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# Varieties Within a Collective Skill Formation System: How VET Governance in Switzerland is Shaped by Associations

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## Abstract

**Context:** International scholarship and policy tend to depict national structures governing Vocational Education and Training (VET) as uniform and devoid of internal differences. This macro perspective neglects the numerous processes at the meso and micro level that shape the structure and content of VET. This article focusses on professional associations (meso level) in Switzerland to examine the heterogeneity of governance of individual VET programmes that can exist within one country or one collective skill formation system.

**Approach:** Drawing on insights from historical institutionalism and research on corporatism, we argue that these differences are the product of the characteristics, traditional practices and styles of reasoning of the various associations involved in VET governance. Our analysis is based on expert interviews and governance documents in two vocational areas: Electrotechnology and food services.

**Findings:** We identify and decode an array of cooperative practices and show that collective skill formation has a different meaning for different associations and, correspondingly, different occupations. Collaboration with state actors, unions, VET schools and single firms, as well as voting procedures, differ considerably between associations. Furthermore, we find that these different modes of governance are determined by associational characteristics such as size, level of professionalization, location and established cooperative practices, as well as traditional styles of reasonings.

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**Conclusion:** The findings indicate that the decisions taken are not always the product of current day training requirements but of historically grown associational characteristics. Thus, path dependencies are to be considered not only at a macro level but also at the meso level. There is a multifaceted variety of governance approaches beneath the classification "collective skill formation system". Associations are key in defining VET content, working life structures and collectivity.

**Keywords:** VET, Vocational Education and Training, Governance, Collective Skill Formation, Historical Institutionalism, Corporatism, Styles of Reasoning in VET

## 1 Introduction

Over the past few decades, Vocational Education and Training (VET) has been assigned a key role in coping with the challenges of globalization, digitalization and other sweeping transformations of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. A recent Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) review of different VET systems found that "after a period of relative neglect in many countries, apprenticeship and other forms of work-based learning are experiencing a revival" (OECD, 2018, p. 11). In this context, Switzerland has increasingly become a role model, because it has a longstanding tradition of classroom instruction and on-the-job training (the "dual system") that relies on a specific form of governance, labelled collective skill formation (Busemeyer & Trampusch, 2012; Krummenacher, 2018).

Approaches that seek to transfer the Swiss model to other countries tend to neglect or underestimate the heterogeneous character of "duality", particularly the plurality of coordinating actors and multifaceted forms of cooperation and governance. Whereas differences regarding dual organizations are well-known and researched (Wettstein & Gonon, 2009), there is a dearth of knowledge about different modes of governance. Scholars have advocated further study of decentralized cooperation in vocational education, proposing that "...since actual cooperation can rarely be imposed by law but happens on the ground, it is likely to vary along regional, sectoral and occupational lines..." (Emmenegger et al., 2018, p. 5).

The particular characteristics of Swiss VET governance have been studied extensively and compared to other countries (Rauner & Wittig, 2009). For instance, political scientists have categorized Switzerland's VET as a prime example of collective skill formation (Busemeyer & Trampusch, 2012; Gonon & Maurer, 2012), decentralized cooperation (Emmenegger et al., 2018), plural governance (Rauner & Wittig, 2009, p. 45) and public-private partnership. While this focus on the national (macro) level dominates research, intermediary associations (meso level) and single firms (micro level) have rarely been addressed, even though they are crucial parts of collective governance.

This article sheds light on the different practices behind those classifications at the macro level by focussing on the meso level of governance, namely the professional associations. The following questions guide the analysis: What are the associational characteristics of cooperation practices? What are the reasons for the various approaches? The article thus explores not only the *how* of governance, but also the *why*; a crucial question that is neglected in many studies (Benz et al., 2007, pp. 19–20; Rosenmund, 2019). Drawing on insights from historical institutionalism and literature on corporatism, we will argue that the variety of governance approaches is not only shaped by "rational" deliberations and requirements endorsed by each occupation's respective industry, but also by the path dependent characteristics, modes of cooperation and styles of reasoning of each occupation's responsible professional association.

To identify the different cooperative practices and decipher the driving logic, this study focusses on the Swiss Commissions for Professional Development and Quality (Schweizerische Kommissionen für Berufsentwicklung und Qualität—hereafter referred to as "Commissions" or "Commissions B&Q"). These Commissions were created for every occupational field following the VET Act of 2002, to oversee the content and quality of vocational training. They generally consist of stakeholders from the state (cantonal and federal government authorities) and professional associations, but as the legislation does not stipulate clear criteria for membership, professional associations from each occupation fill the Commissions and determine their tasks. The Commissions—described as the "heart of collective governance [Verbundpartnerschaft]" (Fleischmann, 2012)—are the optimal object of investigation since they represent a neuralgic point for governance at the meso level that is directed by professional associations.

In this paper we provide insight into different modes of cooperation and the logic that shapes them. Our analysis focusses on two occupational fields: Food services and electro-technology. We conducted eleven in-depth expert interviews with chairmen and chairwomen of every Commission B&Q in the two fields. We supplemented the interview data with information gathered from a variety of other sources, such as national and occupational regulations, and annual reports from professional associations. By decoding and disentangling the cooperative processes, we contribute to a more nuanced picture of VET governance in Switzerland, and thus one case of collective skill formation in particular.

In the first section, we provide an overview of the theories that inform our study and show how our work relates to previous studies. Second, we describe our case selection strategy and methodology. We then focus on empirical data by examining the variety of cooperative practices and disentangling the different underlying associational characteristics and styles of reasoning. We conclude by emphasizing that associations are key not only by defining VET content, but collectivity and working life structures.

## 2 Governance Regimes in VET

This article draws upon insights from historical institutionalism, research on corporatism and associations in VET. Studies in historical institutionalism have shown that existing practices develop stable developmental trajectories along path dependencies, which guarantee a continuity of established structures and processes (Beyer, 2015; Mahoney, 2000). Once put into motion, developments gather strength, reinforce existing pathways, make breaks and radical transformation unlikely and encourage incremental change to meet new requirements or demands (Pierson, 2000). Thelen (2004) and Busemeyer and Trampusch (2012) applied the approach of historical institutionalism to vocational education. Thelen argued that industrialized states and their vocational education systems are not converging globally. She stressed that differences will remain because of "national production regimes" and observed that the answer to the question of "why institutions take the form they do" is historical not functional (Thelen, 2004, pp. 1, 26). Drawing on the work of Thelen, Busemeyer and Trampusch noted:

The establishment of a collective institutional framework is not the result of a rationalistic process of deliberation among firms searching for the optimal skill formation strategy. Instead, training institutions have deep roots in the history of politics and society, which in the case of apprenticeships, often go back to the Middle Ages. (Busemeyer & Trampusch, 2012, p. 7)

VET systems cannot be seen only as need-oriented variables of companies. Rather, they must ultimately be understood against the backdrop of a political culture that expresses itself in "routines of processing and solving society's problems of organization" (Rosenmund, 2019), or in a "production or work order of a country" (Trampusch, 2014, p. 165).

It is exactly this aspect that is emphasized by the "varieties of capitalism" approach. "Many actors learn to follow a set of informal rules by virtue of experience with a familiar set of actors and the shared understandings that accumulate from this experience constitute something like a common culture" (Hall & Soskice, 2001, p. 13). In the Swiss case, this common culture corresponds to a "coordinated market economy" rather than a "liberal market economy" (Hall & Soskice, 2001, p. 13). The former is distinguished by the fact that it designs its qualification systems in a process of "collective skill formation" and thus expresses itself through high levels of regulation and involvement of private companies. These constellations tend to bring about dual VET models, as found in Switzerland, Germany, Austria and Denmark (Busemeyer & Trampusch, 2012). Comparative studies that rely on the "varieties of capitalism" approach explain national characteristics of VET governance systems by way of their respective political systems (Mayer & Solga, 2008; Bosch & Charest, 2008). These studies have been criticized for the fact that they tell us little about national particularities and

the internal national differences between countries with the same political system (Goergen et al., 2012; Gonon, 2016).

These national varieties would become visible by shedding light on decentralized VET cooperation. Current knowledge about cooperation processes "on the ground" is limited, even though it is a core element of collective skill formation systems (Emmenegger et al., 2018). Research on corporatism can provide first indications of the idiosyncrasies of decentral cooperation. A corporatist governance is distinguished by the cooperation of state and labour market stakeholders, represented in intermediary associations such as professional organizations, as is usual in systems of collective skill formation (Culpepper & Thelen, 2008). Studies on corporatism have shown that different work relationships and forms of social partnership can be traced back not only to the degree of inclusion of social partners and the degree of state control, but also to factors regarding companies, occupation and branch membership (Culpepper, 2003, 2007; Meyrat, 2000; Trampusch, 2014). Associations have to negotiate compromises between collective and company-specific interests (Behrens, 2017). Swiss associations responsible for VET tend to (up to 97%) represent the employer's interest (Emmenegger et al., 2019) whereas unions—due to a path dependent development of Swiss VET—are hardly represented in VET governance compared to those in Germany. Furthermore, studies have shown that associations act in their own right (Strebel et al., 2019a; Seitzl & Emmenegger, 2019) and tend to unfold their own logic to maintain the status quo (Hotz-Hart, 2008, p. 115). "The logics of occupations [and thus professional associations that are responsible for them] build on reproduction and further development of existing structures and programmes. Associations are thus less focussed on young people's individual educational requirements and on research and innovation, but oriented towards a timely adapted reproduction of the occupational offspring" (Bauder, 2008, p. 42).

This research on associations leads to two assumptions. First, we propose that the characteristics of associations influence their governance approaches in VET; second, drawing upon historical institutionalism, we argue that over time, they developed specific cooperation practices and styles of reasoning that significantly shape their decisions. In other words, we expect to find path dependencies (as hinted by Bauder's logic of reproduction) at the meso level of governance, much as at the macro level (as outlined by research based on historical institutionalism). It is assumed that associations are like nation states, bound to their institutional legacy and, in a nutshell, not only functionally but historically informed.

### **3 Case Selection Strategy and Methodology**

In order to explore the associational characteristics of cooperation and to shed light on the reasons or reasonings behind these various approaches, this study analyses Commissions

B&Q, their compositions and their ways of working. In the following, we contextualize these Commissions within Swiss VET governance and highlight their significance.

The collective governance of Swiss VET is generally based on three institutional principles: Federalism, corporatism and consensus democracy. The last principle does not correspond to any formal constitutional rules, but to a practice developed over time that primarily aims to involve a large number of individuals in consensus decision-making (Berner, 2013, pp. 40–42). The corporatist structure of Swiss vocational training is characterized by a decentralized organization and cooperation of state and labour market actors (Oesch, 2011; Degen, 2012). Thus, responsibilities are shared between associations and the state (cantons and federal government). It is notable that the involvement of the associations does not occur compulsorily in chambers, as in Germany, but takes place voluntarily (Armingeon, 1997). The cooperation between the associations and the state, and between the associations themselves, is based on a legal framework that leaves a great degree of freedom and scope for negotiation. This can result in partial conflict prevention (Gonon & Zehnder, 2016, pp. 49–50) and makes cooperation dependent on a "shared logic of actions" (Emmenegger et al., 2018).

Swiss VET is therefore operationalized at three levels: The federal VET office (responsible for general governance), the canton departments for economy and education (responsible for implementation) and the employees' and employers' (professional) associations (responsible for the content and specifics of occupational training). Presently, there are 146 associations responsible for the 230 occupations in Switzerland. Four different types can be distinguished: company, professional, employee associations and specialized educational organizations (Strebel et al., 2019b). Usually, one association is responsible for one occupation or occupational field. This means that they develop education plans and regulations for their respective occupations and submit these to the federal office for approval.

In the wake of the VET Act 2002 and encouraged by the federal authorities, the associations started to establish Commissions B&Q. At the formal level, there are no unambiguous overarching regulations for the Commissions, as they are not explicitly mentioned in the VET Act (BBG 2002, Art. 8; Berner, 2013; Meyer, 2007). Although the law places responsibility for quality assurance with the providers of vocational training (and hence with the associations), it does not stipulate how they must fulfil this duty. The subordinate Vocational Training Directive (BBV 2003, Art. 12) is more specific, but it too affords the associations a great deal of freedom. It imposes no conditions on how the associations determine the tasks of the Commissions and only two conditions on how they determine Commission membership: (i) In addition to representatives from the respective associations, the committee must contain at least one representative from the federal authority and (ii) must adequately represent Switzerland's language regions.

The lack of concrete legal requirements led to the creation of an informal regulatory process, which in turn gave rise to written guidelines for the Commissions. The guidelines, deve-



veloped collaboratively by federal authorities, cantons and one of the umbrella associations, recommend that the Commissions periodically review VET curricula and quality, and update them to meet changing professional demands (SGV et al., 2014, p. 3). This duty positions the Commissions as very important actors in decentralized VET governance, especially with regard to the respective occupation's regulation and curricula. The guidelines also suggest that alongside the membership stipulated by the Vocational Training Directive, the Commissions also contain representatives from the cantons and teaching staff (vocational schools) (SGV et al., 2014, p. 6).

The professional associations are therefore largely free in determining the membership and tasks of the Commissions B&Q. The composition and tasks of the board are formally fixed in the *Bildungsverordnungen* (regulation for each occupation). The fact that all VET stakeholders come together in these Commissions, yet the respective associations are (almost) free to choose the representatives and define the tasks, makes the Commissions B&Q crystallization points of collective governance at the meso level. This means that they are optimal objects of study to explore how associations cooperate and why they act like they do.

Our analysis focusses on the Commissions B&Q of two occupational fields: Food services and electrotechnology.<sup>1</sup> Research on corporatism has shown that branch membership can influence associations' characteristics of cooperation. These two representative occupational fields have been chosen because they are different fields but have similarities with regard to composition. This approach allows us to identify and decipher typical patterns of cooperation for the respective branches. Both fields cover a wide variety of companies, from the technologically advanced and internationally orientated to smaller, more traditional locally based firms (Roth, 2007; Keller & Kurzen, 2012). In addition, the occupations they represent are quite heterogeneous with regard to the required skills and the number of trainees<sup>2</sup> (Stalder, 2011) and both are facing challenges—albeit for different reasons—in recruiting adequate numbers of apprentices (cf. Berner, 2018; Staatssekretariat für Wirtschaft, 2016, p. 41).

In the field of nutrition there are six associations and in the field of electrotechnology there are five associations that are accountable for the respective occupations, compositions and tasks of the Commissions B&Q. They all belong to the category of professional associations, but differ with regard to size and professionalization: Some have up to 21 full time employees, while others are staffed on an entirely part time basis.<sup>3</sup>

1 See Schweizerisches Dienstleistungszentrum Berufsbildung/Berufs-, Studien und Laufbahnberatung [SDBB] (2018). Food services includes occupations in the fields of nutrition and food technology. Electrotechnology includes occupations from the fields of electrical installation and electronics.

2 In total there are six occupations in nutrition (n) and 10 in electrotechnology (e). In 2016, four (1n + 3e) had more than 600 apprentices, seven (2n + 5e) had 100 to 600 and five had fewer than 100 (3n + 2e) (SBFI, 2020).

3 The field of nutrition consists of two big (Schweizerischer Bäcker-Confiseurmeister-Verband, Oda AgriAliForm), two medium-sized (Schweizerischer Fleischfachverband; Milchwirtschaftlicher Verein) and two small associations (Schweizerischer Verein Arbeitswelt Müller/in; Arbeitsgemeinschaft Lebensmitteltechnologien/in). The field of electrotechnology consists of two big (Verband der Maschinen-Elektro- und Metallindustrie, EIT.swiss), two medium-sized (Verband Schweizerischer Elektrizitätsunternehmen; MultimediaTec Swiss) and one small association (Arbeitsgemeinschaft der Lehrmeister von Physiklaboranten).



Data collection comprised 11 expert interviews conducted with the chairwomen ( $n = 1$ ) and chairmen ( $n = 10$ ) of the Commissions B&Q whose members are recruited by the responsible associations.<sup>4</sup> Interview data were complemented with documents, such as the regulations of the different occupations (*Bildungsverordnungen*), where membership and tasks of the Commissions B&Q are formally described, as well as annual reports from the professional associations. The interviews were semi-structured, consisting of open questions (focussing on the characteristics of cooperative practices) and problem-oriented sequences (focussing on the underlying reasonings) (Kruse, 2015; Helfferich, 2011). The interviews were fully transcribed and coded. For the first research question, concerning the associational characteristics of cooperation practices, the coding focussed on three key elements of cooperation: Membership (who, how many?), recruiting and voting procedures, and ways of working. These categories were derived from studies on corporatism, which have shown that these aspects influence cooperation practices significantly (Culpepper, 2003, 2007; Meyrat, 2000; Trampusch, 2014).

For the second question, concerning the reasons for the different practices, the categories were inductively generated by reconstructing the logic behind the association's diverse actions (Meuser & Nagel, 2009, 2010; Bogner et al., 2014; Bogner & Menz, 2009). Thus, in contrast to the most popular approach of process tracing within historical institutionalism, we tried to identify and decipher path dependencies via the reasonings or elaborations on decisions put forward by the experts we interviewed. By doing so, we were able to extract the following intertwined factors that explain the diversity of the Commissions: Age, size, level of professionalization, location, financial strength, membership, established cooperative practices and styles of reasoning.

## 4 Varieties of Cooperative Practices

In the following, we briefly outline the formal and informal profiles and practices of the Commissions B&Q, i.e., how they govern. The characteristics or heterogeneity of associational governance is demonstrated by showing differences regarding board members, recruiting and voting procedures, and ways of working.

All Commissions B&Q adhere to formal and informal guidelines regarding tasks and membership, but this merely represents the lowest common denominator among the different associations. Differences are clearly evident between the different associations rather than different occupational fields, since no governance pattern is evident within one of the fields. For instance, some Commissions are allowed to operate detached from their professional associations. These Commissions may submit proposals for VET changes directly to the

<sup>4</sup> Interviews lasted 60-90 minutes. They took place between March and December 2018, on the premises of the associations or companies; one was conducted at the University of Zurich.

national authorities, while the majority of Commissions must first submit their ideas to the associations. The membership of the Commissions can also vary greatly despite all having representatives from the federal authorities, cantons, professional associations and teaching staff. For example, the number of members ranges from seven to 19 people. This is not only due to the size of the professions but also to differences in recruiting practices between the associations. Some Commissions have representatives from multiple associations whose companies carry out VET; others have representatives from individual companies engaged in VET and from companies that do not perform VET.

The number of school and canton representatives in the Commissions is similarly diverse. Some Commissions, especially for smaller professions, have representatives from all the vocational schools. Many Commissions have two canton representatives (instead of the recommended one), as this may allow them to cover different language regions. In order to better represent Switzerland's two larger language regions (French and German), some associations base important functions (such as president and secretary) in different locations.

Another area of difference is trade union representation. While trade unions tend to play a marginal role in Swiss VET—particularly compared to Germany (Emmenegger et al., 2018, p. 18)—this varies among the Commissions we examined. For some professions, worker or union representatives take up to four spots on the Commissions; others lack a single employee representative.

Recruitment approaches are generally similar across all associations, as the general assemblies of the professional associations elect their representatives for the Commissions. In many cases, these elections confirm the nominated candidates. This is because the post of representative takes time and effort, and takes post-holders away from their day job. One interviewee said "the [election] is always close to 100 per cent. And if it is not 100 per cent, then this is because one person fell asleep (laughter) or person was too lazy to raise his hand. So, it's more about...signing off [on the nominees]" (Interview C).

However, there are major differences in voting rights. In some Commissions, all participants get one vote, but in others, the representatives of the federal authorities, cantons and associations each have one vote, which forces consensus. School representatives tend to be excluded from voting. In some cases, for specific topics such as funding, only industry representatives are allowed to vote.

Despite their differences in membership and forms of cooperation, the Commissions share the same culture of cooperation across interest groups. Interviewees reported that the Commissions rarely hold votes; though different interests exist, the members place much value on finding a consensus. Most interviewees connected this approach to the consensus democracy that defines Switzerland's political culture. Metaphors such as "getting everyone on board" and "broad support" were common in the interviews. The Commissions wanted to avoid conflicts or the rejection of reforms because "we know each other in the branch, and

thus we have to rely on being able to talk to each other. Creating fronts is useless" (Interview E). One interviewee referred to the people involved in the VET of one small profession as a family (Interview G).

Company and association representatives regard the growing body of federal regulations as inflexible, rigid and unreliable. Interviewees said the regulations allow little room for negotiation. In the past, the pressure mostly came internally, from companies. Now the pressure is more external, especially with regard to the time frame for revising VET, as the Commissions are required to review the VET of their respective profession every five years. The interviewees also criticized the recent requirement to base contents on competence models. These professionalization trends were felt to present challenges to smaller and part time associations. One interviewee pointedly complained: "So [they] motivate me to go up a mountain, backpack full, heavy. And after I've barely arrived at the top, [they say], well done...but look now, over there [is] the next mountain" (Interview G). These changes were felt to be less controversial among associations whose companies possess professional training structures, i.e., full time VET employees with dedicated time and expertise, because these companies can shoulder the work for the associations and thus have more influence and room to manoeuvre.

## 5 Reasons for Different Governance Approaches

Since there are no patterns of governance discernible within one of the occupational fields, the cooperation practices of the Commissions B&Q are not determined by the occupational field. The various modes of governance arise from the different characteristics of the responsible associations (age, size, professionalization, location, financial strength and membership) and the cooperation practices and specific styles of reasoning developed over time. Decisions are therefore not only made on a functional basis, but are historically informed to a considerable degree. In the following, we shed light on these determining characteristics, practices of cooperation and styles of reasoning.

### *Age, Size and Level of Professionalization*

The Commissions B&Q tend to have more flexibility in governance if the association that is responsible for an occupation was newly founded. This is because there are no historical paths to determine a Commission's tasks and practices.

Larger associations tend to see more politicized Commission elections. While smaller associations complain that they have to "knock on doors" (Interview H) to recruit members so that elections are usually decided unanimously, an interviewee from a major association referred to his election as president of the Commission as a "fight" that ultimately turned

on a dispute between the cantons rather than on the actual qualifications of the candidates (Interview D).

Other associations explicitly choose to remain small to avoid politicized elections, although they could easily join larger associations. One interviewee reflected on the nature of being a small association:

The advantage of being small is of course, I mean...as I said, I can pick up the phone and maybe call...let's say 10 people. And then we can decide whether to do something what we do...of course, being so flexible is an advantage. The downside is...this office does a lot...let's say 80% (laughter) probably comes out of this office. (Interview C)

This interviewee's company possesses professionalized training structures for generating these capacities, which is another example of how different the influence of single firms can be. Professionalization plays an important role; some associations have full time personnel, while others work with a small staff on a part time basis. Generally, the greater an association's professionalization, the more its agenda is predefined and the more it is developed by its office staff. Furthermore, associations with highly professional structures are increasingly involved in drafting and developing national models and strategies, giving them greater influence at the national level.

#### *Location, Financial Strength and Membership*

Both the increasing professional requirements and the geographical location of associations and companies can encourage an accumulation of roles or positions within committees. Companies located in central Switzerland or near associations are more likely to participate. One interviewee reflected:

I find that [the participation of western Switzerland is] a bit difficult because...the sessions always take place in Zurich, because that just makes sense. Because most of them come from Zurich anyway. That means that they [the western Swiss] always have a long way to travel. And hence they do not come very often...I find this this very problematic. (Interview C)

Likewise, an interviewee from another association in Bern emphasized that people would be more involved if they were "around an hour outside of Bern and not just from Upper Valais and from the Graubünden...But we try to do as good a job as we can" (Interview F).

The financial strength and infrastructural factors of the associations also play a central role in cooperative practices. For example, associations tend to cooperate with others if their professions are affiliated with the same vocational school, where they benefit from infrastructural "synergies" (Interview I) that are not exclusively professional. There are also associations that work with others to create new professions to achieve a critical mass for key financing

issues, especially high attendance in school classrooms. Infrastructural factors can also determine whether associations seek collaboration with others or seek to govern their profession independently. For example, an association whose profession experienced a substantial decline in the number of trainees and which had not previously engaged in networking decided to work with other associations and create a new profession. Instead of settling for a smaller number of trainees, it is now looking to cooperate with other associations in order to maintain the size of its association and, in particular, to continue to fund its training centre.

The specific membership or characteristics of the companies represented by the association influences recruitment and cooperation practices of the Commissions. For example, it is desirable for associations to create VET programmes that are as attractive as possible for companies; the goal is to maximize the number of companies able to train the profession with as much freedom as possible. One strategy is to formulate open VET regulations and curricula. One interviewee described his association as:

More of an...association that brings together all those who cannot be trained in a large profession...those who do not fit in come to us. And then we try to make the best of it. Even if the situations can be very different. Even company size or products. [This is why] our VET regulations and curricula are very, how should I put it? Not vague...[so let's say] non-specific. And afterwards, companies have to implement all this or translate it all for themselves. (Interview A)

Existing market hegemonies are also reflected in the Commissions B&Q. For example, dominant companies usually have the financial resources to participate in several committees, which affords them greater influence. As one interviewee told us:

So in this [association] of course, [name of firm] plays a big role because we have the majority. So...we have the largest...market share in Switzerland. This means that we have a lot to say in all the committees because we pay more at the association level. (Interview A)

Another interviewee told us "those who pay more should say more and those who pay less... should also have their say, but they simply have fewer votes" (Interview B). In particular, more resource-rich firms can afford professionalized structures for training and employ dedicated personnel for VET, which improves their ability to get involved in VET or relevant committees.

#### *Established Cooperative Practices and Styles of Reasoning*

The established cooperative practices have an impact on the presence of employee and trade union representatives. For example, professional associations traditionally working with worker associations and trade unions typically include employee representatives in their respective Commission. Here too, however, one interviewee drew a distinction between industry

and manual trades: "People in manual trades of course are not thrilled by...such things...and the industry has grown accustomed to the unions...and is not scared by them" (Interview F). The close relationship between cooperative practices and specific styles of reasoning is also shaped by a sense of belonging to specific industries: "I have noticed that every industry, and of course we are no different, primarily wants to tends to its own garden" and although cooperation does occur, no one thinks "out of the box". Rather, the cooperation that does take place has "a lot of structures behind it, history behind it, personalities behind it" (Interview F). What is striking—with implications for future reforms—is that associations are more likely to collaborate with others or to create joint occupations if they are in the same industry, even though they might have more in common with professions in another industries. Several interviewees said that older associations tend to be conservative: "I'm not saying that they are dusty, but when it comes to bigger topics, they tend to do as they have always done" (Interview D). Interestingly, one interviewee attributed this desire for continuity to the specific professional work, which consists of assembling elements designed to last for decades. In other words, he believed that occupational activities have an effect on the thinking of the companies and ultimately of the associations.

## **6 Conclusion: Associations Defining Collectivity and Working Life**

Our focus on governance at the meso level has allowed us to unpack the concept of collective skill formation in Switzerland, which has various facets and meaning for different associations and occupations. Legislation from 2002 incorporated standardized elements into the governance architecture of Swiss VET, such as the quality assurance Commissions B&Q established for every occupation. However, our analysis has shown that the specifics associated with these structures—membership and cooperative practices—can differ significantly between associations and therefore between occupations. This heterogeneity allows the associations to respond to their own specific needs and those of their members. However, our analysis has also shown that some of the decisions are not directly attributable to VET or functional negotiations, but rather, to the characteristics, specific cooperative practices and styles of reasoning that the associations have developed over time. These findings are underpinned by the fact that no patterns of governance were found within one of the occupational fields.

Overall, the findings indicate that the negotiations on the ground or, at meso level, are key for VET governance in Switzerland. Associations not only shape the content of individual VET programs—as their role is described from the macro perspective—but they define the structure of working life and collectivity. The latter becomes visible in the different recruiting and voting practices within the Commissions B&Q. A board where one or four representatives from the vocational school(s) are integrated will most likely develop or define different

priorities. Furthermore, the fact that in some Commissions B&Q the school delegates do not have a voting right will affect the decisions that are taken. The same applies with regard to the integration of union representatives. Emmenegger et al. (2019) showed that the inclusion of unions significantly impacts the time students spend at school. In a context of continuous upskilling, the distribution between the time spent in the workplace and at school is crucial (SBFI, 2017). Emmenegger et al. also distinguished between liberal (less union integration, like Switzerland) and social (constant union integration, like Germany) collective skill formation systems. However, our examination of the meso level reveals that it is difficult to make this distinction clearly, as some occupations in Switzerland demonstrate a high participation of union delegates.

In addition to the actual representatives in the Commissions B&Q, the associations or their characteristics define collectivity or collective governance. This happens by the generation of different degrees of influence, either at the level of firms or associations. Despite the constant emphasis on consensus democracy among interviewees (in some cases, even using the metaphor of a family), there is an important role played by accumulated influence, which points to hegemonic structures. For example, associations and companies with larger budgets have more influence and a greater ability to shape VET than financially weaker organizations. This is because big budgets allow for professionalized structures and full time staff instead of part time volunteers. As the pressure to professionalize increases, e.g., through shorter review periods and competence-based curricula, these tendencies are likely to become more pronounced.

Furthermore, our findings indicate that associations not only shape individual professions but also the VET landscape and the general structure of working life. This is seen when they prevent or encourage the merger of different occupations to become a larger occupational field. Furthermore, the specific forms of thinking that inform associations within an industry, such as maintaining established infrastructures or carrying out traditional cooperative practices, may override "rational" objectives such as the similarity of training curricula.

Generally, the interviews stressed that many influencing factors are historically informed. They described a persistent inertia, not only in "material" structures but also in ideas. Associations and companies tend to rely on an established matrix of ideas that resists new visions and reforms. Our study focussed exclusively on two occupational fields, but it is reasonable to assume that these findings are transferrable to other occupational fields, although some associations may introduce new forms of governance depending on their characteristics. Once a certain path has been taken, domino effects—known in the literature on path dependencies as "increasing returns" (Beyer, 2005)—can occur. These can increase the importance of individual companies and, in the long term, can establish new power structures. The effects of a path are therefore not only evident at the national level, but also at the meso level, in the governance regimes and paradigms of associations. It may prove challenging for VET gover-



nance in collective skill formation systems to overcome well-established cooperation practices and styles of reasoning, move beyond unnecessary restrictions and think "out of the box".

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