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Between Economic and Social Goals: Short-track Dual Training in Denmark, Germany, and Switzerland

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1 Topic

The governance of educational institutions increasingly faces the challenge to combine social goals with rising economic utility demands (Thelen 2014; Felouzis, Maroy and Van Zanten, 2013). Traditionally, the governance of dual vocational education and training (VET) is closely aligned with the world of work and economic goals. In VET, the satisfaction of skill demands and the production of human capital for employers is often linked to a strong involvement of business interests in the development of curricula, the selection of candidates, and the provision of training. At the same time, VET systems pursue social goals including the access to quality education, the provision of transferable vocational skills and certificates and a smooth school-to-work transition also for disadvantaged youth (Granato and Ulrich, 2013). Thus, VET represents a prime example of the interplay and tension between economic and social goals.

2 Aim

This tension is especially tangible in short-track dual training programs. Short-track apprenticeships focus on theory-reduced, applied training (EQF level 2-3). They typically last two years and are targeted at practically talented youth, which reflects their potential social orientation. Short-tracks are an integral part of dual VET, leading to standardized and recognized certificates. Denmark, Germany, and Switzerland are key cases of short-track provision. In Germany and Switzerland, short-tracks make up about 10%, in Denmark around 2%, of apprenticeships overall. In some occupations, the share reaches up to 40% (e.g. retail in Switzerland). Unlike transition measures, they fully qualify for entry into the labor market, and usually also count towards other, longer VET programs. Against this backdrop, we ask: How do the economic and social goal dimensions present themselves within the institutionalization of short-track dual training in Denmark, Germany, and Switzerland?

3 Methods

To answer this question, we draw on organizational sociology and sociological neo-institutionalism (Scott 2014, DiMaggio and Powell 1991; Powell, Bernhard and Graf 2012). More specifically, we are interested in the regulative (rules), normative (standards), and cultural-cognitive (ideas) institutional dimensions of short-track dual training. We also apply a political economy perspective by focusing on the key actors, their interests and forms of cooperation. With the help of qualitative cases studies of Denmark, Germany, and Switzerland, we explore relevant cross- and within-case variation. Our comparative analysis

mainly builds on document analysis and expert interviews with representatives of employers, employees, the federal state, the regions and national VET institutes.

4 Results

We find significant cross-national variation, but also within-case variation across the three institutional dimensions (rules, standards, and ideas), regarding the goal-orientation of short-track dual training. In the Danish case, all three institutional dimensions are mainly oriented towards the social goal dimension. In Denmark we find a strong focus on the disadvantaged target group which is reflected in the regulative dimension by an explicit definition of the target group (disadvantaged youth). Also the standards and ideas of the central implementing actors reflect a concentration on the social goal dimension. Even though the engagement differs across regions, social goals are the driving motive to offer short-tracks for firms. However, in both the German and the Swiss case, we find a discrepancy between the regulative dimension and the two other dimensions. In Germany, the VET law is not explicitly mentioning social goals for short-tracks, while social goals enter the scene when it comes to the relevant standards and ideas around short-tracks. We see strong state involvement (stronger compared to other dual VET programs) and the interviews revealed that the social dimension plays a much stronger role for the key actors than is visible in the regulative framework. In Switzerland, the VET law clearly foresees also a social role for short-tracks, but with regard to standards and ideas in the concrete implementation, economic goals dominate. For example, in Switzerland the implementation depends on the economic need for the skills that short track graduates offer. The interviews revealed that this economic calculation is very prominent in the ideological underpinnings in Switzerland.

5 Discussion and Conclusion

In global perspective, the VET systems of Denmark, Germany, and Switzerland can be considered to be most similar. Hence, the significant cross-case variation we found is rather puzzling. In our discussion we explore why in the German and Swiss cases, economic goals find their way into the institutionalization more easily than in Denmark. In this context, our analysis suggests that when studying economic and social goals in educational institutions, the distinction between the three institutional dimensions is a fruitful endeavor. The key theoretical contribution of our paper is that new insights can be gained from studying how the three institutional dimensions may systematically vary within one case. This is particularly relevant when different, partly opposing, goal dimensions are at play. The important question

to what extent VET systems, and other educational systems, meet their social goals can be answered in greater detail if all three institutional dimensions are considered individually as well as in combination. Thus, our paper also speaks to the broader debate on how the governance of educational institutions can integrate economic goals without neglecting social goals.

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