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## Analyzing Vocational Education and Training Systems through the Lens of Political Science

The discipline of political science has a long-standing interest in the comparative study of governance structures and policy reforms in vocational education and training (VET). In analyses of VET systems, political science scholars often rely on historical institutionalism. Historical institutionalism is a theoretical framework that seeks to understand institutional stability and change in light of political coalitions, temporal processes, path dependencies, and critical junctures. This chapter introduces historical institutionalism as an important political science perspective frequently used to analyze skill formation policies. We first provide a theoretical introduction to historical institutionalism. This is followed by a review of its applications in education research. Finally, we conduct an illustrative case study, which exhibits this perspective's analytical capacities in the comparison of national VET policies. Focusing on the cases of Germany and Switzerland, our empirical analysis explores how both countries' VET systems have responded to academization pressures brought about by the rise of the knowledge economy. Drawing on key concepts of historical institutionalism, we find that different modes of gradual institutional change are at play in the two countries. While Germany has carried out reforms in the form of policy layering, the dominant trajectory of change in the case of Switzerland is policy conversion. The respective modes of change derive from historically transmitted actor constellations and institutional configurations. The chapter concludes with reflections on the use of historical institutionalism in the realm of skill formation policies more generally.

### 1 Introduction

Political science and especially its subfield of political economy have a long-standing interest in the comparative study of governance structures and policy reforms in vocational education and training (VET). This is not least the case because VET has been identified as one of the most important institutional spheres in the production models of different capitalist market systems next to industrial relations, inter-company relations, and corporate governance (HALL/SOSKICE 2001). In fact, the study of VET systems has served to carve out key differences between different varieties of capitalism and liberal and coordinated market economies (CROUCH/FINEGOLD/SAKO 1999). For instance, collectively governed apprenticeship training systems are considered as one of the core features of a coordinated market economy such as Germany, while VET in liberal market economies has traditionally been characterized by on-the-job training. This distinction persists even if some more coordinated approaches to VET have been integrated with-

in liberal market economies more recently (VOSSIEK 2018). While the initial literature on the political economy of skill formation focused on the between-type distinctions of different models of skill formation (e. g., CULPEPPER/FINEGOLD 1999), a later strand of literature has probed differences *within* coordinated systems (BUSEMEYER/TRAMPUSCH 2012) – for instance, by exploring distinctive features within the cluster of VET systems that are characterized by collective governance (EMMENEGGER/GRAF/TRAMPUSCH 2019). Prominent examples of such collective skill formation systems include Austria, Denmark, Germany, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and Switzerland. In analyses of the aforementioned VET systems, political science scholars often rely on historical institutionalism (HI) given its attention to country-specific historical developments and its ability to capture various change mechanisms. HI is a theoretical framework that seeks to understand both institutional stability and change in light of political coalitions, temporal processes, path dependencies, and critical junctures. As such HI is an increasingly popular lens for the comparative study of skill formation politics.

This chapter introduces HI as an important political science perspective frequently used to analyze skill formation policies. The chapter's goals are threefold; first, we provide a theoretical introduction to HI. This is followed by a review of the use of HI in education research. Finally, we conduct an illustrative case study, which exhibits HI's analytical capacities in the comparison of national VET policies. Here, we draw on the cases of Germany and Switzerland, two relatively similar skill formation systems that both feature a long tradition of apprenticeship training. Our empirical analysis explores how both countries have responded to academization pressures brought about by the rise of the knowledge economy. Drawing on key concepts of HI, our findings suggest that different modes of gradual institutional change are at play in the two countries. We find that while Germany has carried out reforms in the form of policy layering, the dominant trajectory of change in the case of Switzerland is policy conversion. The respective modes of change derive from historically transmitted actor constellations and institutional configurations. The chapter concludes with a reflection on the use of HI in the realm of skill formation policies more generally.

In the following section, we begin our presentation of HI by locating it within different disciplinary perspectives on VET research. This is followed by an outline of HI's key concepts.

## **2 Delineating the political science perspective on VET and key concepts of historical institutionalism**

VET is frequently studied by a range of academic disciplines. The educational sciences are, for instance, concerned with the set-up of VET programs, including studies on the quality of training courses (e.g., KRÖTZ/DEUTSCHER 2021), pedagogical concerns and curricula content (e. g., GULIKERS/BRINKMAN/RUNHAAR 2021), the overall development

of VET as part of a country's education system (e. g., SEEBER/SEIFRIED 2019), international cooperation in VET (e. g., FROMMBERGER/PILZ/GESSLER 2021), or global policy transfer trends (e. g., LI/PILZ 2021). Sociology often focuses on educational pathways and social inequalities, tracing, for example, why individuals opt for VET or higher education (HE) (e. g., SCHUMANN et al. 2018; POWELL/SOLGA 2011), or how different social groups' access to VET training places differs (e. g., DIEHL/FRIEDRICH/HALL 2009; SÖHN 2011). Economists frequently consider the link between VET and firms' productivity (PFEIFER/BACKES-GELLNER 2018), or between VET and labor markets, for example, when studying the effects of VET participation on labor market outcomes (e. g., ACEVEDO et al., 2020). Political science, for its part, typically scrutinizes actor constellations, power distributions, and potential conflicts in the governance of VET systems (e. g., BUSEMEYER/ TRAMPUSCH 2012; EMMENEGGER/GRAF/TRAMPUSCH 2019; THELEN 2004).

Within political science, historical institutionalism (HI) can be considered the most prominent theoretical perspective when it comes to the study of the politics of vocational education and training. In general, institutional theory departs from the assumption that social reality is structured by enduring institutions. For historical institutionalists, these institutions exist in the form of "formal or informal procedures, routines, norms and conventions embedded in the organizational structure of the polity or political economy" (HALL/TAYLOR 1996, 6). The sociological strand of institutionalism defines institutions more broadly and takes into consideration the regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive orders that "provide stability and meaning to social life" (SCOTT 2008, 48). While the normative and cultural-cognitive dimensions concern socially accepted practices and taken-for-granted understandings, the regulative side of institutions concerns formal and informal rules, which are codified, for instance, in state laws or firm regulations (THELEN/STEINMO 1992). Political science studies of VET, including HI studies, tend to focus mainly on this regulative dimension of institutions (CARSTENSEN/IBSEN 2021).

According to HI, institutions generally create conditions for stability and *path dependence*. Path dependence is perhaps the core concept of HI and refers to "historical sequences in which contingent events set into motion institutional patterns or event chains that have deterministic properties" (MAHONEY 2000, 507). In other words, path dependence is likely to reduce the scope of choices available to actors and can therefore lead to lock-in effects. Early HI scholarship stressed mechanisms contributing to institutional stability. In this vein, institutional change could only be induced exogenously, taking place in the form of an external shock that would punctuate the institutional equilibrium, produce a critical juncture, and lead to radical change (BAUMGARTNER/JONES 1993). More recent scholarship has shifted the focus to endogenous forms of gradual institutional change, and pays more attention to institutional actors' agency and potential for innovation (CAMPBELL 2004).

In line with this more recent approach, Streeck and Thelen (2005) identify four *modes of gradual institutional change*: (a) displacement, (b) layering, (c) drift, and (d) conversion. In all four modes, incremental changes over time can add up to transformative change, while substantive institutional change may be obscured by relative stability on the surface. (a) *Displacement* takes place when existing rules are removed and new ones are introduced instead. (b) *Layering* means that instead of replacing existing rules, new rules are added on top. (c) *Drift* denotes shifts occurring in the external conditions of a rule, implying that the rule formally stays the same but that its impact changes (HACKER 2005). (d) When rules are interpreted and implemented in new ways but formally stay the same, this redirection or redeployment is called *conversion*.

The occurrence of a certain mode of change is closely linked to the respective political context, in particular the degree of leeway stakeholders have when it comes to shaping their policy environment. Here, HI assumes that path dependencies lead to strong or weak veto possibilities on the part of different stakeholders, and that the targeted institutions themselves offer either a low or high level of discretion in interpreting or enforcing the institution (MAHONEY/THELEN 2010, 18–22). When guardians of the status quo hold strong veto powers, change agents are more likely to engage in indirect modifications to the institution in the form of *layering* and *drift*, rather than pushing for *displacement* or *conversion*. When the institution offers a high level of interpretational discretion from the get-go, *drift* and *conversion* are more likely to take place (MAHONEY/THELEN 2010).

Next, we provide an overview of how the HI concepts described above have been used in the recent education literature. This review is followed by an exemplary HI analysis of two VET systems undergoing change.

### 3 The use of Historical Institutionalism in the study of education

HI literature on education has grown considerably over the last years. To contextualize HI research on VET, we review how the scholarly literature has applied the HI framework across education sectors from early childhood education to higher education. Our review indicates that most HI studies center on European countries (e. g., German-language regions, France, Nordic countries, Benelux, and the UK), the European Union (European Higher Education Area, Bologna process), Anglophone countries (Australia, Canada, US), and Asia (China, India, Korea, and Japan).

A limited number of studies apply HI to *early childhood education and childcare*. For instance, Lewis and West (2017) analyze continuity and change in early childhood education and care in England under austerity. Nishioka (2018) studies gradual policy changes in the privatization of childcare service at the example of Japan. Wang and Lee (2020) uncover institutional changes in quality assurance of early childhood education, focusing on the case of China. In the sector of *secondary education*, HI studies often scru-

tinize federalist systems (especially Germany) and the way different states embark on distinctive reform trajectories. Edelstein and Nikolai (2013) analyze structural change at the secondary school level focusing on the determinants for school reform policies in Saxony and Hamburg. Powell/Edelstein/Blanck (2016) explore how path dependence shapes effects of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities on education systems comparing German states. Contrasting two federal systems (Germany and the US), Niemann/Hartong/Martens (2018) demonstrate how institutional path dependencies shape the outcome of international, large-scale student assessments. Marroy et al. (2016) speak to the theme of globalization by analyzing policy trajectories in France and Quebec, considering historical legacies related to earlier educational policy choices. Other HI studies center on *teacher training*. Thus, Lu (2019) studies the historical trajectory of teacher education policy in China, while Geiss and Westberg (2020) compare the emergence of training regimes for early childhood professionals in Sweden and Switzerland. In the sector of *HE*, core examples of HI studies explore the impact of European educational policies. For instance, Dobbins and Knill (2014) consider historical legacies in university governance related to ‘soft’ Europeanization. Barret (2017) shows that the Bologna Process is part of a path-dependent trajectory of European integration. Feeney and Hogan (2017) adopt a path dependence approach exploring policy harmonization in relation to qualification frameworks in the European Higher Education Area. At the national level, Schmidt (2017) examines different path developments resulting from quality assurance policies in Scandinavian HE systems.

Our review indicates that HI is beginning to resonate widely across educational sectors including that of HE, which in institutional scholarship has traditionally been dominated more by sociological institutionalist perspectives (MEYER et al. 2007). Nonetheless, its uptake is still most pronounced in the sector of VET. What is more, studies of VET have been instrumental to theory development in HI. The most prominent example of this is Thelen’s (2004) study of the evolution of institutions at the example of vocational skill formation and incremental change. Her book marks a steppingstone for the present-day understanding of gradual institutional change in HI. There have since been a range of studies that apply HI to VET. For instance, Trampusch (2010) carves out transformative and self-preserving change in the Swiss VET system. Graf/Lassnigg/Powell (2012) find gradual change in the changing relationship between apprenticeship training and school-based VET in Austria. Analyzing the Swedish case, Persson and Hermelin (2018) trace incremental institutional changes to explain an “anomaly” within a statist VET system, namely the Technical College scheme. Schneider and Pilz (2019) apply HI to analyze the institutional embeddedness of polytechnics in the Indian education system. Fortwengel/Gospel/Toner (2019) trace distinct trajectories of institutional renewal of apprenticeship training in Australia, England, and the US. Building on the Varieties of Capitalism approach and HI, Busemeyer and Vossiek (2016) demonstrate that common structural pressures do not lead to a full-scale convergence in the case of

German and British skill formation systems. Furthermore, Carstensen and Ibsen (2021) explore how the Danish VET system has tried to reconcile concerns for governance, efficiency, and equality over the course of its institutional trajectory.

In sum, this literature review shows that HI studies on education explore a range of potential sources of stability or change. Regardless of the specific analytical focus, HI research requires a thorough grasp of the country-specific context, and generally departs from a breadth of descriptive information on, for instance, the general properties of the respective education system, actor constellations, and key legislations. With its comprehensive country reviews, the International Handbook of Vocational Education and Training (IHBB) represents a highly useful resource from which researchers have been able to draw such information over the past 25 years. Thus, the IHBB country case studies typically trace the historical trajectory of the respective VET systems, outline important laws surrounding skill formation, and provide contextual information regarding recent socio-economic and cultural developments (see e. g., the country studies on Mexico by WIEMANN 2020, or Scotland by PILZ 2011).

After introducing HI as a theoretical framework and reviewing its use in the education literature, we now move to its practical application. In the following section, we provide a concrete empirical illustration of a comparative HI analysis, focusing on the effect of ongoing academization processes on VET systems in the era of the knowledge economy.

#### **4 Analyzing challenges to VET from a HI perspective: The example of academization in Germany and Switzerland**

A key interest of recent HI studies lies with the way education systems have responded to pressures deriving from an increasingly knowledge-based economy. The latter denotes the growing reliance of production and services on knowledge-intensive activities rather than physical inputs or natural resources, and the accelerated speed of technological developments as well as rapid knowledge obsolescence (POWELL/SNELLMAN 2004). The rise of the knowledge-based economy is among the key drivers of educational massification, that is, a stark increase in participation across education sectors, and *academization*, for instance, in the form of rising participation rates especially in higher education (BAKER 2014; WOLTER/KERST 2015). It is on this academization trend that we focus in the following empirical analysis. For the VET sector, academization can pose a threat, as high-achieving secondary school graduates increasingly opt for HE rather than VET, even in HE systems with a highly reputable VET sector (see, e. g., FASSHAUER/SEVERING 2016; FROMMBERGER 2019). At the same time, firms are in need of a workforce which masters the increasingly complex analytical skills required in a highly interconnected world. In recent years, national policymakers across countries such as China, Germany, India, Switzerland, Spain, Thailand, or the US have reacted to this development by pro-

posing policy reforms (PILZ 2017). As this quest for policy change is unfolding within the respective institutionalized skill formation systems, it lends itself well to a HI analysis.

To demonstrate the analytical potential of HI, the remainder of this chapter is dedicated to an exemplary study of institutional change in the German and Swiss skill formation systems. The two countries can be considered similar systems since they both share a strong tradition of highly institutionalized collectively governed dual apprenticeship training, which is well respected nationally and internationally (BUSEMEYER/TRAMPUSCH 2012). In both countries, dual apprenticeships combine theory-based education at vocational schools and practical training carried out at the respective employer (in Switzerland usually including inter-company training). The company-based part of dual apprenticeships is governed by long-standing decentralized social partnerships between employers and employees under supervision of the state. This collective skill formation arrangement, which involves both employer representatives (for instance, associations and chambers of commerce) and employee representatives (predominantly trade unions), has been linked to low levels of youth unemployment (BUSEMEYER 2015), and serves as a policy model to countries worldwide (e. g., BARABASCH/HUANG/LAWSON 2009 on the impact of the German model on Chinese VET). However, we highlight here also an important distinction between the two countries considering that Switzerland is a liberal collective skill formation system, whereas Germany can be characterized as a social collective skill formation system (EMMENEGGER/GRAF/STREBEL 2020). That is, the Swiss system tends to be employer-dominated, while in the German system, the role of unions is more strongly institutionalized across national, state, and local-level governance boards. These differences in governance, which represent important path dependencies, make a comparative study of endogenous gradual institutional change especially worthwhile.

In recent decades, both Germany and Switzerland have been impacted by the academization trend described earlier. Talented youths often choose a HE trajectory over VET (FROMMBERGER 2019), while firms sometimes struggle to fill up their training program spots (EBBINGHAUS et al. 2013). In this context, the analysis aims to uncover which modes of institutional change are at play in Germany's and Switzerland's responses to academization pressures, and how they relate to country-specific historical trajectories and actor constellations. Here, our main focus is on the emergence and expansion of novel organizational forms that straddle the boundary between VET and HE. The comparative case study examines the respective institutional changes within the last decades through process tracing, a qualitative research method that allows for systematic process observations through historical narratives and within-case analyses (COLLIER 2011; TRAMPUSCH/PALIER 2016). Besides referring to the relevant secondary literature on the two cases, we draw on official documents published by the respective national stakeholders, such as educational organizations, state and federal ministries, and social partners. In addition, we base our findings on numerous expert interviews conducted in

Germany and Switzerland in recent years with key stakeholders across state agencies, trade unions, firms, and employer associations.<sup>1</sup>

## 5 Case studies: Strengthening VET in the face of academization – modes of institutional change in Germany and Switzerland

### 5.1 Germany: Reconfiguring the boundary between VET and HE through layering

In this section, we outline that in Germany, ongoing academization pressures in combination with rather strong union veto powers, and limited room for discretion in the interpretation of rules in traditional VET have facilitated the emergence and expansion of dual study programs and professional schools. These new organizational forms have been added on top of the traditional VET system and are thus associated with layering.

While some academization has taken place since the 1960s, it was especially in the 1990s that HE expansion and academization intensified in Germany. Reasons for this include increasingly positive attitudes towards the academization of, for instance, health professions, the growing vertical differentiation of the HE system, and the Bologna Reform, which introduced the shorter Bachelor's degree (ALESI/TEICHLER 2013). The growing relevance of HE can pose a threat to VET, which is one of the reasons for the emergence and expansion of *dual study programs*. The first dual study programs were founded already in the 1970s, but they have proliferated greatly in more recent times (ERTL 2020). In institutional terms, dual study programs can be located at the nexus of VET and HE alongside the classical dual apprenticeships and the traditional HE study programs (GRAF 2018). The clearest example of this are *apprenticeship-integrating dual study programs* that typically lead to a recognized VET qualification along with a Bachelor's degree. Besides this original type, *practice-integrating*, *job-integrating* and *job-accompanying dual study programs* are based on systematic links between theory and practice both in terms of organizational structure and content, but they are “merely” concluded with a Bachelor's degree. Similar to dual apprenticeships, the practical training component is carried out at the firm, whereas the theoretical learning takes place at a HE organization rather than at a vocational school. But how can we explain that in the face of academization pressures, change agents in the German VET system, especially large firms, engaged in the creation of a new additional educational path rather than focusing on pushing through a major reform of the dual apprenticeship model itself? The institutionalized governance and resulting path dependencies of the long-standing German VET system provide us with answers to this question. Especially larger firms

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1 Due to space constraints, we focus our process tracing analysis on key developmental trends. Further details on the empirical data used can be found in Graf (2021) and Graf and Lohse (2021).



were keen to integrate more academically oriented training into their apprenticeships due to heightened skill demands and growing global competition. However, they were met with opposition on the part of smaller firms because these do not require high-level academic skills to the same extent, and because academization would imply a reduction of time spent at the workplace, resulting in a decrease of low-cost productivity of apprentices (GRAF 2021). Unions were also opposed to the firms' suggested academization reform because traditional VET programs are key to union recruitment and lobbying power in education policy (GRAF 2018). Moreover, unions feared that more differentiation and flexibilization of the system could eventually lead to a greater dominance of firm-specific rather than industry-specific skills. This would increase the dependence of apprentices and workers on specific employers, thus reducing the power of labor associations. Thus, while large firms tried to act as institutional entrepreneurs, they did not have enough leverage to override veto players such as the German Trade Union Confederation. To overcome this institutionalized environment of social collective skill formation – associated with relatively detailed regulations and substantial veto possibilities on the part of employee representatives – large firms engaged in a bottom-up approach. They established vocational academies in cooperation with local chambers on top of the traditional apprenticeship training.<sup>2</sup> Veto players, such as the unions, had little power to object to this local “niche” endeavor, and, consequently, dual studies were added as an additional layer on top of the VET system (GRAF 2021). These new programs, which are especially offered in the fields of engineering, computer science, economics, and health, are now also offered by many universities of applied sciences and even some universities – and have become increasingly popular with around 110,000 dual students working towards Bachelor's degrees in 2019 (HOFMANN et al. 2020).

In the German collective skill formation system, academization pressures partially conflict with the interests of some actors, especially within the employers' camp, who seek to maintain a strong practice orientation. Next to the case of dual study programs, a second example of a ‘compromise’ between academization and a pronounced vocational component can be found in the recent proliferation of *professional schools*, which connect academic learning with practice orientation. Professional schools include business schools, schools of education, engineering and law schools, schools of public health and schools of public policy. The professional school model originated in Anglo-Saxon HE and served as inspiration in the German context both in terms of its educational profile and its name, which was adopted in its English version (BERTRAM/WALTER/ZÜRN 2006).<sup>3</sup> Like dual study programs, professional schools operate at the nexus of

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2 The vocational academies were initially located in the VET system. However, today dual study programs are offered as part of HE.

3 Thus, the English designation is kept both for the overall category of professional schools (see e. g., RÖMMELE/STÄEMMLER 2012) and for its subtypes, with the official names of German professional schools being, for instance, “Mannheim Business School” or “The Willy Brandt School of Public Policy at the University of Erfurt”.

VET and HE. They cater to an increasing demand for practice-oriented higher forms of skill formation and derive from a development that it is gradually unfolding “on top of” the traditional core of VET at the secondary level. Predominantly created at the initiative of HE organizations, they deliver both academic education and practice-oriented training specific to the respective sector. In terms of organizational form, they can be sub-units of multi-disciplinary universities, for instance, in the case of the University of Bielefeld’s School of Public Health, or independent HE organizations, such as the European School of Management and Technology in Berlin. Curricula typically include components from different academic disciplines combined with sector-specific practical skill transmission in the form of integrated work placements and practitioner-led training. Most distinctively, professional schools combine the quest for academic excellence of the research university with close ties to the world of work. They display a strong institutional actorhood since they independently establish ties with employers (GRAF/LOHSE 2021). While professional schools have a long tradition of providing high-level practice-oriented training in some anglophone countries such as the US (ANHEIER 2019), they have proliferated in Germany only since the 2000s, when a growing horizontal and vertical differentiation of the HE system and the introduction of BA and MA programs allowed for the creation of a new type of university-based skill formation (RÖMMELE/STAEMMLER 2012). As in the case of the dual study programs, employers benefit from this new arrangement as they can attract highly skilled youths for internships or permanent employment upon their graduation. Even more than in the case of dual study programs, this vocationalization of HE through the bottom-up creation of professional schools largely sidelines collective skill formation actors such as unions, associations, or chambers. If these actors were more prevalent in HE, they could potentially push for regulations beyond the ones issued by state authorities monitoring HE, such as accreditation bodies. While the recent proliferation of professional schools is facilitated by a global expansion of academic forms of learning more generally (BAKER 2014), the creation of a newly configured education path combining HET and VET on top of existing educational trajectories demonstrates how some actors – in this case, HE organizations and employers – made use of layering. They thus were able to circumvent obstacles to academization posed by path-dependent institutional arrangements within the traditional German skill formation system.

To summarize, in Germany, change agents, including large firms and HE organizations, avoided reform obstacles in the highly institutionalized traditional collective skill formation system – which in its social variant grants significant veto powers to unions (EMMENEGGER/GRAF/STREBEL 2020). This process unfolded through the creation of new educational programs at the nexus of VET and HE. While in principle these developments can have multiple drivers, we have offered here an account that focusses on the rise of knowledge-based economy and academization pressures. Thus, seen from the perspective of the traditional VET system at the secondary level, the establishment

of both dual study programs and professional schools represents a case of layering in response to a strongly institutionalized collective governance system in which respective direct changes to the VET system were difficult to achieve.

## 5.2 Switzerland: Fortifying VET through conversion

In this section, we show that ongoing academization pressures have led to a change through conversion of the Swiss skill formation system. Through the introduction of the Swiss universities of applied sciences (UAS) and the vocational baccalaureate, VET at the secondary level is now systematically linked to more academic forms of education. This conversion process was enabled by relatively weak veto possibilities on the part of key stakeholders and a high level of discretion in rule interpretation in the context of the Swiss liberal collective skill formation system, which is, in relative terms, marked by a more flexible institutional framework and more pronounced employer leverage than its social variant.

In Switzerland, academization trends intensified around the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, not least due to rising qualification demands, for instance, in the health sector (see SPIRIG 2010 on the partial academization of the nursing profession). A key response of the VET sector to ongoing academization was the creation of the *Swiss configuration of initial VET and UAS* that systematically links vocational and the academic worlds of learning. This integrated model was established through a sustained collective effort on the part of key VET stakeholders. The Swiss UAS were formally created in 1995 by converting the most prestigious schools of higher VET, the higher technical schools, and higher economic and administration schools.<sup>4</sup> This conversion was initially driven by these schools' quest for better international recognition. That is, the representatives of these educational organizations themselves initially triggered the establishment of the UAS (see KIENER/GONON 1998). Moreover, according to Culpepper (2007), the establishment of the UAS was pushed by the relative dominance of large export-oriented firms in Switzerland and their interest in higher levels of general education. At a higher governance level, the Swiss federation promoted the creation of the UAS to stimulate the economy (Zosso 2006, III–IV). Like their predecessor schools, Swiss UAS are closely connected to the economy and intend to train individuals for a specific occupation while also providing them with a scientific foundation (BV 1995 Art. 3; WEBER/TREMEL/BALTHASAR 2010).

The creation of the UAS was not the only reform Switzerland's VET sector carried out in the face of academization pressures. Concomitantly, a new certificate program was introduced, namely the *vocational baccalaureate*, which provides successful apprenticeship graduates with a new pathway to post-secondary HE. The preparation for the

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4 It is interesting to note that in Germany, UAS were already founded in the late 1960s, but later became to some extent more similar to traditional universities, in this way getting increasingly detached from traditional VET (GRAF 2018).

vocational baccalaureate examination takes place in classes parallel or subsequently to dual apprenticeship training. The vocational baccalaureate – available in six different subject areas linked to the study fields offered at UAS – is often referred to as the ‘royal path’ (*Königsweg*) for individuals to the Swiss UAS (e. g., BACKES-GELLNER/TUOR 2010): It provides direct access to thematically related study courses at UAS. In contrast, holders of an *academic* baccalaureate from an academic secondary school are required to complete a one-year practical experience within the desired field of study before they can enroll at a Swiss UAS. This regulation is intended to prevent academic drift and ensures that UAS remain firmly connected to VET, with the vocational baccalaureate remaining the dominant path to UAS access (see GONON 2013).

An academization of the Swiss UAS, that is, potentially rendering them more similar to research universities, is not desired by the actors in the Swiss VET system, who actively promote a ‘different but equal’ principle with regard to the relationship between VET and HE (see WEBER/TREMEL/BALTHASAR 2010). In this vein, the Swiss UAS have their own federal law and their governance is rather similar to that of the rest of the VET sector, primarily as the social partners are involved in their steering. For example, the social partners are interwoven in the development of the Swiss UAS through their engagement in the Federal Commission for Universities of Applied Sciences (EFHK 2014, 13). As a result, the UAS are much closer to the economy and the world of work than traditional universities, especially in governance-terms.

Thus, through the creation of the vocational baccalaureate in tandem with the UAS, Swiss stakeholders of dual apprenticeship training managed to secure the VET systems’ traditionally high reputation and its attractiveness for talented young people, thereby fortifying it against the backdrop of academization pressures. In this context, the Swiss liberal collective skill formation system allowed for a certain discretion in reinterpreting the system in line with the strategic interests of firms, facilitating gradual institutional change in the form of conversion. That is, the new co-existence of dual apprenticeship training, vocational baccalaureate and UAS represents a partial conversion of the Swiss VET system as a whole. VET at the secondary level has been partially reinterpreted in a way that it now offers a systematic pathway to the UAS. The latter were created through a conversion of former institutes of higher VET into applied HE organizations that governance-wise remain firmly grounded in the VET system and closely linked to apprenticeship training. Overall, this converted institutional configuration systematically links upper-secondary VET with post-secondary HE. This conversion, however, does not call into question the core organizing principle of the Swiss apprenticeship training system as it is systematically integrated within the overall skill formation system.

## 6 Conclusion

In this chapter, we provided an introduction to one of the main political science approaches used in the comparative study of VET systems, namely HI. Reviewing the literature, we showed that VET to date remains the main locus of HI studies on education, but that the HI approach is also increasingly taken up by research on other educational sectors. We then applied HI to the case of the ongoing academization of skill formation in two countries that are well-known for their apprenticeship training systems. Drawing on core concepts of HI, we identified two distinct trajectories of gradual change in otherwise relatively similar systems. More specifically, we found a dominant pattern of layering through the introduction of dual study programs and professional schools in the German case. Our analysis of the Swiss VET system revealed conversion to be the dominant mode of change. This is visible in the upgrading of vocational schools to UAS and the simultaneous establishment of a new pathway to post-secondary HE from VET via the vocational baccalaureate.

Our application of the HI framework to a comparative case study has pointed to HI's capacity of tracing the institutional conditions that can hinder or enable change agents – such as large firms in the German case – to drive forward policy reforms through specific modes of institutional change. This perspective is particularly relevant when it comes to the study of VET systems that are associated with complex cooperation processes between multiple private and public actors at several governance levels and therefore tend to be strongly path-dependent. Indeed, given this characteristic of VET, which is located at the nexus of education and economy, VET studies have served political scientists to derive concepts of decentralized cooperation and gradual change that are now also being prominently applied in the study of other policy domains. By enabling a systematic analysis of developmental trajectories of skill formation systems, HI can also help inform policymaking. For instance, findings from our HI case study can help VET policymakers to identify key characteristics and weigh the advantages and disadvantages of different reform pathways as VET systems are being adjusted to ongoing academization in the context of an increasingly globalized knowledge economy. It is due to these analytical and policy-informing capacities that HI is finding increasing resonance in education research.

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# Vergleichende Berufsbildungsforschung – Ergebnisse und Perspektiven aus Theorie und Empirie

Jubiläumsausgabe des Internationalen Handbuchs  
der Berufsbildung



Herausgegeben von Philipp Grollmann, Dietmar Frommberger, Thomas Deißinger,  
Uwe Lauterbach, Matthias Pilz, Thomas Schröder, Georg Spöttl

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