's production process and acquire practical vocational knowledge and skills. This education in vocational practice is considered crucial to the high labor market integration and practical relevance of dual VET (Maurer, 2013). The remaining one and a half days the apprentices are at the vocational school. Furthermore, during their apprenticeship, the apprentices must spend some days at so-called branch courses, which serve to teach and acquire basic practical skills (State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation, 2022). The provision of dual VET training places highly depends on the willingness of companies to provide training. Entry into dual VET requires an apprenticeship contract with a host company, that determines its own selection procedure and corresponding access criteria. Furthermore, the host companies bear a large proportion of the training costs, which in contrast to VMSs, are therefore not fully charged to the canton. The qualifications that young people acquire through initial VET are independent of the training model (school-based or dual) chosen: After three or four years of training, young people acquire an initial vocational qualification, the Federal VET Diploma, which formally allows entering the labor market (Federal Act on Vocational and Professional Education and Training 2002). In addition, either in parallel with their apprenticeship or afterwards, holders of a VET Diploma can acquire an entrance qualification for universities of applied sciences, the

8 Further information on the Swiss VET system can be found on the portal of Swiss Vocational and Professional Education and Training, <https://vpvet.ch/dyn/21307.aspx>.

federal vocational baccalaureate (Swiss Conference of Cantonal Ministers of Education 2023).

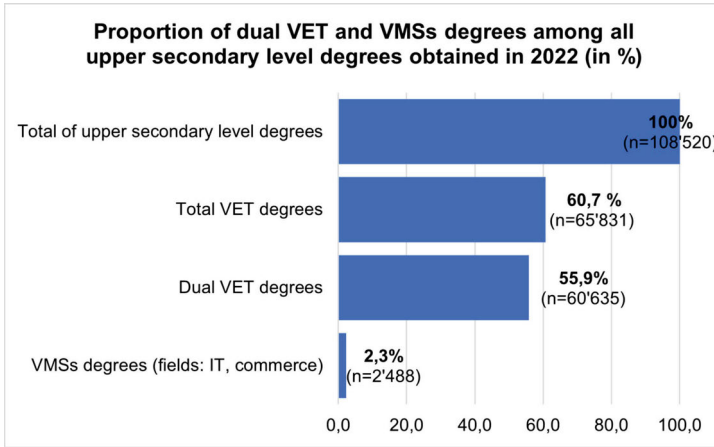
The advantages and strengths of the Swiss VET system include the high labor market orientation and its practical relevance, the integration of students with weaker academic records, the contributions to a low youth unemployment rate and a high completion rate of young people at the upper secondary level (e.g. Kriesi et al. 2022). This last strength is important to a long-standing joint education policy goal of the Swiss government and the cantons, which has not yet been fully achieved: an overall graduation rate of 95 % at the upper secondary level (Federal Department of Economic Affairs, Education and Research & Swiss Conference of Cantonal Ministers of Education, 2019). To maintain these strengths, the Swiss Observatory for VET concluded in its latest trend report that “VET needs to be an appealing pathway for different groups of young people” (Kriesi et al., 2022, p. 30). Swiss VET policy is thus a.o. challenged to position dual VET between integration and excellence. Therefore actors have not only invested substantially in integrating young people at the lower end of the academic performance range, but also focused on how high-achieving students can be further attracted to VET (Elsholz & Neu, 2019; Esposito, 2023a; Kriesi et al., 2022). Overall, dual VET has a strong lobby in society and education policy and is regarded as the “unquestioned standard” (Esposito, 2022; Lee-mann, 2019) of VET at the upper secondary level in Switzerland.

2.2 Vocational Middle Schools (VMSs) as marginalized and questioned VET programs

In fields such as IT and commerce, the Swiss VET system provides a specific school-based VET program, the VMSs. VMSs are four-year full-time school-based VET programs. The school setting is geared towards tertiary education and usually includes a one-year full-time internship in the fourth school year, where apprentices acquire practical skills in the world of work. After four years graduates obtain a double qualification: a Federal VET Diploma qualifying for the labor market entry and a vocational baccalaureate that qualifies them for access to universities of applied sciences. VMSs are demanding VET programs and target high-achieving students. The supply of training places and the admission regulations for VMSs are defined and steered by the cantons. For VMSs the apprentices do not have to sign an apprenticeship contract with a host company, as is the case with dual VET, but an internship contract with the company where the one-year internship is done. In contrast to dual VET, the cantons bear all the training costs incurred in VMSs. VMSs, as school-based VET programs in general, receive only little attention from VET policy and research in most parts of Switzerland. Furthermore, as figure 1 shows, from a quantitative perspective VMSs play only a marginal role: In 2022 the proportion of VMSs (fields of IT and commerce) at the upper secondary level was about 2.3 % (compared to 55.9 % dual VET), when considering the number of degrees obtained.⁹

9 <https://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/de/home/statistiken/bildung-wissenschaft/bildungsabschluesse/sekundarstufe-II.html>, as well as data from the Federal Statistical Office specifically prepared for the author needs regarding the analyses of VMSs.

Figure 1: Proportion of dual VET and VMSs degrees among all upper secondary level degrees obtained in 2022 (in %). Own calculations based on data from the Federal Statistical Office.



If the VMSs' degrees are considered in relation to the total number of VET qualifications, this results in a proportion of 3.8 %. Among other reasons, due to this low quantitative relevance of VMSs at the upper secondary level and within VET, VMSs are often considered a marginalized part of the Swiss VET system by representatives of VET. Interestingly, VMSs are nevertheless often criticized by representatives of dual VET for being an undesirable competition to dual VET, and have been restricted in certain Swiss cantons by education policy measures in recent years (Esposito, 2023a, 2023b).

3 The Sociology of Conventions as theoretical framework

The research questions are examined with reference to the theoretical framework of the Sociology of Conventions (SoC) (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006; Diaz-Bone & de Larquier, 2022). The SoC assumes that situations of coordination of action are fraught with uncertainty about their course and outcome. To cope with this, actors rely on various sociohistorically established principles of action, worth, and justice, termed conventions (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005; Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006). Each of these conventions refers to a specific common good and thus generates its own quality of education (Derouet, 1989; Imdorf & Leemann, 2023). The conventions relevant to this paper are summarized in Table 1.¹⁰

10 For a complete overview see Esposito (2022) and Imdorf and Leemann (2023).

Table 1: Conventions in education.

CONVENTION	COMMON GOOD, QUALITY, LOGIC OF ACTION
<i>Industrial</i>	Efficiency, productivity, expertise, performance, long-term planning
<i>Civic</i>	Collective interest, equality, social integration, general education
<i>Fame</i>	Recognition and opinion of third parties, image promotion and maintenance, popularity among the public, visibility
<i>Domestic</i>	Trust, intimacy, tradition, social fitting, hierarchy, character building
<i>Domestic-company</i>	Social fitting in the work community and the world of adults; world of work and everyday professional life as learning environment; experience-based and on-the-job practice and learning
<i>Domestic-school</i>	Social fitting in the school community and the peer group; simulated working reality (as a safe space) as learning environment
<i>Market</i>	Price, profit, value for money, demand-orientation

Source: Derouet (1989); Esposito (2022); Imdorf & Leemann, (2023)

Based on empirical material comparing the characteristics (target groups, educational goals, curricula, forms of knowledge and modes of knowledge transfer and acquisition) of a general education program and a VET program, both in the field of health, Esposito (2022) has shown that the domestic convention articulates itself differently depending on the learning setting of the school or the company. To theoretically grasp this different articulation of the domestic convention, Esposito (2022) has introduced the notions “domestic-school” and “domestic-company”.

From a SoC perspective, quality is socially ascribed, constructed and expressed based on plural and sometimes contradictory conventions. Actors are equipped with agency and reflexive competence to deal with this plurality of conventions, to assess their appropriateness to any given situation, and, if necessary, to switch between the different logics and to establish compromises between them (Barthe et al., 2016; Boltanski & Thévenot, 1999; Diaz-Bone, 2018; Diaz-Bone & de Larquier, 2022; Wagner, 2004). Compromises are formed not only as solutions to disputes but also as support that reinforces conventions, for instance by relating them positively to each other (Diaz-Bone, 2009, 2015; Knoll, 2013a, 2013b). From a conventionalist perspective, the political governance of transitions is thus understood as a situational practice in which actors rely on different and partially conflicting conventions when justifying positions and decisions and evaluating qualities, which can lead to disputes and criticism.

In situations in which actors evaluate or justify something, they can draw on plural conventions. This does not happen by chance, but rather in situations certain conventions are more obvious as reference logics than others. This due to the fact, that conventions are also anchored in the sociomaterial equipment of the situation. Actors can therefore extend and stabilize the scope of conventions and thus increase their power by investing in forms (Dodier, 2010; Thévenot, 1984, 2011, 2014). In a situation, a convention therefore stabilizes itself through the support of material and immaterial forms and objects. Eymard-Duvernay (2012) has used the term “dispositive of valorization” in this respect.

Forms with a particularly high scope that are unquestioningly accepted in coordination situations are called “standards” (Thévenot, 2009). Standards promote a closing of eyes (Thévenot 2009) to alternative forms that could have been invoked for coordination and thus convey a “blind trust” (Thévenot 2009, p. 795) in established practices (Diaz-Bone, 2018). From an SoC perspective, power depends on the (sociomaterial) equipment of a situation, and is not per se inherent in certain actors but distributed in a coordination situation: Power goes to those actors who succeed in extending the scope of the conventions on which their arguments rely and thus making them powerful (Diaz-Bone, 2017). The convention-theoretical concepts of form investment and the power of conventions are central to (1) explaining persistence and change, (2) examining “how actors produce temporal, social, and spatial stabilizations and generalizations of valorizations and forms of coordination” (Diaz-Bone, 2018, S. 96), and (3) understanding how power is extended, stabilized, and intensified in situations (Diaz-Bone 2017).

4 Design, Data and Methods

Switzerland is characterized by a pronounced educational federalism. Consequently, its federal states, the 26 cantons, are in many respects responsible for education (Hega, 2000). Switzerland is therefore a promising place to study the governance of transitions because it has the potential to show how different ways of governing transitions in local contexts can lead to different outcomes and tensions (Gonon, 2009; Hafner, Esposito & Leemann, 2022; Kerber & Eckardt, 2007). For this reason, the research questions are examined using three German-speaking cantons (in the following named as Cantons A, B or C) as examples. Among these cantons the proportion of VET at the upper secondary level varies between 62.2 % and 75.6 % (2021/2022: Swiss average: 65.4 %) ¹¹ and the proportion of VMSs within upper secondary VET (2022) ¹² varies between 0.5 % and 7.8 % ¹³ (Swiss average: 4.2 %). To ensure that personal data are protected, the cantons are not named, and all data are anonymized. Upon reasonable request, a list of the sources and references not made public in this paper can be obtained from the author. The data for this study were collected as part of a larger research project on the governance of transitions in the Swiss education system. ¹⁴ The database consists of publicly available

11 Proportion of students under 20 years of age in the first year of a VET program at the upper secondary level. Source: <https://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/de/home/statistiken/bildung-wissenschaft/bildungsindikatoren/indicators/ausbildungswahl-sekii.assetdetail.24485162.html>.

12 <https://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/de/home/statistiken/bildung-wissenschaft/bildungsabschluesse/sekundarstufe-II.html>.

13 https://www.pxweb.bfs.admin.ch/pxweb/de/px-x-1502020100_301/px-x-1502020100_301/px-x-1502020100_301.px/table/tableViewLayout2/ as well as based on data from the Federal Statistical Office specifically prepared for the author needs regarding the analyses of VMSs. Due to low case numbers (f.e. n=8) and young people's attendance of VMSs outside his/her canton, the percentages for the cantonal level may show certain imprecisions.

14 Research project “Governance of Transitions in the Swiss Education System. A Study on the Political Regulation of Moving from Primary to Lower Secondary and from Lower Secondary to Upper Secondary Education (GovTrans)”, funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF

documents as minutes of negotiations and decisions in the plenary sessions of the cantonal parliaments as well as proposals and decisions pertaining to the VMSs, cantonal media releases and selected newspapers. Additionally, following the SoC methodology, the actors' perspectives were captured by six¹⁵ qualitative problem-centred expert interviews (Meuser & Nagel, 2009) with representatives of the cantonal educational administrations as well as with (former) heads of VMSs lasting around one to one and a half hours.¹⁶ The data were subjected to a theory-based qualitative content analysis (Gläser & Laudel, 2010), in line with the SoC focus on conventions, form investments, criticisms, and compromises. As conventions cannot directly be asked for in interviews but must be reconstructed by the researcher based on the arguments put forward by the interviewee, argumentation-analytical strategies were additionally made use of (Toulmin, Rieke & Janik, 1979).

5 Results

The results presented in the following show the disputed significance of the Vocational Middle Schools (VMSs) – a hitherto little-known, scarcely researched and politically marginalized part of the Swiss VET system beside dual VET – within the political governance of the transition to upper secondary level in Switzerland. This is done by focusing especially on the qualities, functions and critiques attributed to VMS (subsection 5.1), the governance instruments used to steer the VMSs' supply of training places available as well as the access regulations (subsection 5.3), and the respective justifications relevant actors refer to (subsections 5.2 and 5.4).

5.1 Qualities, functions and critiques attributed to VMSs

Actors rely on diverse and partially conflicting conventions to discuss, evaluate and legitimize the qualities and functions of VMSs. On the one hand, supporters refer to the industrial convention to stress the VMSs' systemic function of providing highly qualified skilled workers in areas with skills shortages. By targeting high-achieving students, VMSs help to exploit the domestic talent potential (Interview A1, educational administration). Furthermore, VMSs were supported with a civic argument: The selection procedures and criteria for VMSs are less susceptible to discriminatory mechanisms, as is the case with dual VET (Imdorf, 2005): Whereas for dual VET each host company can set its own selection procedures and criteria, for VMSs the canton has to define them (mostly mandatory exams or/and school grade averages) and disclose them in publicly accessible

10001A_188906) (07/2020–06/2024), <http://www.bildungssoziologie.ch/forschung/governance-von-transitionen/>.

15 Three interviews were conducted in each of the cantons A and B. Due to field access problems in Canton C no interviews were conducted there.

16 As in Canton B the Specialized Middle Schools are affected by the same educational policy restrictions as the VMSs (Esposito 2022), interviews were also conducted with two heads of a Specialized Middle School.

formal regulations. The civic-orientated function attributed to VMSs is therefore its contribution to more equal access opportunities to upper secondary education (Interview A1, educational administration). On the other hand, opponents refer to the market convention to devalue and criticize VMSs for causing much higher cantonal costs than dual VET without adding any value to the qualifications that can be achieved (e.g. Steimann, 2022; Interview B3, educational administration). VMSs are therefore considered to be replaceable by dual VET without any losses, but with lower costs for the cantons. Moreover, representatives of dual VET criticize the full-time school-based learning setting and related to this the lower proportion of company-based practical learning compared to dual VET. For opponents of VMSs, the understanding of “practice” and “practical learning” based on rationalities of the domestic-company convention is an important yardstick by which they valorize the quality and function of VMSs, and based on this, classify them as subsidiary and inferior to dual VET (Esposito 2022). Furthermore, strengthening the image and the reputation of dual VET as an attractive vocational education pathway for high-achieving students is an important goal of VET policy in Switzerland. Because VMSs target high-achieving students, they are considered a threat to this image of dual VET and therefore an undesirable competition to dual VET (Fleischmann, 2023; Hirayama, 2023; Steimann, 2022; Interview B3, educational administration; Interview A1, educational administration). This critique relies on the rationalities of the convention of fame.

So far, supporters of VMSs have been shown to refer to the industrial and civic conventions to ascribe qualities to VMSs, opponents to the market, fame, and domestic-company conventions to criticize and question them. Based on these plural positions, judgements and justifications, supporters and opponents advocated either for an expansion or a restriction of VMSs. Interestingly, in all three cantons studied, opponents have succeeded in advancing their positions, so that in all of them governance strategies restricting the future development of VMSs could be identified. How can this be explained? A possible answer to this is given in the following.

5.2 The power of conventions as explanation for the enforcement of governance strategies and steering instruments that restrict VMSs

In a first step, the scope and power of the conventions, that opponents rely on in their critics regarding VMSs, are shown:

- *Market convention*: National and cantonal savings requirements are translated into forms such as political decisions for savings packages, tabulated cost comparisons (Document 1, anonymized), newspaper headlines stating “savings potential” (Document 2, anonymized) or “savings mode” (Document 3, anonymized) as well as national and cantonal discourses, etc. This dispositive frames the situation of coordination of actions in a way that the market-oriented argument of saving costs by limiting the expansion of VMSs is highly legitimized and powerful.
- *Convention of fame*: Representatives of dual VET strive to foster and strengthen the attractiveness of dual VET, also for high-achieving students (Esposito, 2023a). Many cognitive and material investments in forms are made at cantonal and national levels to emphasize and support the image and awareness of dual VET in this regard.

Examples are the cantonal program “promotion of talents plus” as a targeted and coordinated attempt to attract more high-achieving pupils to dual VET (Document 4, anonymized), VET funds for training companies and associations that provide special support to their high-achieving apprentices during their apprenticeship (Document 5, anonymized) or political efforts to strengthen the federal vocational baccalaureate as for example by means of letters of intent signed by employer organizations, trade associations and educational administrations (Documents 6 and 7, anonymized). As the publication of the Swiss State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation (2019) entitled “Excellence and appeal of Swiss dual-track VET programs. Switzerland, Austria, and Germany present their respective approaches” exemplifies, the topic of strengthening and maintaining the appeal of dual VET not only shapes the Swiss but also the international VET policy discourse. Such investments in forms increase the scope of the convention of fame, stabilize and thus empower it.

- *Domestic-company convention*: In German-speaking Switzerland dual VET has a high social and educational policy status as well as a powerful lobby. The associated learning setting in the company and in the realities of life is regarded in these circles as a highly legitimized form of learning, while learning in the classroom is devalued (Esposito, 2022; Leemann, Esposito & Imdorf, 2021). In the governance of the transition to upper secondary education, the domestic-company-convention is a powerful one.

In a second step, we consider the power of the conventions to which the supporters of VMSs refer to:

- *Civic convention*: Neither a discussion of discriminatory mechanisms in access to dual VET nor about equal opportunity mechanisms in access to VMSs are widespread in the cantons studied. Correspondingly, the civic convention and the quality attributed to VMSs based on it do not achieve much scope and power.
- *Industrial convention*: Cognitive forms and other mechanisms, including national and cantonal discourses, newspaper headlines as “Skills shortage continues to intensify” (Document 8, anonymized), reports such as the one from the Swiss State Secretariat for Economic Affairs (2016) “Skills shortage in Switzerland. Indicator system for assessing the demand for skilled workers”, and statistical forecasts about a skills shortage at national and cantonal levels support VMSs as a recruitment pathway for future tertiary qualified professionals. Thus, the industrial convention reaches a broad scope and gains importance and legitimacy in the negotiation between supporters and opponents of VMSs. We can assume that this industrial legitimation of VMSs is largely responsible for the fact that VMSs were ‘only’ restricted in the cantons studied, and not completely abolished.

To answer the question of why governance strategies that restrict and not expand VMSs have succeeded in pushing through, referring to the theoretical framework of the SoC, it can be summed up that opponents of VMSs have a broad dispositive of valorization at their disposal, that stabilizes and strengthens the conventions to which they refer to in their justifications and quality attributions of VMSs, and that empowers ‘their’ con-

ventions. Accordingly, the positions of the opponents of VMSs are more assertive in the situations of negotiation within the governance of the transition to upper secondary education than those of the supporters.

5.3 Restricting VMSs by a broad range of steering instruments

At this point, the question arises of how the pursued governance strategies, that restrict VMSs, have concretely been put into practice in the three cantons studied. This is shown in the following.

Canton A: Allocating training places by limiting the number of VMS classes

In 2012, as Canton A faced a financial crisis, the cantonal government decided to limit the number of training places at VMSs in the fields of IT and commerce. Officially justified as a cost-saving measure (market convention), Canton A limited the number of VMS classes to total five per class level (Interviews A1 and A2, educational administration). This ceiling of classes has been anchored in the corresponding cantonal admission regulations for VMSs (Document 9, anonymized). The introduced ceiling can be interpreted as a hard governance (Moos, 2009) steering instrument: Canton A can actively and directly control the number of training places and thus keep the competition between dual VET and VMSs within politically accepted limits. As the following quotation from a former head of several VMSs shows, this has always been an important issue in the political discourse of Canton A:

For a long time, school-based VET has been regarded as costly competition to traditional dual VET, because in some sectors, the state takes over tasks that are performed elsewhere by professional associations and companies. This argument always played a major role in the political discourse on the closure of VMSs in the field of commerce and the establishment of VMSs in the field of IT (Interview A3, former head of VMSs).

In 2017, due to an increased demand for IT specialists, Canton A wanted to establish a VMS in the field of IT. To respect the implemented ceiling of five VMS classes, one class in the field of commerce had to be closed in return for the newly introduced IT class. While the demand for training at VMSs is levelling off in the field of commerce, the interest of young people in IT professions and the need of companies for trained IT specialists is growing strongly. A representative of the cantonal educational administration recently stressed, that due to this situation “we will have to talk about the abolition of the five-class ceiling in the future” (Document 10, anonymized). The cantonal government would have to decide on this issue.

Canton B: Access control by means of an educational choice tool

Canton B has an above-average proportion of students at VMSs and a below-average proportion of dual VET apprentices at the upper secondary level among the German-speaking cantons of Switzerland. Furthermore, Canton B was forced to launch a savings program. The restriction of VMSs was considered to have the potential to cushion the high cost-cutting pressure in the canton. Therefore, legitimized by the market-based argument of saving costs, Canton B's existing admission procedure for VMSs has been supplemented by the 2018/2019 school year. Since then, students who aspire to en-

ter VMSs must go through an online educational choice tool in addition to the school grade requirements. This tool consist of a four-hour online self-assessment (Document 11, anonymized), that aims to “clarify and consolidate” (Document 12, anonymized, p.1) the educational decision of young people after lower secondary school and intendeds to “lead to more conscious decisions about a school-based or dual career” (Document 12, anonymized, p.1). In the first step of the online self-assessment, young people are given information on educational options at the upper secondary level, in tertiary education, and in further education. In the second step, by means of specific questions to be answered, the young people must deal with the question of whether a VMS is the best choice for shaping their own careers. This involves looking outwards (what alternative educational options are there?) as well as inwards (what are the young people’s goals, expectations, interests, and abilities?). In this way, the young people once again come to an understanding of their aptitude and inclinations. Once the young people have completed all the nine tasks of the assessment to be solved, they receive a written confirmation. When applying to a VMS, this confirmation must be enclosed showing that the young person has considered the question of “whether education at a VMS is the best choice for shaping his/her own career” (Document 13, anonymized, p. 74). Beyond the official justification of cost reductions (market convention), the stakeholders interviewed noted that the competitive dynamics between dual VET and VMSs in Canton B (Document 14, anonymized) as well as the related “war for talents” (Interview B1, former head of a Specialized Middle School, see footnote 16) had an influence on the political decision to introduce this steering instrument to regulate the access to VMSs. The following quote emphasises this fame-oriented argument, by referring to the educational choice tool’s arrangement:

From my point of view, the questions are asked in a way, of course, to make sure that EVERYONE is aware that there is still dual VET. Like for example ‘Is it true that a VMS is the best way to become a physiotherapist?’ And then of course the students must click ‘No, it’s not the best way, it’s just as good as with dual VET and an additional vocational baccalaureate’. (Interview B2, head of a Specialized Middle School)

According to leading persons of VMSs, the new admission procedure is therefore also about a “clearly lobbying for [dual, comment of the author] VET”, which aims to “ensure that [dual] VET is supported” (Interview B1, former head of a Specialized Middle School). We can interpret this online educational choice tool as a steering instrument of soft governance (Moos, 2009): Through governance by guidance, in Canton B “the political ambition to govern is realized by shaping citizens’ desires and ambitions” (Romito, 2017, p. 1) and thereby the number of training places at VMSs is steered in a passive and indirect way.

Canton C: Suspension of funding for out-of-canton attendance of VMSs

For young people of a specific part of Canton C, which is geographically somewhat cut off from the rest of the canton, VMSs can only be reached by a lengthy journey. For this reason, students of this part of the canton were previously allowed to attend VMSs in neighboring cantons. For Canton C the out-of-canton attendances of VMSs meant compensatory payments to the neighboring cantons and thus an additional burden on Can-

ton C's financial budget. Because of Canton C's tight financial situation, a cost-cutting package was decided. This package included a.o. stopping the contributions for out-of-canton attendances of VMSs. Students therefore have no longer access to VMSs of the neighboring cantons (Documents 15 and 16, anonymized). The following statement by a representative of the cantonal parliament indicates that beyond the market-oriented argument of a cost-cutting measure, the limitation of access to VMSs in Canton C has also been justified with reference to the convention of fame, in the sense of strengthening dual VET and protecting its reputation as "the real dual VET" by avoiding any form of competition:

In principle, Canton C is committed to strengthening VET, that is, the real dual VET. With the full-time VMSs we are directly competing with dual VET. [...] It is a financial policy proposal, but at the same time, it is also a strengthening of the dual VET pathway. [...] There is a conscious intention [in Canton C] to steer in this direction. (Document 17, anonymized)

Summing up, in the three cantons studied, the restriction of access to and supply of VMSs is justified by the argument of reducing the cantonal expenditure on education. However, beyond this market-based justification, a particular connection between the steering instruments introduced to restrict VMSs and the fear of competition for or weakening of dual VET through VMSs has been identified. Thus, the market and the fame convention as central logics for the justification and legitimation of the specific steering instruments introduced in the cantons, form a reinforcing legitimacy compromise.

5.4 "Dual VET justification standard"

The criticism addressed to VMSs and the justifications of cantonal steering measures to restrict VMSs mainly rely on three conventions: market, domestic-company, and fame. To grasp these repeatedly mobilized orders of worth and justifications, the term "dual VET justification standard" is introduced. This dual VET justification standard, understood as a cognitive compromising format, in which the conventions are positively related to each other by actors (Diaz-Bone, 2009; Knoll, 2013a, 2013b). It is often mobilized and used by representatives of dual VET to devalue and criticize VMSs in situations of coordination and negotiation, as well as to emphasize the contrasting qualities of dual VET. The following list summarizes the central argument per convention:

- *Market convention*: VMSs are much more expensive for a canton than dual VET. Dual VET therefore relieves the burden on cantonal education expenditures.
- *Fame convention*: Strengthening the appeal, reputation, and image of dual VET for high-achieving students is a national education policy goal. VMSs are an undesirable competition and threat to this goal.
- *Domestic-company convention*: In dual VET, young people are embedded part-time in a host company and thus in a real working environment as apprentices. In VMSs, in contrast, most of the time apprentices are in a classroom that is far removed from re-

ality. During their internship in a company the apprentices are more seen as trainees than real company employees as is the case for dual VET apprentices.

The dual VET justification standard is framed by a broad dispositive of valorization and is repeatedly mobilized and used for justification. Therefore, it has acquired a high degree of scope, stability and power within the political governance of the transition to upper secondary vocational education in German-speaking Switzerland. This unfolds a “coordinative power” (Thévenot, 2014, p. 18) in the sense of a strong legitimizing effect within the coordination of actions in situations of negotiations. This is, for example, the case when debating the implementation of steering instruments, that on the one hand restrict and weaken VMSs, and on the other protect dual VET as the “unquestioned standard” (Esposito, 2022; Leemann, 2019) of Swiss VET. The “dual VET justification standard” thus functions as an unquestioningly accepted and supported standard of justification in the coordination of the governance of the transition to upper secondary education.

6 Conclusions

This study investigated the significance of VMSs in the political governance of the transition to upper secondary education in Switzerland. The results show that supporters and opponents of VMSs rely on the industrial and civic convention to valorize the qualities and functions of the VMSs or market, fame, and domestic-company conventions to devalue and question them. In the three German-speaking Swiss cantons studied, a governance strategy restricting VMSs could be identified, which was manifested as a ceiling to the number of VMS-classes in Canton A, the control of access with an online educational choice tool in Canton B, and the suspension of funding for out-of-canton attendance of VMSs in Canton C.

From a power-theoretical point of view and focusing on the Swiss VET system as a whole, these limiting steering strategies pursued, and instruments implemented should be understood a.o. as attempts to control, stabilize, and reproduce the balance of power between dual VET and VMSs, resp. dual VET and school-based VET in general, within the Swiss VET in favor of the former. By doing so, the status of dual VET as the “unquestioned standard” (Esposito, 2022; Leemann, 2019) of Swiss VET can be further protected. As this paper has shown, the sacrifices for this are made (among others) at the expense of VMSs, that get restricted in their further development by cantonal VET policies.

VMSs are therefore subject to a dual VET hegemony in German-speaking Switzerland, which clearly positions VMSs subsidiary to dual VET. As the results show, this dual VET hegemony and the VET policy measures necessary to maintain it are legitimized by dual VET representatives based on a so-called “dual VET justification standard”. This highly stable compromising cognitive format between the market, domestic-company, and fame convention, is mobilized by representatives of dual VET when justifying political measures in favor of dual VET and/or at the expense of VMSs. The dual VET justification standard unfolds a high “coordinative power” (Thévenot, 2014, p. 18), in the sense of a strong legitimizing effect, in the political governance of the transition to the upper secondary level in German-speaking Switzerland.

The (vocational) education policy question of what educational pathway students choose after compulsory education is a central area of tension within the Swiss education landscape (Kriesi et al., 2022). This is not only visible and manifest in well-known competitive dynamics between general education and VET at the upper secondary level (a.o. Jäpel, 2016; Kiener, 2007; Schellenbauer et al., 2010; Wettstein & Amos, 2010), but, as this study has emphasized, also *within* the Swiss VET system between dual and school-based VET programs. Different educational pathways correspond to different interests, competencies, and needs, address different biographical circumstances and life plans of young people, and reflect the variety and quality of the Swiss education system. At this point the question arises to whether governance strategies and instruments that steer this variety of (vocational) education programs, in favor of dual VET and at the expense of other (school-based) alternatives, do correspond to Switzerland's typical liberal-democratic social order, according to which the talents and inclinations of individuals should be the basis for their choice of education (Leemann, Esposito & Hafner, 2023). And does a strategy of strengthening dual VET at the expense of VMSs really contribute to fully exploit the talent potential of Swiss VET?

Overall, and looking beyond the borders of the Swiss education system, the results affirm that the distribution of young people across various education programs in an educational system should be understood not only as the consequence of individual preferences and decisions, but also as resulting from strategic steering interventions by a country's education policy.

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