

Media Release

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The Secret of Switzerland's Long-term Economic Success: World-class Vocational Training

Results of a visit by a delegation of American education specialists to Switzerland

According to a study by the American NCEE (National Center on Education and the Economy), the Swiss vocational training system is regarded as the gold standard. The Swiss vocational training system offers not only apprenticeships throughout all sectors of the economy, but also attracts young persons with strong educational track records. Thanks to well calibrated cooperation between affiliated partners, young professionals are provided with training and are highly sought after on the labour market due to their high qualifications. The report is based on a study carried out during a visit by an American delegation, organised by ETH Zurich's KOF Swiss Economic Institute in June 2014.

The NCEE recently established that the quality of the American vocational training system had deteriorated considerably and that it will need to be revamped if the current economic challenges are to be successfully overcome. Accordingly, NCEE experts went on fact-finding missions to various countries in order to identify strategies that had resulted in successful cooperation between training schemes and employers in other countries. In Switzerland, the delegation was accompanied by training experts from ETH Zurich's KOF Swiss Economic Institute. The NCEE concludes that Switzerland has one of the best vocational systems in the world, and ascribes the country's high economic performance partly to this fact.

As a measure of international success, the report mentions Switzerland's very low unemployment rate by international comparison, its excellent global innovation, and its very high average per capital income.

The special characteristics of Swiss vocational training, which differs significantly from the training system in the United States, include the following features:

- 70% of young persons aged between 16 and 19 decide to complete an apprenticeship. Switzerland integrates apprentices into productive teams of adults at an early stage, where they learn about taking on responsibility and are supervised by specialists.
- Compared to other countries, learning in businesses and at school is more embedded into real situations, and week after week theory is put into practice and applied in specific operational processes from everyday work.

- Young people receive a salary whilst undergoing training, earning around 600-700 CHF per month at the start of the apprenticeship and rising to around 1,100-1,200 CHF at the end of the apprenticeship.
- At the end of the period of training, the young professionals receive a nationally recognised certificate of proficiency, which is recognised both in the event of direct entry into full-time employment as well as for more advanced training at the tertiary level.
- Thanks to the high permeability between educational pathways, training may be pursued throughout a worker's entire career, irrespective of the initial choice of further education.

From the Swiss perspective, it makes sense that the authors have stressed precisely these characteristics. Young people aged between 16 and 19 generally attend high school in the USA. Although preparation for gainful employment is an issue in some more progressive high schools, it is only intended to provide a taster of workplace life through short, often-unpaid internships (normally four weeks) or open days (job shadowing) in a company, and cannot be compared with preparation for a profession. This occurs in community colleges in the USA, which are part of the tertiary level and lead to the award of an associate degree. However, here too practical experience in businesses is only acquired at the end of the period of training, which is otherwise mostly academic; it is usually unpaid and not integrated into the curriculum. These students are on average older than Swiss apprentices and must self-finance their education, which is why the authors emphasise the comparably high monthly salary for apprentices in Switzerland during the period of training as an important distinguishing feature.

The coordinators of the study held numerous interviews with senior Swiss business representatives at the Swiss Economic Forum. The interviewees in turn stressed the particular significance of vocational training for Switzerland's economic success. The special feature of the Swiss vocational training system as compared to other countries lies, according to the authors, in the role played by the training firm: it draws significant benefits from its investment in young professionals, which is in part responsible for the long-term economic success of the country. Firms in the USA would largely tend to avoid a dual apprenticeship according to the Swiss model due to the fear of their young professionals being poached and the resulting loss of the investment. They also lack one of the main partners for the proper operation of an actual vocational training system as in Switzerland: the labour market organisations that support their member firms in the development of job profiles, curricula, training materials and the schooling of vocational trainers.

About the NCEE:

The National Center on Education and the Economy (NCEE) is a non-profit organisation based in Washington (DC), which carries out comparative political studies of education systems around the world. The NCEE has a long tradition of political consultancy. Its reports and recommendations have an influence on politics in the United States. In 1990 the organisation published a report entitled: "America's Choice: High Skills or Low Wages!" The report influenced the "School to Work Act" and the establishment of the "National Skills Standards Board" during the Clinton Administration.

The report entitled "Gold Standard: The Swiss Vocational Education and Training System" was written by the American vocational training experts Nancy Hoffman (Jobs for the Future, Boston) and Robert Schwartz (Harvard Graduate School of Education, Cambridge MA).

More detailed information:

The report entitled “Gold Standard: The Swiss Vocational Education and Training, International Comparative Study of Vocational Education and Training”:
<http://www.ncee.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/SWISSVETMarch11.pdf>

NCEE press release:

<http://www.ncee.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Swiss-VET-Report-Press-Release-Final3.pdf>

Contact:

Dr. Ursula Renold
Phone: 044 632 53 29
renold@kof.ethz.ch

Media services
Phone: 044 632 40 61
Phone: 044 632 53 44
kof_cc@kof.ethz.ch