

THEMATIC PAPER: APPRENTICESHIP

Incorporating apprentices' perspectives in vocational education and training monitoring: A comparative analysis of Germany, Switzerland, and Denmark

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ABSTRACT

Monitoring systems are vital for evidence-based vocational education and training (VET) policy. The regular collection of key indicators provides valuable insights for educational policy decisions. However, to what extent is the perspective of apprentices taken into account in this process? This contribution shows how the perspective of apprentices is systematically captured through surveys in three countries, *i.e.*, Germany, Switzerland and Denmark. Significant differences between the approaches of the comparator countries become evident in this context. These differences impact the role of apprentices as actors within VET systems.

Key words: apprentices, governance, international comparison, monitoring

INTRODUCTION AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Apprentices' perspectives are crucial for designing modern, appealing training programs. For example, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) recognizes the importance of learner satisfaction as an important aspect for the success of vocational education and training (VET) systems (OECD, 2010). Matching training opportunities to learners' preferences is considered essential to fostering their motivation and commitment (OECD, 2010). Regular surveys amplify apprentices' voices. The Bundesinstitut für Berufsbildung (BIBB) project "Communication and Reception of the Apprentice Perspective in International Comparison (Kommunikation und Rezeption der Auszubildendenperspektive im internationalen Vergleich, KuRA)"

investigated, among other aspects, how such monitoring processes are implemented in Germany, Denmark, and Switzerland (Hippach-Schneider *et al.*, 2023).

The project's research question considered that systematic monitoring of apprentices' experiences and suggestions is essential for integrating their views into vocational education policy-making processes.

This, in turn, is crucial for an evidence-based vocational education policy aimed at continuously improving system quality, reducing apprenticeship dropouts, and enhancing the overall attractiveness of VET. The design of monitoring processes influences how effectively apprentices' perspectives inform policy decisions. In all three countries, dual VET forms an integral part of the upper secondary education sector and holds significant importance within it.

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THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND METHOD

The study builds on approaches from educational governance research, which analyzes how actors' social actions are coordinated across levels. It is characterized by a broad understanding of the concept of actors.

However, actor-oriented governance research has primarily focused on examining various state actors, as well as employer organizations and trade unions (Bürge & Gonon, 2022; Emmenegger *et al.*, 2020; Trampusch, 2010), along with other institutional actors within the national context, such as chambers in Germany and labor market organizations in Switzerland (Emmenegger & Seitzl, 2019; Strebel *et al.*, 2019). To date, the group of apprentices has not played a role in this research.

The study connected to educational governance research because different forms of monitoring create varying potentials for integrating apprentices' perspectives into educational policy processes. This, in turn, affects the role of apprentices within the actor constellation at the macro level. The more comprehensive the monitoring concept, the greater the potential influence of the apprentices' perspective, *i.e.*, the stronger their position as actors.

Focusing on the role of apprentices within VET systems may provide an additional perspective for explaining why these three similarly structured training systems differ in terms of their flexibility and adaptability.

As part of an extensive literature and document review on monitoring activities between 2014 and 2022, several systematic survey approaches were identified in the three comparison countries. This analysis revealed significant differences in the monitoring approaches used across these countries.

RESULTS

The identified monitoring activities are shown in Table 1. A closer examination of their respective designs revealed conceptual differences relevant for categorizing the potential role of apprentices.

The analysis assessed monitoring activities using four criteria: scope, frequency, focus on apprentices/professionally learning individuals, and funding. State funding increases the likelihood of incorporating monitoring results into educational policy-making processes (Table 2).

Table 1: Overview of the initially identified monitoring activities

| Countries | Monitoring activities |
|-------------|--|
| Germany | National education panel, substudy on class 9 (NEPS-SC4) BA/BIBB applicant survey Training report by the DGB youth |
| Switzerland | Standardized Final Year Survey (SAB) Transition Barometer Apprentice Barometer yousty. ch |
| Denmark | Survey on "Strengthening trust and well-being in vocational schools" |

NEPS, National Educational Panel Study; BIBB, Bundesinstitut für Berufsbildung; SAB, Standardisierte Abschlussklassenbefragung.

Germany

Surveys not regularly targeting apprentices were excluded, *i.e.*, the National Educational Panel Study (NEPS) and the BA/BIBB applicant survey.

The NEPS-SC4 survey is a panel study that started in 2010 with students in the 9th grade and followed their educational trajectories, including some apprenticeships. However, the study lacks regularity in focusing on apprentices' training experiences. The focus of the study is on analyzing educational pathways rather than the training experiences and assessments of apprentices.

The BA/BIBB applicant survey targets individuals still seeking apprenticeships, focusing on the pre-apprenticeship phase. Since 2006, the youth organization of the German Trade Union Confederation (DGB) has conducted annual surveys with changing thematic focuses, such as digitalization (2023) and access to training orientation (2022).

These surveys are conducted as part of the so-called vocational school tours organized by DGB Youth, through which apprentices are informed about their rights and overall empowered. The surveys are carried out regionally over an extended period of time. With the publication of the report, the union also provides its own vocational education policy assessment, which is linked to corresponding demands. For example, the 2022 Training Report calls for a levy-financed apprenticeship guarantee (DGB-Jugend, 2023).

Switzerland

The Standardisierte Abschlussklassenbefragung (SAB) survey is conducted every three years surveying all students in the final year of vocational schools. These are the schools attended as part of vocational training, alongside the company-based and inter-company learning locations. The SAB collects data on quality aspects across three dimensions: input, process, and

Table 2: Criteria-based evaluation of monitoring activities

| Countries | Monitoring activities | Nationwide | Regularly repeated | Focus on apprentices/vocational learning individuals | State funded |
|-------------|--|---|--------------------|--|--------------|
| Germany | NEPS-SC4 | Yes | No | Partially | Yes |
| | BA/BIBB-Applicant Survey | Yes | Yes | No | Yes |
| | Training Report by DGB Youth | Yes | Annually | Yes | No |
| Switzerland | SAB | Yes | Every 3 years | Yes | Yes |
| | Transition Barometer | Yes | Annually | Partially | Yes |
| | Apprentice Barometer yousty. ch | No (Focus on German-speaking Switzerland) | Yes | Yes | No |
| Denmark | Survey on "Strengthening Trust and Well-being in Vocational Schools" | Yes | Annually | Yes | Yes |

NEPS, National Educational Panel Study; BIBB, Bundesinstitut für Berufsbildung; DGB, German Trade Union Confederation; SAB, Standardisierte Abschlusskassenbefragung.

output/outcome quality. In addition to questions about the acquisition of various competencies, school facilities, and teaching, the survey also includes questions about the expertise of teachers.

The interaction between teachers and learners is addressed in a dedicated module on social relationships. Additionally, there are questions about motivation, experiences with support services, and individualized guidance. Another module focuses on the satisfaction of vocational learners. This data collection is possible because the cantons, which are responsible for the quality of schools, have committed to it through an agreement with the federal government. The advantage of this is that the transition data collected can be analyzed individually by school or canton. These data also serve as the foundation for further research and are of central importance for the quality assurance of vocational schools in many cantons (Müller & Schorn, 2021).

The Transition Barometer in Switzerland focuses on educational decisions made after compulsory schooling and is conducted on behalf of the State Secretariat for Education, Research, and Innovation (SBFI). The aim is to capture the current situation of young people during the transition from compulsory school to upper secondary education (Sekundarstufe II). The survey is conducted at two points in the year: in the spring and at the end of August.

In the spring sample, questions are asked about planned and upcoming transitions into vocational education, including inquiries about training interests, the status of apprenticeship applications, and the current acceptance situation. The August survey follows up and provides the final results of the transition, as well as a preview for the upcoming year. Notably, companies are also surveyed simultaneously, allowing for a comprehensive view of the overall training situation and capturing the

alignment of supply and demand from both perspectives (Golder *et al.*, 2021).

The Learner Barometer in Switzerland is the largest online apprenticeship platform in the country. Yousty.ch, a privately owned company founded in 2008, conducted surveys of apprentices in 2015, 2016, 2019, and 2021. The company collaborated with a university of applied sciences in developing the survey questionnaire. Apprentices are invited to participate in the survey through the online platform. Although the German-speaking region of Switzerland has a notably higher apprenticeship rate compared to the French and Italian-speaking regions, the survey effectively has a regional focus.

Denmark

Denmark conducts an annual, state-funded, mandatory survey of vocational learners. It covers learners' behaviour, skills, motivation, teaching conditions, and relationships with colleagues and teaching staff. The aim of the survey is to assess the well-being of the learners. This is the result of a political decision that places the perspective of vocational learners at the center, granting them a legal right to a high-quality learning environment. The improvement of learners' well-being was explicitly stated as one of the four goals in the VET reform of 2015.

The questionnaire consists of 35 to 42 questions, with the number depending on the phase of the vocational learners' training and whether they have an apprenticeship position. The survey is completed during the learning phase at vocational schools. The data can be broken down by region, school, groups of learners, *etc.*

The results of the surveys serve as the basis for corresponding political initiatives aimed at increasing the satisfaction (including mental health) of students, as well as reducing dropout rates. These results are intended to

be incorporated into local quality assurance in vocational schools as well as into the work of the ministry. Appropriate state funding is provided to support these efforts (Børne-og, 2019).

The impacts of the VET reform in 2015 and the subsequent initiatives have been investigated in numerous and regular studies. For instance, the survey results show a clear correlation between well-being and the likelihood of an apprenticeship dropout (Danmarks, 2021).

CONCLUSION

The surveys conducted in Switzerland (SAB and Transition Barometer) and Denmark provide continuous data, enabling the systematic incorporation of apprentices' perspectives into education policy decision-making at various levels—national, regional, and school levels.

The systematic linkage with analytical and research activities serves as strong evidence that the results are integrated into education policy processes in both Switzerland and Denmark. Denmark's legal focus on learners' well-being strengthens this approach. Germany shows less potential for systematic integration. There is no comparable state-funded and systematic survey of apprentices. While trade unions play a significant role in shaping vocational education in Germany, which could suggest a corresponding reception by other stakeholders and the public, there is a lack of systematic integration into an education policy strategy with a corresponding linkage to further research analyses.

In this respect, it can be said that apprentices in Switzerland and Denmark have an indirect role as actors in shaping the vocational education system—deliberately intended and implemented by the state through publicly funded surveys.

Against the backdrop of debates on democratic education in vocational training and the corresponding opportunities for learners to participate, such an indirectly shaping role of vocational learners represents an important approach to incorporating their experiences. Expanding further opportunities for active participation by learners as directly involved actors could be considered.

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Author contributions

Hippach-SchneiderU: Writing—Original draft,

Writing—Review and Editing. The author has read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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Conflict of interest

The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

Data availability statement

No additional data.

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